The Definition of Infuriating

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Summary

Casey thought they'd be done with childish behaviour when she and Derek went to college, but he is just as infuriating as ever and seems determined to make sure she never stops thinking about him. Why can't he just leave her alone? Oh, wait, because that would mean letting her win...

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Life With Derek... In this reality anyway...
Chapter 1

Chapter One

"You wouldn't dare!" I screeched so shrilly even I flinched, but he just laughed and continued to drive.

"I'm telling Mom and George!" I yelled in desperation.

"You're such a princess!" I received in reply as he sped up and left me standing there looking around at the empty parking lot at the small service station.

It was a few seconds before I started holding back tears of fear. How was I going to get home? What if something happened to me out here? How could Derek do this? I always knew he had a cruel sense of humour, but this?

I dug in my pocket for my cell phone before realising that I had left it in the car. "Damn it!" I cursed, before losing control of the tears that sprung from my situation. I was alone, in the middle of nowhere, with no cell phone to call for help. And a slightly creepy gas station attendant had started staring at me from the pay station by the pumps.

I shivered and wondered what I had done or said that Derek thought warranted this?

I turned towards the diner part of the station and hoped to God that they had a phone I could use and that change in my purse was enough for a coffee. Derek had already cleaned me out for gas money.

Once inside I called out for service as no one was in sight, and sat down at the counter. Sniffing back tears, I counted all the money I had on me, including the quarter I found in my coat pocket. It must have fallen in somehow; I would never put random change in my coat pocket. I had very little over a dollar and I daren't look at the menu or specials board to see what that would get me.

It hadn't been much more than a minute, but I was getting anxious about whether anyone was actually here. A small gasp of despair pushed past my lips and I threw my head down onto my folded arms. I still couldn't believe he had done this to me.

The door opened and I drew in breath to scream as a hand clamped around my arm, before forgetting to breathe out again as a familiar voice spoke.

"Casey! What the hell do you think you're doing?!” Derek shouted angrily. "You weren't outside when I came back, I didn't know where you were!"

My breath suddenly found an outlet as I stared indignantly at him and yelled back. "What am I doing? I came in here to find a phone seeing as my step-brother ditched me at the road side half way between college and home!” The word step-brother came out as an acid hiss.

"In case you forgot, it was you who wanted out of the car!"

"Not in the middle of nowhere, miles from any means of getting home!" I retorted.

"Are you really stupid enough to think I actually left?! I just drove out of sight for a couple of minutes to teach you a lesson for messing with my stuff!”
"All I did was try and call mom and George on your phone as someone had used up my minutes!" I nearly prodded him in the chest in accusation before thinking better of touching him and pushing past to leave the diner. "And how was I to know you weren't actually gone?"

We still hadn't done arguing as we arrived home, pushing through the door, each trying to get through at that same time. I managed to get through first, but only as the strap on my back-pack caught on Derek's and broke, sending it crashing to the floor and my stuff hurtling around the room.

"Way to go, Klutzilla." Derek laughed at he barged past me, crushing two of my pens underfoot.

"Der-ek!" I could've stomped my foot in frustration, but instead I bent down to pick up my stuff, muttering things about insensitive jerks and good for nothing idiots under my breath.

No one was in to hear the thump and the shouts; we'd come a day early to surprise everyone. Something I now regretted as I could really do with seeing my mom and sister after the long and argument filled drive back.

I had barely finished collecting my things up off the floor (with absolutely no help of course) by the time Derek had grabbed a sandwich and plonked himself down to watch TV.

With growl of frustration I made my way into the kitchen for a drink, earning myself a smug smirk from Derek as I stomped across the floorboards. Leaning against the counter I sipped a cool glass of water, breathing out a sigh and trying to calm myself. Lizzie and Edwin would be home from school soon and it would totally ruin the surprise if they walked into a battle zone.

By the time they actually got in, I had managed to suppress my fury enough to start reading my book upstairs, even if it was only by repeating to myself that it wasn't over.

As soon as the door closed I heard Lizzie and Edwin downstairs, saying Derek's name with surprised delight. I cursed Derek for making me escape to my room and miss their happy reactions then made my way downstairs.

"Hey, guys," I smiled at them.

"Casey!" Lizzie ran up to me, throwing her arms around me, and I stumbled back a little, surprised by her force. "I missed you so much!"

"It's only been two weeks since we were last here, you know." Derek said infuriatingly.

"But that was just for a weekend! Barely any time at all!" Lizzie still hadn't let me go.

"Plus, she's been dying to talk to Casey about Darren." Edwin added with a grin. "Hey, Casey."

"Who's Darren?" I ask, acknowledging Edwin with a smile.

"Doesn't matter, we can talk about him later," Lizzie glared at Edwin, who shrugged and sat down to watch TV with Derek. "You weren't supposed to be here until tomorrow, what are you doing here?" She said, releasing me.

"We came early to surprise you guys," I smile with self satisfaction. Derek hadn't wanted to come early, he wanted to spend all of today 'relaxing', which in Derek language means sleeping, eating and watching hockey re-runs, not driving your step-sister and yourself home for five and a half hours. Too bad for him. My smile turns into a smirk as I add annoying Derek to my satisfaction.
Chapter Two

My mom was happy to have us home early, but was a lot less surprised than I'd hoped. She'd
guessed, apparently, when I'd tried to subtly demand their day's plans so that they'd all be home. I
couldn't help but sulk a little at my own transparency, even though George was thoroughly
surprised, having forgotten it was this weekend at all, and therefore having no reason to suspect a
thing.

Marti jumped straight on Derek, barely noticing me at first, but giving me equal attention once she
had, and we all laughed as she launched straight into telling us how she hated Demi because he had
had a cup-cake at lunch today and refused to share with her.

By the time we sat down to dinner the service station incident was safely stored in the back of my
mind, waiting to be called upon next time Derek was a jerk. It rested there safe in the knowledge
that it probably wouldn't be long.

"It's so good having the family all together again! I don't know why but when you guys come over
the weekend it just never seems long enough." Mom looked around at us all. I knew she was still
hormonal from having the baby, which is why I smiled and said 'aw' instead of grimacing.

It isn't that I minded being together as a family again, it's just that since the baby Mom and George
were always pre-occupied, and Lizzie was always talking about her next protest or about an article
she was writing for the school paper, which she was now a regular columnist on. Edwin was
always kissing up to Derek for tips with girls, and Marti was... well Marti; which is great but I can't
really talk with her about anything. When mom made comments like that it just made me wish
things were back how they were before college and the baby.

"So, how are things going at school?" I asked Lizzie and Edwin, when Mom's outburst failed to
kickstart conversation.

"It's going great! The editor of the paper said I might even get front page next edition!" Lizzie
enthused, "He said I've got a lot of potential and I might even make it as a writer one day!"

"That's because he wants to get in her pants." Edwin informed us.

"Edwin!" Lizzie thumped him in the arm and he nearly fell out of his chair. "I'll have you know,
Darren is a perfect gentleman."

"Oh, so that's who Darren is." I grinned.

"He's also two grades above us." Edwin said in an accusitory tone.

Derek made a spluttering noise. "Oh, no, you are not dating seventeen year old!"
Lizzie pouted. "We're not dating, not that you would stop me!" She crossed her arms and slouched back in her chair.

"I hate to say it, but maybe Derek's right," I couldn't believe those words had come out of my mouth but I pressed on anyway. "Don't you think he's a little old for you?"

"It's only two years!" Lizzie's pout turned into a scowl. "Besides, I told you, we aren't dating."

George tried to help and failed miserably. "I think maybe what Derek and Casey are saying is that he might have certain expectations..."

"I am not hearing this!" Lizzie looked at him in horror, "We are not having this conversation. We're not dating, conversation over!"

An awkward silence prevailed for several minutes.

"So how was the drive down?" Mom asked after awhile, looking between me and Derek.

It was my turn to pout and lean back; what he had done came flooding back into my mind along with my anger.

Derek shrugged, "Casey had a hissy fit half way, but the first half was fine."

"Oh?" Mom looked at me but I kept a stoney silence, daring him to tell them what he did.

"She said she wanted out of the car, so I let her out of the car." He smirked. I wanted to rip that smirk from his face and feed it to him.

"And then left me at a service station in the middle of nowhere!" I couldn't help but add.

"You did what?!" Mom glared at Derek and it was my turn to smirk.

"Relax, I only went a little way down the road, I wasn't actually gonna leave her there; as evidenced by her being here!" He raised his hands in defense.

"I was alone for at least ten minutes! Anything could have happened to me!" I leant forward and looked daggers at him, an expression he returned. Why did I always find myself moving towards him when we argued? Probably a subconscious dominance thing, 'cause he always did too.

"Nothing happened to you, more's the pity," I narrowed my eyes at him and he continued, "And I was only gone for a minute, it took me nine minutes to find you though, 'cause you ran off!"

"She actually thought you'd left? Classic!" Edwin interjected, receiving death glares from us both.

"I did not 'run off', I went into the diner to see if I could find a phone to call for help!" I turned my glare back to Derek. "And it was a really horrible thing to do!"

"Oh, come on Princess, it's not my fault you fell for it." His smirk was back, "Maybe if you had brain you might have realised I wasn't about to leave you behind when I need you for gas money on the way back."

"There is no way I'm driving back with you, let alone giving you gas money."

"Then how will you get back?"

He had me there. "I'll take the bus!" I said out of desperation not to lose, though we both knew I
wasn't about to do that.

His eyes danced in triumph, seeing right through me as I'd known he would. All of a sudden I felt uncomfortable with his victorious stare and turned away, trying to change the subject.

"So, mom, is Simon sleeping through yet?"

"No," She sighed, "I think he's gowing through another growth spurt. I swear, you girls were never this much trouble when you were babies."

"That's because we're girls, and not Venturi's." I explained.

Mom smiled, "All the same, I wish he'd let us get some sleep! We're both exhausted."

"I'll stay up with him tonight if you want?" I offered without thinking, but I couldn't take it back when I saw the relief on my mom's face.

"Casey, are you sure?" She asked, a twinge of conscience in her voice.

"Yeah, sure. I want to finish some work so I can relax properly anyway." I shrugged and smiled my reassurance.

"You're gonna start winter break with homework!" Derek said in disbelief. "Could you be any more of a keener?"

I tried to ignore him, but of course, Derek couldn't let it go without a reaction.

"I mean seriously, do you even have a life or is your sad obsession with school due to a lack of social interaction?"

I turned to face him. "Wow, did you make that whole sentence by yourself or did you have to use a dictionary?" I said calmly.

He gave a snort and turned to ask Edwin about his love life.

My hands were clenched under the table and my blood was pounding through me. Why did he manage to annoy me so much? Why couldn't I just ignore him? I decided next time I would, next time there would be no reaction. That would drive him crazy.

I realised I was giving the opposit wall a death glare and that Lizzie and Mom were looking at me strangely. I gave a strained smile and excused myself, saying I would have a nap ready for tonight.

As of yet I still had my room, though Mom and George told me they'd want it back when Simon was old enough to go in his own room. It stung but I took a perverse pleasure in knowing that it wouldn't be just me, Derek's room was going to be said nursery. He owed it keeping it's furniture and decor for now to George's procrastination.

I shoved in through my door and slammed down on the bed, a twang of sadness going through me at knowing this visit could very likely be the last time I'd ever sleep in that room.

I stared in blank annoyance at the ceiling before taking a deep breath, opening the book I'd left on the nightstand earlier, and trying to forget Derek Venturi even existed.

As if I was ever able to do that.
Chapter Three

I woke up with my open book crumpled beneath my face and I desperately tried to straighten out the pages. I couldn't take it back to the library in that state.

I pushed my hair off my face and breathed out. I decided to worry about it later. A thought that didn't last very long.

I was still trying to get the page perfect again when Derek walked into my room.

"You have drool on your face." Were the first words out of his mouth.

Horrified I wiped at my face, then turned on him. "What do you want?" I gave him my best withering look, which only made his smirk bigger.

"Nora asked if you were ok to take Simon yet? They're going to have an early night." He leaned against the door frame, clearly amused by my rumpled state as he didn't take his eyes off me.

I jumped up, cleaned myself up and brushed my hair, before pushing past him to go downstairs. Book left forgotten on the bed.

Mom handed me Simon almost as soon as I entered the room, listing off instructions that I barely followed. Something about bottles in the refrigerator his changing stuff and to try and sleep when he did. She then muttered that he should be sleeping through by now with a pained look on her face, then said goodnight and practically ran to the basement.

Wow, and I thought college was stressful.

George thoughtfully took Simon's Moses basket up to my room, but I decided to stay downstairs for now with the TV for background noise while I did some work. Which was harder to do one handed than I thought it would be.

I did half an hour's work before deciding to make a drink. A move that filled me with nervousness seeing as I would have to be holding Simon as all his rockers and stuff had been put away downstairs. Everyone else was upstairs which meant I couldn't ask Lizzie or Marti to make it, and I was really thirsty so I wasn't about to go without. This was going to be a long night.

"Ok, Si, want to help Casey make a drink?" I asked the baby, hearing Derek's mocking voice in my head even as I did so.

I wondered if I had been imagining his voice when the real one flooded the room. Funny how even when he's quiet (which is virtually never) he still dominates the room. "Get me a can of coke while you're at it would ya."

"Get it yourself." I said automatically, but knowing he wouldn't I made him do the next best thing and shoved Simon at him as I went into the kitchen.

"Hey!" He complained.

"You want me to get you a drink? Then you have to hold Simon, or I won't have enough hands to carry yours and mine."
"I wasn't the one who offered to take him for the night." He grumbled, giving in for once. "Get me a bag of chips while you're there!" He called after me.

I complied with a sigh of irritation. He just couldn't have offered to get me my drink 'cause I was busy with my work and Simon. Typical Derek, does whatever's easiest for him, never mind anyone else. I had half a mind to leave him with Simon all night, he'd probably be up all night anyway.

When I came back in the channel had been changed from a late night chat show to a horror movie.

"Der-ek!" I grabbed his remote and the normal one before he could move (babies have their uses it seems) and changed back the channel.

"Oh, Pleeeeaassse not that crap again!" He moaned, reaching across for me to pass him the remote. As if.

I just fidgeted back into the couch, picking up my work again. I didn't make a move to relieve him of Simon.

"You aren't even watching it!"

"Well, I think Simon's a little young for horror movies. Besides, I can't concentrate with all that screaming." I pulled my lip up a little in distaste.

"Fine, compromise." He held out his hand again, and against my better judgement I handed him back his remote, keeping the family one just in case. He flicked through before landing on 'Cheaters' and looking at me. "May as well be a chat show, but with girls attacking other half-naked girls. Good for both of us, right?"

I narrowed my eyes at him but left it on. I was a little surprised he'd offered a compromise at all, I didn't want to discourage him. I watched him a moment, waiting to see if he'd pass Simon back over.

"What?" He frowned without looking away from the TV.

"Nothing." I quickly looked back down at my work. I don't know why, but him knowing I was watching him made me uncomfortable.

It wasn't long before I got side-tracked by the show and Derek's running commentary. I left what I was doing mid sentence and joined him in laughing as a man jumped out of bed, ran outside and tried to climb over a wall, all with no clothes on and his girlfriend's husband chasing him.

I felt bad for laughing, after all, this was someone's life and I knew how I'd felt when I caught Truman with Vicky. I wouldn't want people laughing. But then I didn't sign up to have it put on TV.

Derek's laugh filled the room again as the cheating girl started trying to shove her husband with her rather sizeable torso. "She should be a sumo wrestler!" He said to me.

I laughed back, enjoying a few precious minutes with him without fighting. Sometimes I just couldn't understand it; sure he's a jerk, but when we're not fighting we really get along. Just before we left for college we were getting on great, then he started bugging me again for no reason. If had lunch with new friends he was sure to come over and flirt with them, and make typical Derek comments, then when I ate alone he just smirked at me from across the room. Probably gloating. I even tried eating with him a couple of times, but he accused me of coming on to his friends and basically told me to get lost. I just couldn't win. But we could get along. If we just stopped
fighting.

I shook my head sadly.

"It's just a show, Case. If he was really upset he sure wouldn't be talking to them about it." Derek said, misunderstanding my expression.

I nodded, smiling a little to show I was ok.

Simon hadn't stirred up to this point and I was beginning to wonder why my Mom made it sound so hard. Then the screaming started.

Of course, Derek immediately passed Simon back to me, well more like shoved him at me. I took him with an eye roll and tried jiggling and shushing him. When that didn't work I checked his nappy and changed it. He stopped for a second then started again, so I went into the kitchen to warm up a bottle for him, leaving Derek holding him at arms length, a look of pure fear on his face as I did so.

When I came back, the screaming had stopped but he was still crying so I fed him anyway. An act rendered nearly pointless when he threw most of it back up all over me when I burped him. A fact considered boundlessly amusing by Derek, until Simon projectilely again, this time splashing Derek's shoulder.

"Eewww!" He wiped it with his hand, wiped his hand on me, then got up to wash his hand and change his shirt.

I cleaned myself up with tissue as best I could, then cleaned the couch off, yet another task that wasn't meant to be done with one hand I might add. My neat instincts were screaming at me to go and have a shower, but I couldn't just leave Simon on his own. Luckily years of Derek putting disgusting things on me, in my clothes and in my toiletries had hardened me a little against this kind of thing but I still felt completely mortified.

Until Derek popped back into my head; not that he was ever really far from it. I smiled evilly and took Simon upstairs.

Without knocking, I walked straight into Derek's room and passed Simon to a totally bewildered Derek. I shot his own smirk at him and crossed my arms so he couldn't pass him back.

"I'm gonna go take a shower, you're on baby watch until I come back." My eyes glanced down over him, taking in the small piece of his hip that showed where he hadn't pulled his shirt down properly. Why did I notice these things? I shook myself out of it and left for my shower.

As the water ran over me, I let out a sigh of contentment. The first proper shower I'd had since we left; the ones in my dorm had terrible pressure, they could barely penetrate my hair. I started singing a song my room mate was always playing.

I never thought that I was so blind,

I can finally see the truth,

It's me for you

I skipped the next part that I can't remember than launched straight into the chorus.

I wanna, I wanna, I wanna touch you,
You wanna touch me too,

Everyday, but all I have is time,

Our love's the perfect crime

Derek chose this exact moment to burst through the door, which I thought I had locked, with a crying Simon, saying my name in a panicked tone. Then stopped, probably realising what he'd just done.

"Der-ek!" I yelled at him, clutching the shower curtain around myself.

He broke out of his open mouthed reverie. "He's screaming again, what do I do?"

"I don't know, sing to him?"

Derek just looked at me like I'm stupid.

"Oh, right. Um, play him something on your guitar?" I said, desperately willing him to leave.

"It's an electric guitar, Case. I'd wake up the whole street!"

"And it doesn't have a volume control?" I asked, frustrated. "Fine, fine, I'll be right out." I gave in.

He just stood their looking relieved.

"Out!" My exasperated tone teamed with my shooing motions to make him turn around and leave, smirking as he went.

I finished up in the shower, blushing the whole time, then ran to my room to get dressed into my night clothes as I'd forgotten to bring them into the bathroom in my desperation to get out of the sicky ones.

I let out a noise of frustration as I saw Derek asleep on my bed with Simon.

Derek looked so worn out from the day that I almost decided to let him sleep. Then I thought of my options; sleep next to Derek, or in his bed, and I decided against it.

"Derek, wake up." I nudged his knee with mine. Nothing. "Derek." I nudged harder this time and he stirred.

"Wha-?" He sleepily turned his eyes on me, then looked around himself.

"Get up and go to your own room." I ordered him, and he must have been tired because he obeyed. I took a sleeping Simon and gently transferred him to his Moses basket, noting that he'd soon be too big for it.

I smiled as I heard Derek fall down on his bed and got ready to go to my own.
Chapter 4

I had to get up to feed and change Simon twice in the night. Twice. I was sure he shouldn't have been waking up twice in the night by his age, but Mom told me he was often much worse. I couldn't imagine having to do that every night, let alone more than twice, and I discovered a newfound admiration for Mom and George. I mean, how did they do it? I felt like a zombie after only one night, but they did it every night then George worked all day and Mom, instead of collapsing, did the housework, paperwork and looked after Simon through the day. I couldn't even look at my college work that morning.

Still, even with my lack of sleep I got up earlier than Derek, if only by twenty minutes. I rolled my eyes as he came stumbling into the kitchen at 11:15. Seriously, anyone would think he was the one who looked after Simon that night.

"And sleeping beauty stirs at last!" I said sarcastically, cringing when I realised I'd just called him 'beauty'. He didn't even notice, only making a grumbling, groaning noise in response.

Frustrated at my failure to get a rise out of him, I tried again. "Up parting all night while I looked after our little brother?"

That got a glare. "You were up half the night, and I can't sleep when you're awake." There was a brief pause. "You make too much noise." He added as an explanation.

"You slept fine this morning." I faced him, arms folded.

He mimicked my pose and I couldn't help but remember something Emily had mentioned after her psychology class (who knew she'd finally settle on psychology as a major? She had other plans originally, but once she knew people watching was part of the course it was a done deal), that crossing your arms was a 'closed' gesture, meaning you don't like someone. Though mirroring someone's posture is meant to put them at ease and encourage them to like you. How Emily didn't go crazy in that class I'll never know.

"Once you got downstairs, yeah!" He leaned in, trying to antagonise me further no doubt.

"Whatever happened to that brief time that you two got along?" Mom interjected before I could answer him. I hadn't even noticed her come in.

"Oh, we never got along. I tried. I even said he was my brother. It didn't take. I can't even imagine being related to that." I wrinkled my nose in disgust at the thought. Whatever had possessed me to say that brothers and step-brothers were the same thing? If Derek was my real brother- No I am not going there...

"Feelin's mutual." Derek winked annoyingly.

"Well, can't you at least be friends?" Mom said in a tone that made me feel instantly guilty. "I mean, we had hoped but we never expected you to think of each other as brother and sister, we just wanted you to try and get along. Is that really too much to ask for?"

Up until that point I always thought my Mom would go to any lengths to get me and Derek to be sibling-y. It made me feel a lot less like killing him once that pressure was removed. Though the urge was still pretty strong.
I sighed. "You're right, we should try to at least be civil," Here I couldn't resist giving Derek an I-am-better-than-you look, "So from now on I'll try not to fight with Derek so much. At least while we're here." It was worth it to see my Mom's smile, she looked like a weight had been lifted.

Derek just rolled his eyes and left the kitchen with a bowl of cereal.

If he spilled that on the couch then so help me- No, I can't break my promise ten minutes after making it! I swallowed hard. How was I going to manage not to fight with him when he seemed to live to provoke me?

I got and ate my own breakfast, wondering where everyone else was. When I asked Mom she said apart from George they'd all eaten before I got up. George was sleeping in because he was still tired from baby duty the night before we came, Marti was already at Demi's house (which reminded me I had to call Emily tomorrow and ask how her journey home was) and Lizzie and Edwin were upstairs.

I often wondered what it was they found to do up there; they always seemed to spend most of their time up there.

Stifling a yawn I got my college work from the last night and sat down in the living room to look over it. When I got to the end I frowned. I must have been paying more attention to Derek and the TV than I thought. The last sentence I'd written went 'and so this shows that the guy is so stoned...' Derek had been saying that just before I stopped writing. "Der-ek!" I screeched before I had time to reconsider.

He peered over my shoulder on the way back from getting a drink (without offering me one of course) and laughed. His laughter so close to my ear was unnerving and I flinched away.

"Though that is pretty funny, I don't see how any of it's my fault." He said, leaning in closer, trying to make me move again.

Well, I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction! I straightened my work out and set about correcting it without even looking at him. I caught his smirk out of the corner of my eye and pushed back the unpleasant feeling of knowing he thought he'd won. I was a grown woman, I wasn't going to get into another childish argument. Even if he was completely and utterly wrong about winning.

He stayed leaning over the couch until I shifted uncomfortably, then jumped over to sit next to me, making me move off to the side as was obviously his intention; why else would he sit next to his keener step-sister instead of on his precious recliner?

I let out an unintentional sigh of frustration. He just wasn't going to let me do my work was he?

"What's up Space-Case, are even you finding your stupid essay boring?"

I ignored him, even though my fingers clenched so tightly on the paper that it nearly crumpled in my hands.

"Earth to Spacey, I know this isn't your home-world but would ya come back for a second?" He asked, clearly annoyed that I hadn't answered him.

I stifled a smile of satisfaction. "What do you want, Derek?" I asked, coldly but politely.

Having got my attention, he didn't seem to know what to say. Just as I thought, he was trying to distract me from my work. "I can't find anything on TV, you wanna look?" He asked at last.
I was speechless. Last night he compromised on what to watch, now he was letting me choose?! This was the complete opposit of Derek. Not to mention I knew for a fact he hadn't even looked what was on. He was just letting me choose.

Not about to let the opportunity slip by, I grabbed the remote from his hand, feeling a momentary resistance as he joked about being undecided. I smiled at him and actually got a smile back. Not a smirk, an actual smile. My heart nearly stopped in surprise.

"So, you actually gonna put something on?" Derek snapped me out of whatever place his unexpected smile had taken me and I realized I was staring.

"Yeah," I said, a little dazedly. I turned to the TV and flipped through the channels. Strange how with the controller there in my hands, uncontested and with very little risk of being taken away, I suddenly didn't care what was on. I half heartedly tried to find something before handing the remote back. Normally I would put on whatever I could find that Derek would hate, but my words to my Mom were still fresh in my mind and his gesture in giving me the remote threatened massive guilt if I did.

He looked as surprised as I had felt when he passed it to me. He gave a brief flick through before turning the TV off. Derek turned the TV off.

I couldn't hide the shock that must have been plastered all over my face.

He shrugged and for second there I thought he looked self conscious, but I must have imagined that. Derek doesn't do self conscious. "Nothin' on." He proclaimed.

There was no such thing as 'nothing on' to Derek, and I was getting a little worried. I made a big show of trying to feel his temperature, him fighting my hands off him of course, and things started to feel normal again.

After a few moments of me teasing him about the TV, his phone rang. I rolled my eyes, just knowing it would be one of the Derek groupies. It wasn't a logical assumption; it could have been one one of his friends, or even his Mom, but some unknown instinct told me that wasn't so.

Sure enough, Derek's 'charming' voice kicked in as he spoke to the voice on the other end.

I sighed in an exasperated way and tried yet again to get some work done.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Little bit of a crossover with Clueless from here on out, 'cause I love that film and couldn't resist the similarities. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I called Emily, but she hadn't managed to get back yet and was heading home that afternoon. I sighed heavily as I put down the phone. We were doing things as a family that day anyway, but I was looking forward to talking to her, and now she'd be spending the next day with her family instead of me.

I went to Lizzie's room, hoping she'd have time to talk to me. Who am I kidding? Expecting that she'd have time to talk to me; but she wasn't there. She wasn't in at all as it turned out; she'd gone to review an article with Darren.

I was a little worried, I'll admit, but as I thought back to when I was her age I realized that perhaps I was being a little harsh; not all boys were like Derek and two years wouldn't have stopped me.

I decided to go and play with Marti instead. It always made me smile how she refused to give in to peer pressure and still played all her favourite games. I secretly hoped she'd never grow out of them, partly because it gave me an excuse to still play with her.

"Whatcha doin' Marti?" I asked in through her open door.

She shrugged with a smile, "Just looking at the dolls Derek gave me that you used to have."

I took it as an invitation and sat down next to her on the floor. "You know, they're called babooshka's," I informed her, cringing at my own nerdyness. "They're from Russia. Well, not that one in particular..." I trailed off.

"Kate Bush was hot in that video."

I turned to find him leaning against the doorframe. "What video? And you know who Kate Bush is?" I asked incredulously. I knew he liked some old rock, but I would have thought she was too girly for him.

He shrugged. "Babooshka, and I'm surprised you do, she's not really you're normal mainstream girly cr... stuff." He finished, not swearing for Marti's sake.

"She's an incredible dancer." I semi-explained. "Plus, I love 'Wuthering Heights'."

"Oh, yeah, that song got me out of reading the book for an essay." I rolled my eyes as he said this; trust him to hear a deep and meaningful song and use it to cheat on homework. "Kinda reminds me of you when we did Dance Mania in that video."

I frowned at the apparent compliment. After a moment I decided he probably meant I looked dead; I couldn't see what else he'd mean. "What's your excuse? She actually sings instead of shouting. And writes songs that have real meaning."
"I already said, she's hot."

"Bit old for you." I smirked, trying to dispell the connection between 'she's hot' and 'reminds me of you' from my mind. That couldn't be what he meant at all.

"Ha, ha." He turned to Marti. "What are you playing?"

"Nothin' yet," Her attention towards the dolls disappeared the moment Derek had shown up. "Wanna play with us?"

His eyes found mine. "Nah, think I'll pass. But I'll play with you later, 'k?"

"Please Smerek?" Marti pleaded.

He rolled his eyes and gave in.

Marti decided on dressing up. Dressing up me and Derek that is. I struggled to hold back my terror as she offered to do my make-up, then enjoyed watching as it was Derek's turn. I never tired of Marti's Derek make-overs.

"I think he'd look pretty in the pink one, Marti." I said evilly as Derek tried to convince her not to put him in one of the dresses I'd given her for dress up.

"Yeah!" Marti yelled excitedly, "Come on Smerek, don't ya wanna look pretty?"

I could hug her; we all knew she was old enough by now to know why Derek was reluctant to go transvestite for her, but she still took every opportunity she could. She even had a Ken doll that she put in a dress and called Dereka. I could still picture his face when she introduced 'Dereka' to the family.

"Smarti!" He cried, exasperated. He knew she did it on purpose, but he still hadn't the heart to refuse her anything.

She just giggled and held out the dress to him.

Unfortunately, we had to forgoe the pleasure of pretty Derek as Mom yelled to us that we were leaving for dinner in and hour and it would probably take that long to take off the make-up.

Marti wasn't keen on me reversing her make-over. "But you look pretty, doesn't she Smerek?"

He smirked, the pleasure of revenge filling his eyes. "Yeah, you should let Marti do your make-up more often, hides so much more of your face."

I looked daggers at him. "I'm sorry Marti, but it's not really appropriate for eating out." Though her make-up artist skill had improved over the years, she still tended to lean towards the drag queen look, and I had no desire to let the outside world see me like that.

I went to the bathroom to clean myself up, only to be elbowed out of the way by Derek, who obviously had the same idea.

I elbowed him back and soon we were having a full out shoving war.

"Der-ek!" I yelled at him as he shoved me so hard I nearly fell in the bath tub. "I could've hurt myself!"

"And this is my fault how? I didn't make you queen of the klutzes." He carried on cleaning his
I practically growled in frustration. I suddenly remembered the wipes in my room and left to use them, pushing him hard enough to make him stumble as I passed.

I don't know how I managed to get the smudged lipstick off my face, but by the time we left my face was back to normal; a fact Derek lamented as we got in the car. I responded by telling him he had lipstick on his cheek and licking my finger, threatening to remove the lipstick with it. He yelled and squirmed away but I got him in the end and he spent the entire drive wiping at his face, complaining about 'Casey germs' and making disgusted faces and noises.

This was entertaining until he swerved the car, only letting on that it was on purpose after I screamed at him.

We joined the others in the restaurant and I couldn't help but wish I could sink into the floor when my family started their usual table bickering and noisyness. "Guys, can we not do this in public!" I begged getting no answer but a smirk from Derek.

After the waiter had taken our orders, I excused myself to the ladies to try and recover from the embarrassment that I call a family. I stood, breathing to calm myself in front of the mirror and grooming my hair a little.

"Casey!" A familiar voice made me turn.

"Cher?" I asked in surprised, "What are you doing here?" The pretty blonde was in my english class at uni.

"My fiance is thinking of interning at Brisnuskavich and Simmons next year." She grinned and held her arms out for the most over the top girly hug I'd ever recieved.

"That's the firm my step-dad works at!" I told her, amused by the coincidence.

"Really? You'll have to introduce us; Josh is just at our table."

I cringed. Cher was just the type Derek would hit on; fiance or no. "Sure, though I wouldn't want to interrupt your romantic dinner."

"No, really. It'd be great for him to meet someone who already works there." She just wouldn't take a hint!

I smiled and walked out of the restroom with her, following as she walked over to her fiance.

"Josh, this is Casey. Her dad works at Brisnuskavich and Simmons." Cher practically bounced.

"Step-dad, but yeah." I added.

"You wanna go over and introduce yourself?" She asked him as he sat with a slight deer-in-the-headlights expression. Cher had that effect on people, apparently it didn't wear off with exposure.

Without waiting for an answer, she pulled him up and gestured for me to show the way.

There was just no refusing her. I shook my head and led the way. "George, Mom, this is Cher and her fiance Josh." I introduced them. "Josh, Cher, this is George, and my Mom Nora. Josh is thinking of interning at Brisnuskavich and Simmons." I get back to my place, task completed and watch on as Josh and George make awkward and polite conversation.
Cher pulled up a chair. "So, who are you guys?" She asked around the table.

"I'm Marti, who're you?" Marti asked in her 'adore me, I'm cute' voice.

"Oh, well I'm Cher. I'm a friend of Casey's." I could tell by her face the voice hadn't failed.

"Oh. You're really pretty." Was all Marti had to say back.

"Thankyou." Cher beamed. "Are these your brothers and sister?"

"That's Derek, and that's Edwin," Marti nodded and pointed at each in turn. "And this is Lizzie."

"Hi," Lizzie and Edwin said in unison.

"So, you go to university with Casey?" Derek asked in his usual talking to girls tone. Predictable as ever.

"Yeah, we're in english together." Cher's voice remained chipper and I smiled at her lack of reaction to Derek's charms. "Where do you go to school?"

"Queens also; I'm on a hockey scholarship or I wouldn't go the same place as Casey." I snorted quietly at his need to say this to a complete stranger.

"Cool." Cher apparently had nothing to say to this.

"So, Cher, this thing with Josh, is it serious?" Edwin asked, obviously joking to those that knew him, but I glanced at Cher, worried what her reaction would be.

I sighed with relief as she laughed. "He's my fiance, so yeah, I'd say it's pretty serious."

"Shame, let me know if things don't work out." He winked comically.

"You're the first one I'll call." She replied with mock seriousness.

Lizzie seemed as anxious as I was to stop our step-brothers from making asses of themselves. "You're not from Canada are you?" She asked quickly, before anyone could say anything else.

"No, I'm American. I used to live in L.A, but I decided to go to Queen's when Joshy transfered. I think he was sick of my dad trying to get him to become a litigator like him." She leaned over conspiritorially as she said the last part.

"Wow, that's some commitment!" Lizzie said. "I don't think I'd ever put that much on the line for a guy!"

"Well I just knew that Josh and I are meant for each other. Besides, he wouldn't have moved if I hadn't come with him, even though he's always wanted to come to Canada." I had to admire Cher's fortitude; I was getting irritated and I wasn't the one on the recieving end of their questions. I was reminded of Derek nearly moving to be with Sally, and I wondered briefly if they would have made it. Something told me that they would have always gone their seperate ways eventually.

He seemed to be having the same thoughts as he was staring down at the table and being uncharacteristically quiet.

The dinner ended with Cher and Josh still with us. Josh and George seemed to actually get on and Cher ordered me to call her the next day. I had to admit, there was something about her that just refused to be disliked and I was actually looking forward to seeing her again.
Sorry if there are too many references to other things, and I know the Kate Bush stuff is kinda random and they probably wouldn't know who she is, but I was listening to her while writing and the 'Wuthering Heights' video really does remind me of Casey in the Dance Mania episode. No idea why really.
I was flicking through channels on the TV when my phone rang. I snatched it up eagerly; I had had the most boring day in history and I had been looking forward to Emily's call all day.

As I answered it all I heard was Emily's excited yell of 'I'm back! come over' before she hung up again. Even better than I thought. I briefly wondered if her family would mind me coming over as soon as their daughter got back. It was a little intrusive. But then the Davisons were really nice, and Emily and I had been best friends since I moved to London, so I pushed the unwanted doubts from my mind and went upstairs to change out of my night clothes.

I was practically bouncing when I arrived at Emily's front door, but took a deep breath and tried to calm down when Derek's mocking smirk appeared in my head. Silently cursing him for ruining my excitement even without being there, I knocked on the door.

"Casey!" Emily launched herself at me and my enthusiasm made an admirable recovery.

"Em!" I squeezed her tightly. I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed her until her goofy grin and high pitched yell were before me.

"Oh my gosh, it's been forever!" Emily dragged me inside and didn't stop talking for at least twenty minutes straight. I mostly sat and tried to listen to her account of all the activities and parties that she'd had a part in, luckily for me she'd already told me most of it via email and phone calls or I would never have been able to keep up. When she finally took a break, she demanded to know how things had been going for me and sipped on her cola (which I hadn't noticed her get in amongst all the talking), watching me with her wide brown eyes.

I sighed; why did she need me to repeat everything she already knew?

"Well, it wasn't as scary as I thought it'd be," I started, "I mean, I was so scared when I decided not to do the show, wondering if I made the right choice-"

"Yeah, yeah. Skip to the good part!" Emily prompted.

"What good part?" I asked in confusion.

"The part where you tell me about all the cute guys that you were clearly waiting until now to tell me about!"

"Em, if there had been cute guys or any interaction with guys at all then you would know already." I laughed. She really did have a one track mind. A fact that didn't seem as innocent as it did in high school; maybe she and Derek should have tried harder to make it work...

"You mean to tell me that in a whole quarter at university, you didn't meet one cute guy?" She asked skeptically.

"I had a lot of work to do!" I defended. "You don't need to turn into Derek and critisize my personal life." I couldn't rid myself of the grin on my face when I said this though, so Emily just laughed. In truth, I hadn't really wanted to get back into the dating scene again just yet; Jesse was safe, he was a summer romance that wouldn't last long enough to hurt, but a guy who could potentially be at any party I went to, or be in a class or activity I was in... No, I couldn't, I didn't want to.
"All work and no play makes Casey a very dull girl..." Emily teased. "So, have I been replaced yet?"

"You could never be replaced Em."

"You know what I mean. Have you made any friends? Or are you too busy for that as well?" She rolled her eyes as she said this.

"Hey!" I pretended offense. "I already told you about Laurel! And I actually ran into someone from school yesterday who seems nice."

"Male or female?"

"Female." It was my turn to roll my eyes. "She's called Cher and she's in my english class."

Emily fidgeted.

"But, you aren't really interested anymore are you?" I stopped when I saw her troubled expression. I sighed, knowing instantly what she wanted to ask. "As far as I'm aware, he doesn't have a serious girlfriend yet. He's been on a few dates and kissed a few groupies, but that's just Derek being Derek." I never did tell her about Roxy; she was only a holiday fling so what would be the point?

"Oh, well it's not like I care anyway. I don't know why you brought that up." She started picking at her cuffs.

"I know, you're completely over him. That's why every time I talk to you we don't say goodbye until you know if he had a date that day." I put my hand on her back in what I hoped was a comforting way.

She sighed. "Force of habit. I know I should just let it go, I mean it was my decision to break it off in the first place. I... I just..." She moved her gaze to the ceiling, "I don't know, I guess years of obsession don't go away that easily." Her rueful smile as she looked at me convinced me that maybe she was right.

"He really liked you, you know." I smiled at her. I'd always had a feeling (and I guess a little hope) that it wouldn't work out, but that didn't mean they didn't have it good while it lasted.

"I know, and I think that's what scared me. I mean, he was... he was Orlando Bloom."

I must have looked as confused as I felt because she giggled and explained.

"You know, the perfect guy, the one that would never really happen. The one that wasn't real." She stopped a moment to check that I was following her line of thought. "So when I had him and he was real..."

"You got scared that he wouldn't be what you imagined." I finished for her.

"No, I knew he wouldn't be. He's a great guy but he's only human." She smiled a genuine smile when she realized I knew what she meant.

I nodded, finally getting why she'd thrown away her dream guy. It made sense in a strange kind of way, and I was relieved that I could stop worrying about her. And I'll admit, more than a little relieved that the likelihood of a repeat Demily was slim. Couldn't help but think Derek was more of a Johnny Depp though... I spaced out, remembering the pirate outfit he wore for the musical at school.
"Casey?"

"Hmm?" I pulled myself back from my reverie to find Emily staring at me with a bemused expression on her face.

"What are you thinking about? You've got that look on your face that you used to get when we saw cute guys at the swimming baths."

I made a face. No way was it the same look! "So, what are you doing over break?" I changed the subject.

"Hanging out with you of course!" She gave me a you-are-so-dumb-sometimes look. "Unless you'd rather hang out with your imaginary boyfriend?"

I laughed, Emily would so not have said that if she knew who I'd actually been thinking about. "I knew that, Em, I just wanted to know what exactly you wanted to do?"

The next two hours we spent discussing our plans; who we wanted to see, where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do. After that, her parents politely made it clear that they wanted their daughter to themselves, so I said goodbye and skipped back next door to see if Mom and George had any ice-cream in the freezer.
Chapter 7

The next few days passed quickly, spent either with Emily or Cher. I discovered that I liked Cher; she was ditzy but sweet and funny, and surprisingly smart. She was overtaking Laurel (who hadn't called since we left university) as my best school friend, and the prospect of going back brightened at the thought that I would be able to talk to her about home and my friends and family. I loved university, but I never realized how big the workload would be, or how lonely it would be. How my fellow students possibly found the time for parties and socializing I'd never know!

Somewhere in my mind a familiar voice that was never far away remarked that I'd have more time if I didn't obsess over my work, and triple check and edit everything before handing it in, but as always I pushed it back.

I stood up from where I'd been lying daydreaming on my bed, and stretched. I needed to think of something to do. Emily was spending the day with her family, and Cher was having a romantic day out with Josh, which left me at home. On my own as well, seeing as Mom and George were at a baby group with Simon, Marti was at a friend's house, and Lizzie had dragged Edwin to a leafleting and food taster session she'd organized to promote Vegan living. I still remember her trying to turn all of us when she made that particular dietary choice; telling us about the industry shooting calves in front of their mothers so they could have all the milk themselves, and sawing chickens beaks off so they didn't peck each other in their tiny cages. I'll admit, I cut back a little. God help me if Derek found out; I'd never live it down. Oh, and that brings me to Derek. He's at home but there was no way I'd ever be bored enough to spend time with him of all people.

I got up and turned on my laptop, quickly finding the site for the movie theatre Browsing through, I wondered what movies had come to these days. There wasn't a single title that peaked my interest.

"You aren't going to the movies alone are you?" Derek said in a tone that oozed how-much-of-a-loser-are-you?

I wasn't surprised to find him standing in the doorway; hockey had probably finished, leaving him nothing to do for entertainment but annoy me. "I don't see what would be wrong with it." I replied defiantly, refusing to give him eye contact or the satisfaction of annoying me.

He shook his head, "Casey, Casey, Casey. How can you not see how lame it is to have so few friends that you have to resort to going alone?"

"I have friends, they're just busy today," Damn it, I'd wanted to say I was choosing to go alone! Or better yet that I was meeting someone there! "Besides, I don't see friends just swarming around you to take you out."

"That's because there's such a thing as a telephone; you'd know about it if you had anyone to call; my many friends already called to see if they could get me to enrich their lives with my presence. I decided to stay at home." By this time he had wandered further into my room and was bent over, looking at my laptop screen over my shoulder.

"Der-ek, did I say you had permission to bring your disgusting self into my room?" His proximity was unnerving, and I could see his smirk reflected in my screen.

He ignored me, instead reaching around to click on something.

I pushed his arm away and leaned away from him, "Ew, personal space!"
"Relax Case! Just seeing what's on." He seemed highly amused by my reaction.

"And why would you care? I thought you decided to stay at home?" I folded my arms and turned to face him.

"That was until I realised you were staying at home."

I sighed. "So go look on your own computer and call one of your many friends to come get you out of my hair."

"Firstly, I'm not one of your lice," He waited a second for my look of disgust before continuing, "And secondly, I can't think of anyone needs their life enriching more than you Case. So put something on that'll make you less ugly and let's go." He ruffled my hair and left my room.

Two thoughts then entered my mind. One that he was being nice for a change; and two that he was somehow managing to be a jerk at the same time.

Still, I got up and obeyed his instructions, getting ready to go.

He was already down stairs when I got there. I made a noise and he turned.

"Let's go then." He barely gave me a glance and I was oddly disappointed.

Shrugging off the feeling, I followed him out of the door and into the Prince.

"So what are we going to see?" I asked, hoping that it wouldn't be an overly gory action film where the plot lines were replaced with car chases.

He shrugged, "You tell me; you're the one who got a look at the listings." He looked at me sharply, "And no girly romances. No, not even romantic comedies."

"Der-ek! Keep your eyes on the road!"

He swerved on purpose, making me squeal. The grin on his face made me want to hit him, and as we pulled in to the parking lot, I punched him repetitively on the arm.

"Hey! Do you want us to crash?" He leaned away from me and raised his arm in self-defence.

I sat back with my arms folded, willing him to see my glower.

"So, what are we watching Princess?" He asked as we walked in.

A pretty blonde followed our progress from near-by, shooting me a look of jealousy as he called me Princess. I had to repress a laugh; there was absolutely no reason to envy me when it came to Derek, but it just now struck me how the nickname could come across. I looked at him to see if he'd noticed, but his eyes were on the titles displayed on the overhead sign above the counter.

When I didn't answer he looked at me, "Hello? Earth to Spacey? What are we watching?"

I swallowed my smile. "I don't know. We could watch..." My eyes scanned the titles, trying to remember what they were. "Frankenweenie?" I seemed to remember trailers on TV for it, a bit childish, but probably my best chance of avoiding an action movie.

"Right," He wasn't really paying attention, he'd finally noticed the blonde who was now trying her best to pretend she hadn't noticed him. It was really quite pathetic.
"Are we going to get tickets, or what?"

He held out cash and I took it. He must really have been distracted, there was enough for both our tickets. Figuring he owed me for taking me out then getting side-tracked by a girl in the first few minutes, I picked up both of our tickets with his money, then wondered over to the snack area with the change.

We had fifteen minutes until the film started, so I took my time looking. I was still annoyed with Derek for abandoning me so quickly, and wondered briefly if it was worth seeing if he'd shell out for popcorn and drinks as well. In the end I settled for getting him a diet cola which I knew he hated, he always said he wasn't on a diet and that it tasted funny. It was sad, I admit, but an act of petty revenge that put a smile back on my face anyway.

Looking back to Derek, who was by now chatting up the poor girl, and to the clock which told me I still had ten minutes to go; I realised it was going to be a long wait. Ten minutes can be forever when you have nothing to do and are waiting. I pulled out my phone, sighing at the lack of messages, and brought up a game.

By the time ten minutes had passed, it felt like it had been hours. I stood and stretched. Derek was still with the blonde, so I walked over to tell him it was time to go in.

"Oh, she's not my girlfriend. She's my step-sister. I take her out every now and then to make our parents happy." He clearly didn't know I was behind him as he continued, leaning forward now and talking in a conspiratorial tone, "She has problems, you know, she's a bit on the slow side."

I folded my arms, standing behind him. The blonde noticed me long before he did and stood with her mouth slightly open, probably wondering whether or not to say anything.

"Derek, sweetie, the movie's starting." I couldn't resist showing him up in front of her, though the word 'sweetie' made me want to vomit.

Derek spun around and took in my sickly-sweet smile and murderous eyes. He clearly thought better than to correct me so said bye to the girl, and followed me to hand over our tickets.

I handed him his drink as we entered the screen room and walked down to find a place to sit. I wasn't even pretending not to be annoyed now.

"So... Sweetie?" Derek questioned, almost as annoyed with me as I was with him.

"Slow?" I shot back at him.

He laughed, "I call it how I see it."

I clenched my jaw and tried to ignore him.

"Or was that what you were doing too?" He asked mockingly.

I gave a snort of derision and decided the trailers were infinitely more interesting than the person sat beside me. A tactic that seemed to work well for a few minutes, until I felt an arm creep behind my shoulders. I flinched away instinctively, but not fast enough. I felt a cold and sticky sliver of ice slip down my back.

"Der-ek!" I blushed as everyone on the theatre shushed me. I didn't bother trying to fish out the ice, it had already melted. Instead, I focused on revenge. Slowly, a sneaky grin grew on my face; hidden in the dark and so avoiding suspicion. I reached for more popcorn, eating half the handful,
and carefully crumbling the other half. I waited until Derek went to take another sip of his drink and reached up silently before bringing my hand down quickly, rubbing the broken popcorn in Derek's hair.

"Arrgh!"

Another loud 'shush' from the audience, but this time directed at Derek.

I barely had time to stifle a laugh before diet cola spattered my face, flung from Derek's fingers. I responded in kind and pretty soon we were both sticky and being given warning glances by a security guard who had appeared not far from where we sat.

A glance at the screen let me know that watching the film now would be next to pointless, even if I could convince Derek to stop his childish antics. I stood and started towards the exit, stumbling a little on a discarded popcorn carton.

"Careful klutzilla, you nearly stepped on my foot." Derek whispered harshly, following me out.

Once we were outside I shoved Derek in the side. "What the hell was that about?! Ice down my shirt Derek? What are you, in pre-school?"

"You got me a diet cola, you know I hate diet cola." He shoved me back.

"And that's an excuse for assaulting me?" I knew I was exaggerating but everything was exaggerated when it came to him.

"Assault? That wasn't assault, you shoving me was assault!" He tossed his cup into a trash can before unlocking the prince. To be honest, I was surprised he didn't drop it on the floor.
I woke up the next morning with a feeling of optimizm. Most people think that's the norm for me, but they'd be wrong. Usually I'm a frantic bundle of nerves, just waiting for something to go wrong. The only time I don't feel that way is when it's already gone wrong.

This feeling intensified when I was able to take a shower as soon as I got up. A simple pleasure but after years of sharing one bathroom with four other people, even my time at university hadn't diminished my appreciation for it.

I strolled into the kitchen with a blissful smile on my face, ready for a full day of shopping with Cher and Emily. It was the first time they'd met but I was willing to bet good money that they'd get along. Yep, today was going to be a good day. I got a bowl of cereal, humming as I went.

"Hey, honey. You're in a good mood." Mom smiled at me.

I smiled back, struggling to ignore Derek and Edwin who were trying to do goofy impressions of me.

Mom rolled her eyes, "Don't worry about them, they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

They stopped abruptly then laughed. "That may be, but there's a big difference between imitation and mockery." Derek said pointedly.

"Derek." Mom said warningly.

"Nora." Derek replied in the same tone, then flashed her a smile, "We're just messin' with her, she's used to it."

Mom remained unconvinced.

"It's ok Mom, just another couple of hours and I'll be at the mall with Emily and Cher, where no annoying step-brothers can bother me." I smiled at the thought as I spoke.

"Cher? Well, maybe I ought to spend some time with my step-sis and my dear friend Emily." Derek said evilly.

"Don't even think about it!" Only he could make me snap from happy and carefree to homicidal in such a short amount of time. "She's a married woman! Or she will be anyway. And even if she wasn't, she wouldn't go for a pig like you!"

Something flashed behind his eyes, anger or hurt, then he composed himself and pulled back his evil smile. "I wouldn't bet on that. No one says no to the D-man."

"D-man? What are you, twelve?" And we were arguing. Again. Both our breakfasts lay abandoned as we yelled insults back and forth until Simon started crying and we both stopped, looking guiltily at him and Mom. "Sorry." I said sheepishly.

Derek nodded his head in agreement, the closest he was ever going to come to apologizing.

Mom didn't say anything, she just looked tired. And that's when the guilt really set in.

I ate my breakfast in silence and left for Emily's. She wouldn't mind me being early.
When we got to the mall, we immedietly sat down for a drink. Cher wouldn't be here for another hour and I hadn't given Emily time to have breakfast.

"I think it's really starting to get to her," I mused, "I mean, she was never a big fan of me and Derek fighting, but now she doesn't yell at us or anything. And Mom always used to yell at us, even if it was the quiet type of yelling where she didn't really yell at all, you know?"

"Not really, no." Emily replied, but I barely registered her response.

"But now, it's like she's just tired. Tired of the fighting. Tired of us, of me." I was starting to get upset and Emily chewed frantically, trying to free up her mouth for some words of encouragement or consolation.

"Casey, you're reading too much into it. Sure she's tired, she has a little baby to deal with now as well. I'm sure she isn't tired of you."

I gave her a look.

"Well, if you think it's that bad then why don't you stop fighting?"

"Because. Even if I decided no more fights, Derek would still be Derek. He'd still pull pranks on me and call me names and try his best to ruin my life." I explained.

"Can't you just ignore him? Maybe if he doesn't get a reaction, he'll get bored and leave you alone."

I sighed. If only it were that simple. Then I thought. What if it was? What if I could ignore him and he just went away? Wouldn't that be worth taking a few hits from the Derek arsenal without retaliation?

My phone beeped. It was Cher, she'd arrived. I looked at the time in shock, I'd spent the whole hour talking over my Derek woes. "Cher's here." I stood up, waving toward the entrance. Cher waved back an walked over to us.

Emily smiled as Cher sat down. "Hi, I'm Emily."

"Cher." Cher smiled back.

They immedietly fell into girly chit chat and I smiled, glad that my friends got along.

After nearly a full day of shopping, we stopped at Emily's for another drink before Cher and I headed home. Naturally, my Derek problems emerged again as I described our trip to the cinema to my friends.

Cher listened open mouthed and I remembered that she hadn't heard about how we were before. "So, you two are always like that?" She asked disbelievingly.

"Pretty much," I nodded. "Us McDonalds 'invaded' the Venturi household when Derek and I were fifteen and it was hate at first sight. We even tried to convince our parents not to get married so we wouldn't have to live together, but we gave in when we saw how unhappy it made them. Unfortunately, Derek thought it was an excuse to prank me, tease me and generally ruin my life, and has done all of the above ever since."

"Wow, so I'm guessing cola fights aren't the worst it ever got?" Cher asked wide eyed.

"Nope." I shook my head.
"You guys didn't seem that bad at dinner?" Cher said sceptically.

"We aren't always, I mean he can even be pretty sweet on occasion, but it always, always comes back to ridiculous fights and shouting matches." I sighed. "For every good thing he does there's a hundred and one bad things."

"Good things?" Cher was obviously enthralled, and it was refreshing to talk to someone who wasn't sick to death of hearing about me and Derek.

I smiled, "Usually they're to make up for something terrible he did."

"He ruined her dress for prom so she was going to stay at home but we made him find a dress and go get her." Emily gave as an example.

"Really? He found the dress? He told me you found it in the theatre department." I asked Emily.

"Well, I guess I did, but there were four or five of them. You really think anyone but Derek would be brave enough to choose one for you?" Emily asked me as if I was stupid. I guess I was being a bit of a prom-zilla at the time, I wouldn't have wanted to be in her place choosing a dress for me.

I smiled a little. "And then there was the time he sabotaged my dance competition." I continued at Cher's questioning look. "There was this big dance competition and the winners got to dance on TV. Dance was kind of my life at the time, so Derek auditioned to mock me. Problem was, he made the cut, and when the other finalist realised he wasn't really a dancer, she stole my partner, leaving me with no one to dance with."

"But Derek offered to be her partner and they won! They did this amazing dance where Derek was like a zombie trying to catch Casey!" Emily enthused. She reached for her laptop. "It's on youtube, I'll show you!"

I grinned as we watched the familiar video.

"Wow!" Cher looked at the screen the same way she'd looked when we watched the film adaptation of Emma for English Lit. I inwardly groaned. Derek was right, even the taken ones went for him.

"I know!" Emily practically bounced, pleased with Cher's reaction.

"Kinda reminds me of something." Cher frowned, trying think what it reminded her of.

I blushed as the 'she's hot' and 'kinda reminds me of you' conversation popped into my head. If she mentioned Kate Bush or Wuthering Heights I'd die.

"Ooh, I know. The trailer for that zombie film." Her face brightened.

"What?" Emily and I asked, intrigued.

"Josh said the book was brilliant and he's gonna make me watch it with him. It's about this zombie who falls in love with this girl when he eats her boyfriend's brains."

Emily and I made a face.

"Yeah, I know, but it gets better. You see, in the book, when a zombie eats someone's brain it gets all their memories. So when he ate her boyfriend's, he remembered her and all this stuff about her, so he protects her and gets her back home where she's safe. But being around her sorta makes him
remember what it's like to be human." Cher tries to explain. "Here, I'll show you the trailer." She reached for Emily's laptop and typed in 'Warm Bodies'.

After watching it I had to admit I was curious to see it. It looked funny, and strangely the romantic element was there too. I wondered if I could get a hold of the book.

"So, what about sweet things that weren't to make up for being a dick?" Cher interrupted my thoughts.

"Urrm," I reached into my memory. "Well, he saved me from going out with a complete jerk." I quickly described what had happened with Scott.

"That's a lot of effort just to show up the jerk." Cher said, obviously enjoying the re-telling.

"Oh, Derek's very protective of Casey." Emily said in a tone that made him out to be some kind of hero.

"Oh?" Cher's eyes sparkled and I blushed. I had to admit, the way Emily said that, coupled with the stories we'd just told could give the wrong impression of mine and Derek's relationship. An impression that Cher was all too eagerly latching onto.

I looked to Emily, but she was busily bringing up any example of her previous point that she could.

"There was the time when Truman cheated on her with her cousin and he confronted them and immediately drove Casey all the way home from Toronto. Ooh and the time he quit his job to defend her when the boss was mean to her. And the time his best friend Sam wanted to go out with her and he went totally mental and wrestled him..." Emily was clearly warming to her theme.

"Em, I think she gets the point." I was blushing like crazy at this point and would have done practically anything to stop Emily from continuing to confirm Cher's (wrong) ideas about us. The more the conversation progressed, the more certain Cher seemed to become, and at this point I was in some doubt as to whether I'd be able to convince her of the truth, that Derek and I were nemesis, not secretly in love. "I, uh, I'm gonna go. It was fun. Today. Bye." I managed to say before leaving as quickly as I was able.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I entered the family home. At least here no one was going to think any of those things about me and Derek.

My relief was short lived as I saw Lizzie and a boy on the sofa, Derek glowering at them from the recliner. "Derek, can I speak with you?" I said, granting the SOS Lizzie sent me with her pleading eyes.

He got up without a word and followed me into the kitchen.

"I take it that was Darren?" I asked coldly.

He grunted in the affirmative.

"Well, I guess I'll go say hello so he knows that someone in the family has common decency." I said, giving him a death glare.

"I wouldn't bother, he clearly doesn't have any."

I folded my arms. "Did you even bother talking to him before you made this assumption?"
"I didn't have to. I know his type. He's a user and he's only with her to get one thing." Derek scowled.

"How would you know? Or is it that it takes one to know one?" I shot back and his scowl darkened.

"I am nothing like him. I've just seen enough people who are to know. You should to since half the people I'm talking about, you've dated!"

That hurt more than I'd care to admit. "That is so not true!"

"Oh, really? Scott, Trueman, Max." He listed off.

"Max was nothing like that!" I defended.

"Really?" He stepped closer. "So the fact that Amy went to get herself tested for STD's after they broke up for the billionth time was just because she's that kind of girl!"

"And how on earth would you know that?" I yelled, wanting to escape. Max was the only real relationship I'd had that I held as good. I wasn't just going to let him trash it.

"I used to date her remember! We stayed friends, she told me." He looked me right in the eye so I knew it was true.

I couldn't help the tears that started. "Well, congratulations, Max was an asshole. You win! But it still doesn't mean Darren just wants to sleep with Lizzie!"

"You know the type as well as I do Casey!"

It was then that I noticed a distraught looking Lizzie staring at us from the doorway, Darren a little behind her.

"We came to get a drink." She said in a small, hurt voice.

Darren looked uncomfortable. "Look, I'm gonna take off. I'll see you around?" He asked Lizzie.

She nodded miserably. After he left she turned on us. "You always ruin everything! You're always fighting and I'm sick of it! I can't wait for you to go back to College!" She ran upstairs, leaving me feeling like the worst big sister in the world.

"This has to stop." I said once she was gone. "I can't do this any more, we're hurting people. So no more pranks, no more name calling, no more anything. I won't respond, I'll just ignore it. If you want to be a child then so be it. But I'm done." I said quietly, but I hoped firmly.

"Oh, you'll respond." He said with a grin that the occasion really didn't call for.

"I won't."

"Wanna bet?" He leaned forward towards me.

"No, no more betting." I turned and walked out.
I made sure to get to Emily's house before Derek woke up. The first day after my declaration I knew he'd be at his worst and decided to play it safe and avoid. Or maybe I was more procrastinating. Either way, I didn't feel ready to deal with him yet.

Emily was barely awake when she answered the door, and I felt guilty as I watched her down a second and then a third cup of coffee.

"I've done it." I announced unceremoniously.

"Done what?" Emily mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

"I've finally told Derek." My knee was bobbing up and down and anyone would think it was me who'd drunk three cups of coffee.

Emily spluttered her last sip of coffee all over herself. "You what?!"

"I told him," I frowned in confusion. "You didn't think I was going to?"

"No! I mean, I guess I knew it was coming but I always thought it would be him who would..." She started rambling and I had no idea what she was talking about.

"As if! You know what Derek's like." I rolled my eyes.

"Well, I guess that's true, but still..."

"I mean, he lives for ruining my life, why would he be the one to stop it?"

"Huh?" Now she was looking confused.

"He gets too much fun out of it. He was never just gonna stop bugging me. So I have to be the bigger man." I drew myself up. "I told him once and for all, there will be no more arguments, pranks or name calling. Any of the above will be ignored. I will not retaliate or give him the satisfaction of a reaction." I nodded to myself at the end of my mini speech.

"You told him you were going to ignore him?" Emily asked slowly.

My puzzled frown came back. "Yeah, what did you think I meant?"

"Nothing. I need more coffee." Emily mumbled, then looked at me with wide eyes. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Of course it is. It'll be rough for awhile, but then he'll get bored and leave me alone, just like you said." I smiled confidently.

"I said that?" She hurriedly poured more coffee and sat back down.

"Yes, you did. You said I should just ignore him and he'd get bored." I said patiently. I really should have waited to talk to her until she'd woken up properly.

"Right, well maybe I was wrong about that." She said a little nervously.

"No, you weren't. You were absolutely right. It's the only way I can put a stop to these childish..."
Shanannigans." I was firm in my resolve, determined to carry this through.

"Casey..." Emily said despairingly. I didn't get why she was pushing this, I would have thought she'd be the first person to advocate my ignoring Derek.

Emily's phone rang. She answered it and tried to hide her guilty blush. "Oh, hi... Well, thing is, she's here already... Yeah I know... But there's been a... development." Emily had retreated to what she thought was a safe distance, but was smart enough to try and make her conversation subtle. I narrowed my eyes and she hung up, coming back into the room to join me.

"So, that was Cher," Emily told me, unprompted. "She's coming over. If it's ok with you of course?" She was fidgety and her eyes were evasive. I didn't even want to know what she'd done that warranted this behaviour. Oh, who was I kidding? Of course I wanted to know! I just didn't think I'd like the answer.

I nodded cautiously. I was beginning to think my friends getting along wasn't such a good thing. Especially not when they ganged up on me. Thank god they would be separated when we went back to University.

An uncomfortable silence prevailed until Cher arrived.

"Hey girls!" She immediately flung herself at us, and if I didn't know better, I'd think she was completely innocent.

I tried for the rest of the day to wheedle out what it was they were conspiring about, but the only thing open to observation were the secretive smiles when they thought I wasn't looking.

In the end they convinced me between them to read Fifty Shades of Grey, a book which made me giggle like a fifteen year old and blush until my head exploded. They were both reading it and said I should read it too so we had something to talk about. I protested, bringing up the evils of peer pressure and how good friends don't manipulate each other, but all in vain. I opened the pages with a shudder.

"It's really not that bad Casey, it's really a love story." Cher encouraged.

"Yeah, about a sexual deviant." I muttered.

"Oh, come on. Just because people don't talk about it does not mean they don't do it." Emily said matter of factly.

I blushed a deeper shade. Well whatever 'people' did, I sure didn't.

It was typical that I reached the first sex scene just after I got home. I was reading in my room as I didn't want anyone to know what I was reading, but of course everyone decided that today was talk to Casey day.

First was Lizzie. She'd refused to speak to me after last night, and now she wanted to come say sorry. "I'm so sorry, Casey. I know it wasn't really your fault. It was Derek doing that protective big brother thing he does so badly." She pulled a face at that sentiment. We both found it somewhat ironic how he chose to protect the women in his home from people doing something he'd probably do.

"Yeah, well you wouldn't be the first to suffer from him doing that." I said sympathetically.

"Yeah..." Lizzie didn't look convinced. Had she forgotten me and Sam already? "I don't think that
was from brotherly motives."

"Yeah, your probably right." I sighed, "I was after his best friend, and we all know Derek doesn't like to share."

Lizzie laughed and I smiled.

"So has Darren called yet?" I asked.

"Nah, but it's only been a day." Her face took on a worried look. "That's normal right?"

I nodded. "He'll probably call later. Or tomorrow."

"Yeah, or next week." Her expression was sceptical, clearly not buying what I was selling. "Anyway, I gotta go. Places to go, protests to organise. See ya later."

"See you." I sighed. Why did I give relationship advice/girly pep talks? I was no good at it.

Second Mom came for a mother daughter heart to heart. I knew she missed me when I was at university, but I would have preferred not to have the lecture on the importance of friends and a social life amongst my studies.

And last came Derek, entering without knocking and with the usual greeting of 'space-case'. He looked a little amused when I greeted him politely, but somewhat coldly.

"Whatcha readin'?" He asked casually.

I didn't bother trying to hide the cover, he'd find a way to find out anyway. Probably involving wrestling it out of my hands or going in my room while I was asleep. This way was better.

He laughed, "Isn't that pornographic?" He asked, delighting in the blush I wasn't able to suppress.

"It's a romance novel, and yes it does contain some sexual scenes." I said as calmly as I could. I was currently reading one of said scenes which wasn't helping.

"That's not what Sam's sister says, she says it's about an uptight virginal prude who gets seduced by a kinky billionaire who does all sortsa nasty stuff to her." He grinned at my discomfort. "Sounds like you, you hoping for your kinky rich guy to show up?"

I resisted the urge to hurt him. Badly. And, no it wasn't in any way related to the goings on in the book 'cause that would just be... Ew. "She's nothing like me. And she's not an uptight prude."

"Well if you're right about the second part then you've got to be right about the first part."

I clenched my jaw. This was not going to turn into a fight, he was not going to provoke me out of my resolution.

"I see you didn't correct me about the kinky billionaire doing nasty things to her. I wouldn't have thought that was your kind of thing." He tilted his head to the side like he was examining me. "But then I could be wrong. Do you want someone to tie you up and do bad things to you, Princess?"

By now I was pretty sure I was causing myself an ulcer, but I refused to break. "What a person reads doesn't necessarily have anything to do with their personal preferences." I managed, though if justice had prevailed over physics, the coldness of my tone would have turned him into a snowman.
"Oh, come on Case, you know you want to yell at me for that one."

I ignored him and turned the page, though I hadn't really read a word since he came in.

"Casey, Casey, Casey." He sat down in my office chair. "Why don't you just give in? You know I'll win in the end. I always do."

"It's not about winning, Derek. It's about stopping this childishness." I looked at him then and he looked a little worried under his smirk. I smiled for the first time since he came in. "It's time we grew up."

He left, throwing the words 'dinner's ready' over his shoulder.

I sighed and rolled onto my back. This was going to be harder than I thought.

I was the last one downstairs and took my seat while conversation was already going on around me. I breathed a sigh of relief; Derek was already talking to George about his hockey games. No hassling Casey for the time being.

I was almost halfway through dinner before he decided to make another attempt, pretending to reach for the peas and knocking my drink on me in the process.

I hissed, but bit my tongue. "I'm going to go get changed." I said with every bit of calm I had left in me.

The whole table looked at me, stunned.

"Casey, are you ok?" Mom asked.

"Fine, it's just a little juice. I'll be right back." I knew that wasn't what she meant, but I was in no mood to talk to her about Derek. I even managed to avoid giving Derek the evils as I left. Not so much as I came back in (which got a small smile from him), but I still didn't say anything to him.

The rest of the meal was significantly quieter, everyone pausing to give me strange looks every few minutes. Luckily they were over it by the time we'd all finished.

The day passed with an attempt by Derek to get me to fight him for the remote and lots of name calling, though I was proud to say, none of it by me.

I dreamt that night that I'd killed Derek and hidden his body under my bed, and was trying to stop everyone from finding out.

I woke up and stretched leisurely, thinking I was up early as my alarm hadn't gone off. I came to my senses and my head whipped around to my alarm clock. Ten twenty! Someone had turned off my alarm and I knew who. Instinct had me out of my bed and halfway to Derek's room before I took a breath and remembered my resolution. I turned and headed for the stairs, still in my pyjamas.

The first thing I saw when I got to the kitchen was Derek's smirk. I decided to wipe that off the only way I could without arguing (which would probably have made it bigger, thinking about it).

"Thanks for turning off my alarm Der, haven't felt this well rested in forever." I smiled sweetly and walked past my open mouthed sister, sneaking a glance and Derek's frown as I went.

"Yeah, well I thought you'd be enjoying your dreams what with what you're reading. You seemed
to be, what with the huge smile on your face. It was adorable." He put it on really thick at the end, his smirk returning.

I opened and closed my mouth a few times before answering. "Actually I was dreaming about you." I could have kicked myself. Why, oh why did I say that? That would give him enough ammunition for a month!

His expression froze and his eyes looked panicked. To my surprise, he turned to Lizzie and started asking about what she was doing that day (soccer practice followed by a round of milkshakes at Smelly Nellie's, as she had somehow managed to convince the manager to do soya milk and ice-cream), ending the conversation.

I shrugged, too relieved to care why he wasn't teasing me.
"Let's play hide and seek!" Marti yells, and makes to dive under my bed.

"No!" I grab her around the waist and pull her away. The body under the bed groans and I freeze.

"Smerek!" Marti yells, not noticing anything wrong, and escapes my grasp, disappearing under the bed.

I woke up to the real Marti jumping on the end of my bed, chanting "Wake up Casey, wake up Casey!"

"Marti, get down!" I nearly screamed, not sure if I was more afraid of her falling off and hurting herself or of her missing and landing on me.

She bounced down into a sitting position, legs crossed over each other and looking at me expectantly.

I squinted against the light and wondered why she was in my room.

Seemingly reading my mind she decided to explain. "Christmas shopping! You said you'd take me today!"

"Oh!" Suddenly I remembered telling her that a week ago. I got up and shooed her out of the room so I could get dressed. Once fully clothed, I grabbed my list and pencil, shoved my phone in my pocket and rushed downstairs to eat breakfast. Marti was yelling at me to hurry up the whole time, but in the end it was her that wasn't ready and I sat with my hastily eaten breakfast making churning noises in my stomach, waiting for her.

I pulled out my mp3 and switched to the list Cher had made me. The first song to come up was 'I'd lie' by Tailor Swift. I rolled my eyes; Cher had made it abundantly obvious what she thought of mine and Derek's relationship and had been constantly making 'subtle' references to it for the last few days.

"Why don't you use your phone for music?" Derek asked, making me jump. I hadn't noticed him come in. "Or can't you figure out how?"

I took my headphones out. "My phone doesn't do music. As you should know." I reminded him. When he looked confused, I rolled my eyes and brought out my near enough four year old phone.

His eyes widened. "You kept that?"

"It never broke." I explained, shrugging.

"Didn't you ever want a new one?"

I shrugged again, uncomfortable. The truth was, I hadn't. This phone was a reminder that Derek could sometimes do nice things, and I often needed reminding. That and I'd had it so long it wouldn't feel right to throw it away for a new one. I was surprised he hadn't noticed before; I never made any attempt to hide my phone.

George called from the other room and Derek left with a wondering look at my phone.

Fifteen minutes later Marti and I were on our way out of the door.
"Wait!" Derek called, running into the room. "Here, I'm not having you take my Smarti on the bus and giving her a cold." He tossed the keys to the prince over.

I thanked him and we left, me shaking my head a little at Derek's willing surrender of the car.

Two hours later and both of us had reached the Derek part of our shopping lists. "It's hopeless, he's impossible to buy for!" I moaned.

"No he's not, he always likes his presents." Marti skipped along happily beside me.

I smiled, "Of course he always likes your presents, you're his Smarti."

"He always likes your presents too." She insisted.

I laughed at that. "He's never liked a single thing I got him! He always has something to complain about!"

"That's not true, he's just playing. He wore that shirt you got him all the time until it ripped." She argued. "And the picture you gave him of us is still on his desk."

I shook my head. Only Marti could come up with the good side of Derek wherever she looked. The only reason he wore the shirt was because it was his favourite band at the time, and of course he still had the picture; it was of him and Marti for God's sake!

She ran over to a shop and picked up a huge water gun.

"Please don't get him that, Marti! You know he'll use it on me all the time!" I begged.

She grinned but put it down. Next she picked up a barbie doll. "She looks a bit like Sally. At least she can't run away though." She grinned mischievously.

"Marti!" I giggled.

In the end she got him a new shoulder strap for his guitar with Derek stitched in brightly coloured letters across it.

We stopped for a milkshake break, then continued our search. At least I did. Marti had finished and was just looking around for the fun of it and giving her opinion once in awhile.

When I saw it I almost decided against it. It seemed too... Risky. He might hate it. But then I remembered that he never liked anything I got anyway and went for a closer look. After ten minutes dithering and five minutes queuing I had Derek's present. I still wasn't sure but by that point I was too tired to care, and once Marti saw what I bought her enthusiasm buoyed me until we got back.

We walked in the door laughing, having been discussing the merits of Derek having a barbie for a girlfriend.

"We're talking about cheese... Holy crap!" Derek exclaimed when the door swung shut.

"Huh?" Marti looked as confused as I felt.

"I think Derek finally lost it!" I told her.

"Lost what?"
"His sanity."

"Oh."

"Well, I decided to give your 'romance novel' a look. And so far it's talked about food more than... Other stuff." He smirked. "That line was actually from the book. I think she has some sorta food fetish."

I took a deep breath. "It's so nice to see you take an interest in literature, Derek. I hope it becomes a habit."

"Hey! I read!" He said mock indignantly.

Yeah, comic books, I thought to myself. "By the way, they're descriptions. They're there to make the world in the book seem more real. It's nothing to do with a fetish."

"For Gods sake Casey, he wants her to have a prescribed foods list!" Derek said in a tone that said I was being oblivious.

"That's about control. And about her staying healthy."

"Whatever you say, Princess. But I still say food fetish."

Marti had got bored and gone upstairs.

"Plus, he's always commanding her to eat." He said, following me into my room where I put down my presents. "I just flipped through and without even looking found three separate occasions where he tells her to eat."

"Fine, you win, he likes to watch her eat." I replied smoothly, meanwhile thinking actually I win, because ta da, no more argument.

He'd already opened his mouth to make another point, but shut it with a barely visible frown and left me to wrap the presents I'd bought.

The next day I bought Derek an extra Christmas present.

Christmas eve came and Derek and I had friends over for movies and pizza. It was the usual suspects; Ralph and Sam, Emily and Cher; and I couldn't help but remember that this was only the second time Cher had seen me and Derek. The first since she'd started suspecting... That.

Suddenly I was very aware of how Derek's arm went around my shoulders when he teased me, and how often he smirked at me. I tried to put some distance between us by sitting with my friends on either side, but ended up on the floor opposite him, with a prime view of his face as I looked up.

When the pizza arrived it had onion on, which Derek knew I couldn't stand. "Der-ek!" I couldn't help myself, Cher was unnerving me and thoughts of my resolution went out of the window.

"I'm sorry, Princess? Is there something wrong with your pizza?" His smirk was dangerously verging on a grin. He knew he'd got me.

I blushed and glanced at Cher, who had the hugest grin on her face. "It's just you know I hate onion." I mumbled. His eyes were still on me and I could feel Cher looking back and forth between us.

"I'm so sorry, I forgot."
I knew damn well he hadn't forgotten. But I let my gaze drop and started half heartedly picking off the onion.

"Eat."

I looked up at the firmly spoken command to see Derek looking at me with a triumphant look in his eye and a darkly teasing smile that, if it wasn't Derek, would be incredibly sexy. I felt myself flush all over and quickly averted my eyes; unable to look at Cher to see if she'd noticed.

I ate. Onion and all. I couldn't help but think that (if used by someone other than Derek of course) I'd do anything asked of me in that tone of voice.

After a moment I felt his attention shift from me and I breathed in deeply, already feeling a little more normal.

We watched a couple of films and before long I was back to my usual self, though I couldn't help but give Cher the evils when she put on 'It's a boy girl thing', a film she'd said reminded her of me and Derek.

A loud groan went up from the boys. "Come on!" Sam started the complaints rolling.

"Yeah, we said no chick flicks!" Derek joined.

"Oh, come on. We watched Final Destination!" Cher argued back spiritedly.

"No complaints were raised over Final Destination!" Sam pointed out.

"Not the point!" Emily jumped in, and they spent the next fifteen minutes arguing before Ralph was persuaded to join the girls team and the play button was finally pressed and the movie started.

At the end of the evening we all exchanged gifts and Cher warned me not to open hers in front of the family with a wink. I rolled my eyes at her and passed her mine, then it was time for everyone to leave.

After dancing around to a Christmas CD then watching 'The Snowman' with the family, we all went to our separate rooms; me with my present from Cher in my hands.

I woke on Christmas morning at six am and jumped in the shower to wake myself up. I went back to my room to open my present from Cher before Marti came out of her room (she'd been told in no uncertain terms that she was not to leave her room until it was either light or seven O'clock, which meant she'd probably be running screaming down the halls in a little less than ten minutes).

I quickly peeled off the paper, not tearing a single part. I was so pre-occupied with this that I didn't notice what it was until the paper had been removed and folded.

It was a piece of... Of... Underwear... The kind you don't wear in front of anyone except... Well, the person who saw you without underwear.

I blushed and glanced at the gift tag.

To: Casey (I could put and...)

I hope you find a use for this in the near future

From: Cher and Josh xx
I stuffed the... Present in my draw, and dried my hair.

I was halfway through brushing it when the cry of 'It's Christmassssss!' rang through the house. A few moments later Marti was dragging a half asleep and slightly amused Derek down the hall.

"Let's get Casey up first!" Marti was literally jumping up and down. She didn't wait for and answer before racing into my room and diving on my bed. "Come on Casey, it's Christmas!" She yelled down my ear (I was pretending to be asleep).

I flinched back and laughed at her expectant face. "I know Marti, now why don't we go wake Lizzie up." We pushed past a smiling Derek.

"Smerek, you go get Edwin!" Marti yelled, pulling me at a run towards Lizzie's room.

Once we were all downstairs, I tried damage control; I told them all to wait for Mom and George to get up before opening presents and told Lizzie to keep an eye on everyone while I went and made hot chocolate for. I just barely kept Marti from rushing down to the basement to get Mom, George and Simon up.

As it was, we were all just sitting down with our drinks when they came stumbling up the stairs. "Your Cocoa is on the counter!" I yelled to them.

A few seconds later they were sprawled out on the sofa with Mom holding Simon while we all sat on the floor around the tree.

"Presents!" Marti yelled, startling Simon.

"Marti, not so loud!" Mom told her.

"Sorry." Marti stage whispered with a sheepish expression. She crawled closer to the tree and started sorting the presents out into piles.

I laughed as she threw one of Derek's at him and he only just caught it before it hit his face.

"Smerek, open mine first!" Marti insisted and he lifted one of his gifts.

"Okay, Smarti. Which one is it?"

They dug through together to find it and he opened it with major theatrics, pretending to guess outrageous things before finally pulling it out of the paper.

"Is it... A trampoline?"

"No!" Giggles.

"A... Rolex?"

She shook her head.

"How about... A puppy?"

"Nope."

"Darn, thought I was close there. Is it... A..." He shook it. "A guitar?"

"Close!" Marti shifted closer as he pulled the last of the wrapping paper from it.
"Aww, Smarti! Thank you!" He smiled and pulled her into his side. "I love it!"

Everyone had held off opening any of their presents to watch the adorable scene, and now Marti decided the rest of us should open the gifts she got us.

Mine was an All American Rejects CD. "Smerek said you liked them! He heard you singing it in the shower." Marti said happily.

Derek looked embarrassed and started handing out his presents.

Only Marti's had absolute concentration, we opened all of our other presents in random order and at the same time.

I saw Derek pick up his last minute present from me and smirked, already opening one from him.

We both burst out laughing as we revealed Fifty Shades books. We'd got each other the same joke presents. "I got you something else as well though." I pointed to his other gift from me and he nodded.

"Same."

I looked around for whatever else he'd got me and picked up a small rectangle. He paused in opening his to watch me.

I carefully removed the paper and gasped. It was a brand new phone. The latest upgrade of my old one (which by now, looked like a caveman in comparison). "Thank you, Derek!" I leaned over and hugged him before he had a chance to escape, and he pushed me off laughing.

"I thought it was about time you joined the modern world." He grinned.

"Open yours!" I commanded, and he bent to the task.

I could barely watch as he opened the gift it had taken me three hours to find. My fingers pulled at each other anxiously as he held it up and I swallowed nervously, unable to see his face behind it.

"You trying to say my old one needs throwing in the trash?" He asked, though to my relief he was smiling. He shrugged on his new jacket.

"That's not leather is it?" Lizzie asked disapprovingly.


Derek pulled a face, but didn't take it off.

I kept glancing back at him, still wearing the jacket, as everyone finished opening their presents. When we were all finished, I took my new phone out of it's box and put the battery and sim card in, surprised to find a booklet for a cheap contract in there as well. He'd actually paid for a contract. I tried to hide my sappy grin as I plugged it in to charge.

"No going over your contract." Derek warned, "I'm not made of money, you know."

"I won't." I said sweetly.

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but he was still smiling.
Chapter 11

Christmas day was just so perfect that there had to be a lot of bad to cancel it out. That bad came in the form of family visits. Mine and Mom’s heads had practically exploded when Aunt Fiona and Abby both arranged to come for boxing day. In the end Mom had argued Aunt Fiona into coming for new years instead. Abby would be staying for two days. I still had no idea what Mom had told the rest of the family. Dad had told me on the phone he was coming in January as soon as he got the chance (for some reason Christmas is a busy time of year for Corporate Lawyers), but I didn't know when Grandma Ruth and Aunt Madge (not to mention the dozens of other family members that may or may not decide to turn up) were going to show; this left me feeling very uneasy. Derek would probably say this was because I'm a control freak who needs to have an exact day plan a year in advance (and maybe he wouldn't be completely wrong), but mostly it was because in all these years, our family and the Venturi's family had never really mingled. I was more than a little anxious about that, and without knowing when they were coming I couldn't be sure it wouldn't finally happen this year.

This is why, from ten in the morning (three hours before Abby was due to arrive) I was badgering my Mom for information. And getting nowhere. It wasn't that she was being purposely evasive; it was more that she had more pressing things to worry about. Simon was screaming, Marti was making an attempt at baking a cake for Abby ('I want to do it on my own! I'm not a baby!') and she herself was rushing around the house clearing up any Christmas mess. When she knew Abby was coming, Mom always turned into a total neat freak.

If it wasn't for the reason behind it, I would have been constantly making arrangements for her to come; but I couldn't do that when I knew why my Mom did it. She was always very insecure about Abby; the divorce had been mostly her idea so she could go and do her P.H.D and Mom knew that. She wanted to make sure that if any comparison were to be made, she would come out the better. In my opinion, she didn't even have to try. She had not only put her kids first, but also taken on someone else's and that counts for a lot; but I could see why an independant P.H.D ex-wife of her husband might be threatening to her.

"Casey honey, could you check Edwin's room? Last time it was full of dirty dishes and a three month old cheese sandwich, even after he'd supposedly cleaned it." She was shushing and jiggling Simon with one arm and hoovering with the other. Between the baby and the vacuum I could barely hear her, but I nodded and went upstairs with a sigh.

I stopped at the foot of the attic stairs and yelled up. "Edwin! Mom wants me to check your room, is it presentable?"

"Yeah!" He yelled back down.

"You sure? No mouldy food or dirty dishes?"

There was a pause. "One minute!" A few seconds later he came running down, two plates, a bowl that still had the remnants of whatever it had once contained begining to grow up the sides, and a glass in his hands.

I backed off quickly to avoid a collision, and ran straight into Derek. "Watch it!" I snapped, despite the small detail of it being me that had backed up.

"Chilz Space Case, you're the one that backed into me!" He smirked. "But given your unfortunate condition, I guess I'll let it slide."
"Condition?" I asked in a hissing voice.

"Well something's gotta be wrong with you." He turned to yell downstairs to Edwin. "Ed, when you're done my room needs some attention!"

"Why can't you clean your own room?" I said, hands on hips.

"Where would be the fun in that?" His eyes were glinting in satisfaction, and I realised I was letting him get to me.

I straightened up and tugged my shirt straight. "Well, if you've got nothing to do I think my mom could use some help." I struggled to get my tone back to a casual, non-agressive tone.

"I don't 'help'." He leaned forward a little.

I folded my arms defensively. I had no idea how to act when I wasn't arguing with him; there wasn't really a time when we didn't argue to look back on. "Then could you play with your little brother so she at least has two hands?" I asked, astounded at my newfound aptitude for compromise.

His smile dropped momentarily when he realised his victory had just escaped. "Sure." He said shortly and dashed down the stairs.

I breathed. That was easier than I thought it would be.

As I started to head down the stairs as well, I caught Edwin on his way up. "Oh, no you don't. You left those dishes to get disgusting, you can clean them." I said firmly.

"But Derek's room-"

"Leave it! He can clean it himself." I glared.

"But he'll kill me!"

"And I'll kill you if you go near that room!"

Muttering about 'overbearing, homicidal elder siblings', he went down to do my bidding, while I stood a little shocked at the top of the stairs.

"What's up with you?" Lizzie had just emerged from her room, clutching notepad.

"Edwin just defied Derek to do as I said! I must be getting more authoritative!" I said excitedly.

"Or just more scary." She brought me back down. "Anyway, which do you think Abby would be more supportive of? Saving the whales? Or the Great Barrier Reef?" She waved her pencil from one side to the other as she named the causes.

I recovered the smile I'd lost when she called me scary. Since our success in the summer she'd become quite the little protester; so far she'd organised a local group of activists, gone on a whale walk and attended numerous protests. Then of course there was the leafletting, food tasting sessions, encouraging local businesses to stock animal friendly and fair trade goods and trying to convince family and friends to support at least one cause each. "I don't know Liz, why don't you talk to her about both?"

Lizzie looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, we could. I just don't want her to feel overwhelmed or like we're shoving it down her throat."
"We, we're?" I asked warily.

"Casey, you do want us to garner extra support to protect whales and the Great Barrier Reef don't you?" She asked reproachfully.

"Of course." I didn't like where this was going.

"So, all you need to do is make some of the key points I've outlined for you, and give her some reading material."

"And what are you going to do?"

She smiled hopefully, "Provide silent, background support?"

"Liz," I started warningly.

"Casey, she likes you better!" Lizzie said, in a whining tone Derek had often attributed to my influence.

"No she doesn't, she likes us all equally." I tried to use my firm voice again, but it didn't work.

"She barely knows me! She adores you though."

"Flattery won't help you Liz, though feel free to try." I laughed.

"She does! Ever since you helped Derek with his exams she's thought you were the second coming!" She insisted, "She'll listen to you, I know it!"

I scowled a little before breathing a sigh. "Fine, but you owe me big." I gave in reluctantly.

"'Kay," She nodded happily. "First, let me get you the leaflets. You'll need to give them a quick read through so you know what they're about, but they're the same ones I gave you before so that shouldn't be a problem."

"Right..." I looked down guiltily; I had meant to read them, I really had! But then Derek had taken my text books, and I couldn't let him get away with them! Who knew what he'd have done to them? And after that, well I must have forgotten about them...

"While you do that, I'll write some cue cards for you. You know, with interesting points and facts about whales." She grinned. "I'll be right back."

I stood awkwardly in the hall for a moment waiting for her.

"Here; there's the one about whale hunting, life in the Great Barrier Reef, and the global effects of the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef. I can't find the one about the effects of ocean pollution." She frowned.

"She has a P.H.D in Marine Biology; I think she knows about ocean pollution." I smiled at her.

"Right." She looked a little relieved. "I better go write those cue cards."

I sighed and looked down at the leaflets. "Well, I'd better get started." I decided I ought to read them downstairs so I could help out if needed, so headed down to curl up on the sofa. "Ew!" I pulled out an abandoned and still sticky candy cane from between the cushions, and sat down with a sigh. Pulling out the first leaflet, I opened it and began to read.
"Lizzie got you campaining, huh?" Derek asked from behind me.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Yeah, she has this crazy notion that Abby will do anything I say 'cause I saved your butt in high school." I tried to go back to reading.

He laughed, "Case, for that alone my mom would jump off a cliff for you! Add to that the fact she feels sorry for you for having to live with me, and is hoping you'll keep me from being a college drop out and yeah. She'd probably worship you as a goddess and take your word as script if you wanted." He looked amused at my surprised expression. "I think she's a little disappointed that you're my step-sister and not my girlfriend. If you were she wouldn't begged you to marry me long ago."

I blushed and turned my eyes back to the leaflet. I had absolutely no idea what to say to that.

Derek smiled at my embarrassment. "Still might actually."

"Der-ek!" I cried out, appalled.

"Oh, don't worry; it'd take a LOT of chocolate chip pancakes to make me take you on Princess." He winked and took Simon back into the kitchen to bug someone else.

Suddenly I couldn't concentrate on the leaflets anymore. It's not like I'd have to say much about them anyway, they probably didn't have anything in them that Lizzie's cue cards wouldn't cover anyway. I put them down and went to find my Mom to see if there was any more cleaning to be done.

"No, it's ok honey. There's just a couple of things left that I want to do myself." Mom smiled tiredly as she finished making her and George's bed. When exactly Abby was going to see the basement I didn't know, but when my mum is obsessive, she's crazy obsessive.

"You could clean my room seeing as you hijacked Edwin." Derek called from the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes. "He isn't your personal slave! You should clean your room yourself!" I called back up to him.

Mom winced and put a hand to her head.

"Sorry!"

"It's ok sweetie, just... Go and help Derek with your brother."

"Help Derek?" I asked incredulously.

"I thought you two weren't going to fight anymore?" The defeated tone she said this in get to me.

"Fine; I'll go," I held up my hand, "But for the record, no fighting does not mean me helping him."

Mom's smile was still half wince, but she nodded in thanks. "Just... Please, no yelling."

I nodded back and started back up the stairs, stopping in the doorway to watch the scene before me. The CD Marti had bought me was blaring out, and Derek and Marti were dancing to it; Derek swinging Simon around (safely I was glad to see) while Marti jumped and twirled around them. More entertaining was an out of tune Derek singing along while Marti giggled at him.

Derek noticed me watching with a grin. "Marti, go get Casey. If she's going to be in here then she has to dance too." He commanded playfully.
I allowed Marti to lead me to the middle of the room and spun her around. It wasn't long before I was both singing along with Derek and the CD, bringing us the attention of Edwin and Lizzie. I would have been surprised that Edwin could hear us from all the attic; but in honesty I was surprised the Davisons weren't pounding on the door. We were being loud even for us.

After fifteen minutes I was getting a little breathless from dipping, twirling and lifting Marti; a fact Derek noticed straight away.

"Here, I'll swap you a baby for a Smarti." He held our brother out to me. Our brother. It still didn't sound right.

Someone knocked as the door so I balanced Simon on one hip, using the arm this freed up to push my hair off my face, intending to answer it. Derek seized my hand and twirled me before I could reclaim my arm; his other arm outstretched so I couldn't trip or lose my grip on Simon, then dashed off to get the door instead.

Marti stood to the side, looking a little uncomfortable as her mother entered, attempting to hug Derek before coming in to greet us.

"This must be Simon." She smiled at her ex-husband's baby with forced enthusiasm.

I gave her a matching smile. I felt unbelievably awkward at that moment. Several thoughts ran through my head that contributed to my discomfort. The first that it was the first time Abby had met Simon and my mom would have wanted to be there, second Derek's comment that she might beg me to marry him, and third that she must have heard all of our loud singing and she was now seeing the messy outcome in my hair, face and disarrayed clothes. Although that may not be in chronological order.

When Mom came up to join us a minute or two later, she rescued us from an uneasy silence. With relief I handed her son to her and went to make drinks.

Lizzie came down shortly after and helped me carry the drinks in, by which time the rest of the family had also appeared.

Derek and Edwin were playing a video game Edwin had got for Christmas, Marti was being Derek's unashamed cheerleader, yelling childish trash talk at Edwin and jumping up and down whenever Derek scored a point or shot a bad guy or whatever they were doing.

Mom was holding Simon while she, George and Abby held a stunted conversation about anything they could think of.

I wasn't quite sure which group to join; one was in desperate need of fresh company and therefore conversation, and the other looked like I might avoid awkward silences. It was tempting to join the latter but as I was about to, Mom gave me a silent SOS and I caved.

"Here's your drinks." I handed them out after setting the other's down.

They all flashed me relieved smiles.

"So, Casey. How's University?" Abby asked me.

"It's amazing!" A smile instantly leapt to my face, even with the awkwardness. "I can't believe I almost didn't go!"

"You almost didn't go?" Abby repeated my words with incredulity.
"Casey was offered an opportunity to dance in New York." Mom beamed proudly.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I was talent spotted during the summer." I didn't bother name dropping as I was fairly certain she wouldn't know or care who. My inner Derek guiding my behaviour again. I shuddered a little at the thought.

"You mean when you guys did that charity drive thing in the summer?"

I nodded. "It wasn't really a charity drive; more of an awareness campaign to promote a cause." I was about to launch into a description of the whole thing; reasons, acts, how it worked out and where my dancing came in, but Abby was ahead of me.

"So why didn't you take the opportunity?"

I shrugged, to be honest I'm still not entirely sure why I didn't. "I... I guess it just didn't feel right. I mean, I love to dance and I still do. But it was so sudden, and I was already so excited to go to Queens; I'd worked my ass off..." I winced as that came out; it just wasn't me to speak like that and I didn't know where it came from. "I worked really hard all the way through school so I could go to University, and apart from when I was little, I never really considered dancing professionally." I paused. "I guess I figured, why mess with the plan?"

Abby nodded at me sympathetically and I had to lighten the mood.

"And lets face it; Derek would never have made it in the real world without me." Only after she smiled at me did I realise how that could sound. I blushed and excused myself. I was generous but I wasn't a saint. No way was I standing there getting asked the reasons behind my life choices just to help them out of an awkward conversation.

"So what's the score at?" I asked, sitting down next to Lizzie.

"Edwin's a loser!" Marti shouted out gleefully.

"Hey!" Edwin protested.

"Well you are." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"She's right. There's no way you're making a comeback now. You're three hundred points behind." Derek didn't even look away from the screen. "In fact, I'm bored of beating you. Maybe one of the girls would like a go?" He quit the game and turned. "Casey?"

"Uh uh, I'm fine being an observer." I smiled.

"Scared you'll be humiliated?" He taunted.

"Nope; I just don't like to rub my superior gaming skills in people's faces. Especially ones with such fragile egos."

He opened his mouth to answer me but before he could Marti volunteered to play, and he never could say no to her. "All right Smarti, but go easy on me."

"Okay."

"Ed, controller, now."
"But it's my game!"

"And?"

"Nothing." Edwin gave up the controller and sat down to sulk. That didn't last for very long once the game had started. Of course Derek was shamelessly letting his baby sister win, and it was too funny for Edwin to maintain his bad mood.

Eventually we were called to dinner (pre-prepared during Mom's freak out) and things settled into the normal dinner table chatter.

Afterwards Marti insisted on charades and the Venturi kids opened their presents. Lizzie and I had presents too, but ours were opened in the background.

Lizzie had a dolphin pendant and I had a pair of cubit zirconia earrings. Derek had a t-shirt signed by some hockey big shot, Edwin had a CD and Marti had an expensive face paint set, which she then insisted she had to use right away on everyone present.

Luckily Derek managed to get her to postpone with promises that Sam would be round the next day and then she could use it on him.

I was just beginning to relax when Lizzie nudged me and shoved the cue cards into my hands. I gave her a pleading look but she didn't budge.

I sighed deeply. "Abby, I was wondering. Are you at all interested in the preservation of the Great Barrier Reef or the protection of whales?"

"Of course. Why?"

She would have to be on board wouldn't she? Why couldn't she have shot me down? "I was wondering if you'd allow me to give you a brief presentation?"

She nodded. "Go ahead."

I stood up and stepped into the centre of the room. Looking at the first of the cue cards I started to make my, or rather Lizzie's points. "The Great Barrier Reef is composed of over two thousand, nine hundred individual reefs..." I began. Why Lizzie wanted me to cover this I'm not sure. The woman had her P.H.D in this stuff, seemed kinda pointless to tell her stuff she already knew. Five minutes later and I was onto 'interesting whale facts'. "The Order Cetacea contains the two largest animals in the world: the blue whale, which can grow to about 100 feet in length, and the fin whale, which can grow to about 88 feet. I flipped to the next cue card, not sure what else to say on that subject. "A whale's penis is called a dork..." I trailed off looking horrified at the card and flipped to the next. "A blue whale produces over four hundred gallons of semen when it ejaculates..." I looked up at Lizzie, who looked just as disturbed as me (although maybe a little amused) then switched my gaze to Derek who was practically suffocating himself in an effort not to laugh. "Der-ek!"

"What?" He choked out, but was unable to continue due to the violent laughter spilling out of his ridiculously happy face.

I scowled and narrowed my eyes. He wouldn't be so pleased with himself when he was lying cold and dead on the floor... I took a deep breath and let it out, counting slowly to ten in my head while doing so. I forced a smile. "Very funny Derek, it's very encouraging that you took the time and effort to study to make this valuable contribution to mine and Lizzie's presentation. Thank you."

Everyone's mouths dropped. Their eyes turned to Derek for his reaction.
"You're welcome, Case. Why don't you continue?" He challenged, arms folded and laughter gone.

"Oh, I think we've all learned enough. I said tightly. Abby, here's some reading material for you. Although I'm afraid they don't contain Derek's colourful facts."

Everyone's eyes had switched to me when Derek had finished speaking, and now they switched back to him. It was as if they were watching a sparring match and didn't want to miss the next move.

"But after all that time and effort that I spent, the least you could do is finish your charming presentation, Sis." His eyes held the fire of combat; he wasn't going to let this go easily.

I pursed my lips and resisted the urge to make threatening noises. Of all the things Derek called me, 'Sis' was the one I hated most of all. Coming from him anyway. "Well, I was going to sit down and have a drink. But you're more than welcome to finish it yourself, Bro."

George, sensing the oncoming disaster, heroically stepped in, asking Marti if she would like to show her mother the school work she'd got an A on just before term ended.

"Apocalypse averted, I decided to make my escape. If you'll please excuse me, I have some school work of my own that needs doing." I smiled and left the room.

"Keener!" Echoed after me as I made my way up the stairs.
Chapter 12

Things got worse over the next few days; by the time new years eve came around Derek seemed to have forgotten my real name. Not once did he call me 'Casey' or 'Case' that day, it was all 'keener', 'klutzilla', 'space-case' or 'spacey'. Occasionally 'princess' was thrown in. It astounded me how many nicknames he had for me; when they were all used in one day they really added up.

As well as calling me names, he developed a childish habit of 'wanting' whatever I had. He even went as far as drinking soya milk from the carton (even Lizzie and I wouldn't do that, plain soya milk isn't the nicest drink) so I couldn't use it in my cereal.

Thus far I had managed to hold my tongue, but only by picturing being back at school and going about my business Derek free. 'Not long now' became my mantra, I blared it out like music in my head every time he did something to irritate me. Needless to say, I did it so much I started doing it in my sleep; apparently so loudly that Derek heard through his wall and started teasing me about that too.

"Sweetie, are you sure you're okay with this?" Mom asked me for the fifth time that day. We were cleaning up for Aunt Fiona, Harry and Icky Vicky and she was feeling guilty for making me put up with Vicky and Derek at the same time.

"Mom, I'm fine. Besides, they're already on their way. We couldn't cancel now if we wanted to." I reasoned. I actually figured this could work to my advantage; with Vicky here Derek might focus more on her than on tormenting me. And she wouldn't even bother with me while Derek was around. The slut had even hit on him in the car back home after she'd kissed Truman, though luckily he was too pissed off to notice.

"I guess." She still looked guilty.

"Look, it's fine. I'm fine. I'm over it, really." Even if seeing her still brought back flashbacks; I would survive. Mom shouldn't feel guilty over seeing her own sister just because her niece was a little... I breathed, halting my inner monologue. "Besides, they're family. It's not like you invited Truman over."

She sighed and nodded. "You're right." She hugged me. "I am so proud of you. You're so grown up. I could count on one hand the people, even the adults that I know who would deal with this in such a mature way."

I hugged her back while desperately looking for an escape. I can do emotions, heck I'm the queen of emotional wreckage, but breast feeding hormones were a nightmare. I felt the deepest sympathy for George these days; the poor guy had thought the mood swings would end with the pregnancy (Abby had bottle fed so it was only a couple of weeks after for her) and now he had survived that to find he had months of this still ahead.

Luckily the cause of the hormones came to my rescue. Simon started screaming. I was a little amused at the sound as it wasn't his usual sad or hungry cry; more like an angry yell.

"I better go get him." Mom pulled away with a hard worn expression. "I don't know why he hates tummy time so much; you girls loved it. Crinkling the noisy toys and looking in the mirror on the playmat..."

"That the Princess liked looking at herself a lot doesn't surprise me; but maybe Simon just doesn't
like being put down. Marti constantly wanted entertaining until she was... Actually she still does.” Derek interjected helpfully as he and George came in, having just returned from the store. That he was making sense surprised me too much for me to get annoyed over the 'princess' remark.

"Derek's right, both he and Marti were very restless babies and they hated to be alone." George confirmed.

I bit back a comment about Derek being needy and smiled. "You guys get everything?" To my horror I had discovered the night before that no shopping had been done for the evenings celebrations and had sent them out as soon as they would go (which wasn't early, as Derek wouldn't even get out of bed until noon).

"Yep." George smiled back out of me and held out his bags for inspection.

I took them and started mentally checking off items as I dug through quickly. I frowned. "Where are the party poppers?"

Derek rolled his eyes. "Calm down your Highness, they're right here." He passed me the bag he was holding.

Mom looked at them worriedly as I pulled them from the bag. "Make sure Marti doesn't get a hold of those, I don't like the idea of her and explosives. Even if they are just novelty."

"She won't, I'll put them on top of the refrigerator until she's gone to bed.” I reassured her, then breathed out in relief as I noticed everything was there. Although there was a bit more than everything. "Derek, what is this?" I held up a bottle in each hand.

"That's champagne, and that's vodka." He pointed at each in turn.

"I know that, I meant what are they doing here? I said no alcohol."

"New years without booze? Are you nuts?" He smirked, "Actually, don't answer that."

I opened my mouth, the first half of his name already on my lips.

"It's fine Casey; we'll just make sure we don't open them until the kids are in bed." Mom quickly placated me.

"I think Ed and Liz were going to stay up for the countdown." George said, a little nervously.

Mom held up her hands in an I'm-not-dealing-with-this gesture and went to soothe her still screaming son.

I took a deep breath. "It's fine, I'll just watch them and make sure they don't have any." I answered George but was mostly talking to myself.

"I told you we shouldn't have got it!" I heard George complain to Derek as I took the bags into the kitchen.

I shook my head despairingly. George sounded more like Derek's impressionable friend than his father. Sometimes I wondered how he could be the same guy that grounded Derek and took away his privileges when we lived at home.

I was in the process of helping Marti 'find' her shoes when they arrived.

"Marti, come back here!" I yelled as I chased her down the stairs. "Marti, this isn't funny anymore,
you have to wear your shoes!"

"Can't, Daphne hid them again. She doesn't like shoes." She chirruped happily as Fiona, Harry and Vicki sat down in the living room. I had no idea whether she even still believed in Daphne or she was just a handy excuse, but having experienced her angry sulks first hand I wasn't about to question her.

"Would she tell us where she hid them if we gave her some candy?" I resorted to bribery. I wasn't going to keep running around the house looking while we had guests, and I sure as heck wasn't going to ask Derek for help.

"Nope." She grinned mischievously and plopped herself down on the floor.

Vicki grinned back at her and I felt my stomach turn. She was my step-sister, not Vicki's. Or was she going to one up me there too?

"Hey Smarti, no shoes?" Derek just had to enter at the precise moment Marti was proudly wiggling her shoeless feet.

I sighed in defeat, "She says Daphne hid them."

He just laughed and walked through to the kitchen.

I looked around at my relatives. "I'll go find Mom and George." I rushed from the room, but not before seeing Derek come back in with Marti's shoes in hand.

I found them in their room resting with Simon. They looked so worn out it seemed a shame to wake them... But hey, better than me face the relatives without back up.

"Mom, George." I shook their shoulders gently, then a bit more roughly when they didn't wake up. "They're here."

Mom stirred and rubbed her face, leaving her arm there to shield her eyes from the light.

"Mom, Aunt Fiona is here, you have to get up." I insisted.

She looked at my pleading face and sighed. "Okay, Sweetie. We'll be right up."

I gave a half smile and made my way back up.

I spent most of the day avoiding Vicki, doing menial chores and texting my friends about it all. I had briefly outlined my history with Vicki on the phone to Cher the day before, to which she replied that Vicki was a bitch but had the same taste in men as me. I had rolled my eyes at that. Three guys... I mean two guys I liked and my step-brother hardly classed her as having the same taste as me.

Her last message had suggested I offer to set Vicki up with one of my 'cast offs'.

When I'd finally done all of the chores I could do without raising suspicion I sat down quietly and continued texting surreptitiously. Until Vicki finally couldn't resist the urge to torment me any longer.

"I heard you finally ended things with Truman?"

I clenched my jaw and swallowed before forcing a smile onto my face. She just had to go straight for the kill didn't she? "Yes, we broke up only a few days after graduation." I picked up my drink
and searched desperately for a topic of conversation before she could continue.

"So, what happened?"

I cursed inwardly at my slowness. "Things just weren't working out." I tried.

"I hope it wasn't anything to do with me?" She pulled a concerned face but the smugness in her eye gleamed through it. "Because you know it was nothing and we both regretted it as soon as we knew how much we'd hurt you." Her hand rested above her heart to try to prove her sincerity.

I blushed and opened my mouth to answer.

"Oh, don't worry; we could all tell he regretted it." Derek leaned on the arm of the chair next to Vicki. "Hey Vicki... Toria..." I smiled at his 'mistake'. She'd been Victoria since he'd known her, he wasn't going to call her Vicki by accident.

"Hey Derek." She smiled in what I'm sure she thought was a seductive way. She didn't seem to have noticed the insult.

I lost interest and involvement while they flirted. Or at least Vicki flirted, Derek might have just been being Derek, it was hard to tell.

Shortly after that, I brought my planned activities list out. Everyone agreed to join in apart from Derek who sat watching with a smirk while we played charades and messed around on the Kinect Mom and George had bought for Christmas.

Of course it wasn't long until Vicki decided she was tired and sat out with Derek, though he was apparently too entertained to pay her much attention.

We had to take it in turns on the games on the Kinect, so several times I was sat down on the sofa within easy listening distance. Not that I was necessarily listening; but some things one can't help but overhear... Such as Vicki shamelessly coming on to Derek and him ignoring her in favour of laughing at Mom and George wobbling around trying to play virtual volleyball. Her frustration at her failure was priceless and it was all I could do not to grin outright for the duration.

Mom and George sent Marti up to bed at nine o'clock, though it took Derek and a bedtime story to get her there, and we brought out the champagne ready for later. And Derek brought out the vodka with some choice mixing drinks and some beer I didn't even know we had.

Edwin's eyes lit up, but Mom and I were quick to tell him and Lizzie they weren't to have any. Which was completely undermined when Derek stage whispered to them that he'd sneak them some later.

It looked like we would enter the new year surprisingly well (though I think Edwin had succeeded in getting his hands on alcohol and Marti woke up and came downstairs for the countdown and refused to go back upstairs), we were all laughing and joking. Or should I say laughing at Edwin and Georges attempts at joking; it's amazing what a party atmosphere and a little alcohol can do; and the countdown was about to start.

We all grabbed a party popper (Mom confiscated Marti's but she just grabbed another when no one was looking) and a glass of either champagne or lemonade ready for midnight and George raised his watch to count.

"Ten..."
"Nine..."

"Eight..."

Vicki stumbled, having started drinking as soon as the bottles were out and we all paused to laugh before continuing.

"Five..."

"Four..."

"Three..."

We all somehow balanced our glasses while gripping the cords on our party poppers; miraculously not spilling a drop between us.

"Two..."

"One..."

"Happy New Year!"

We all pulled the cords, splashing drinks everywhere (apart from me, I may have looked silly the way I did it but I was dry) and streamers filled the air.

Derek spun me around and unceremoniously stuck his tongue in my mouth. I stumbled and fell back, luckily onto the sofa, and prepared to... hit... him, but he'd already moved on to Lizzie and Marti, pressing kisses to their cheeks.

I was bright red and furious. Why oh why had I told him before that I thought french kissing was gross? Why had I revealed my germaphobic tendencies to him of all people? I was surprised he'd gone that far, but he hadn't got a rise out of me in days, so maybe he was desperate.

I stormed from the room the second Auld Lang Syne finished to call Emily and Cher on conference. And to brush my teeth, though I forgot about that until I'd finished my phone call. I just needed the loving support of my friends more than I needed to de-germ my mouth. Didn't mean I didn't want to brush my teeth.

The loving support of my friends wasn't very forthcoming. They both laughed. Laughed! I'd just been assaulted by my step-brother and they were laughing!

"Calm down, Case! It was just a kiss!" Emily fought through her laughter to say.

"Just a kiss? One it was Derek! Two he stuck his tongue in my mouth!" I squealed back indignantly.

"Start the year as you mean to continue I always say!" Cher giggled. She was obviously drunk. Very drunk.

"Cher!"

Emily broke in again through Cher's rendition of 'Kiss Me'. "Are you sure you're not more mad about the fact he just walked off to kiss other people than the fact he kissed you?"

"Derek. Tongue. Do I need to explain this to you?! It was disgusting!"
"Now I happen to know, Derek's tongue is far from disgusting!" She told me.

Shortly after that I hung up. I was not going to listen to that nonsense any longer! The idea that I... That I liked... That I enjoyed... Urgh!

I was in bed that night before Marti. And my dreams hated me as well...
Chapter 13

I breathed out and stared forwards. It was the first time I'd been alone with Derek for more than a few seconds in days and, more importantly, since I told him I was going to ignore him. I'd hoped to find the time and courage to break myself in slowly before the five hour drive, but between helping Mom and George and spending quality time with our siblings, I'd not got the chance. Or maybe I'd just wimped out when I did.

No one seemed to have noticed Derek's little show on new years and for that I was thankful. I already had Cher and, since Cher's arrival, Emily teasing me on the sidelines, I didn't need the reaction of my family to Derek kind of kissing me. They'd understand that it was just to irritate me, but it would be undue stress for our parents and unneeded ammunition for our siblings. And as for Vicki... If it wasn't for the risk of her telling I'd almost want her to have seen. She didn't know about my aversion to tongues, and she certainly didn't know that Derek knew that; to her it would look just like he was kissing me for new years (albeit not in the gentlest or most romantic fashion) even after she'd been working on him all evening. It wouldn't completely repay her for Truman, but it'd be a nice start.

The car turned sharply and my head hit the window just hard enough to hurt. I struggled to relax my stiff posture to avoid a repeat as we turned another corner. Thoughts flickered through my head about making Derek pull over and let me drive, but that would undoubtedly have led to an argument and with my vacant concentration it might not have been a good idea anyway.

This time I was prepared; I'd taken more cash than I needed from the bank and had made sure I had plenty of minutes on my mobile. If he decided to 'let me out' of the car again I wouldn't be stranded. I even had snack bars and hand warmers in my coat pockets and a water bottle within easy reach.

I looked over at Derek. He was driving unconcernedly, only one hand on the steering wheel (I was sure he was only doing that to wind me up) as he picked at a butterfly sticker Marti had stuck to the dash. I crossed my arms and looked away.

It was only minutes later that I realised there was no music playing. I took my opportunity and flipped to my favourite radio station. Then commenced a wordless battle as each of us flicked back and forth between the stations we wanted to listen to. I reasoned that it wasn't giving in if I didn't speak.

Derek didn't seem to think that was the case as a small smirk set on his face, though his eyes stayed resolutely on the road at all times. My lips thinned and a flipped back one more time, still looking at his face.

His smirk twitched a little. He was enjoying this. For some reason the realisation surprised me; I knew he liked teasing me and that he was trying to make me break my resolution of no retaliation, but that he was finding a small fight over radio stations so amusing seemed a little strange. I would have thought he would find it annoying, especially when he had to use both hands to drive every now and then and my station blared out the girly music he hated.

After a moment he turned it back to his station and I turned with folded arms towards the window, trying to block out the screaming music. I knew he put this one on on purpose; he liked plenty of things I didn't mind, but screamo rock wasn't one of them and he knew it.

I racked my brains for something that might make him uncomfortable without my giving in. "So,
did you enjoy new years? Vicki, sorry, Victoria seemed to be trying very hard to make sure you had fun." It was lame but the best I could think of in the moment. It also offered a chance for Derek to explain his actions.

He glanced at me before answering. "It was great. I had hoped to spend some of it with my actual friends, but your cousin was very friendly. Wouldn't hear of me leaving." His tone was sarcastic all the way.

I snorted a little. "You know Mom and George wouldn't have let you go anyway." As an afterthought I added, "And she's your cousin now too."

He pulled a face. "No she isn't. I made out with her; that would just be... Wrong. She's no relation. And if she is it's only by marriage."

I shrugged, enjoying his discomfort. This had worked better than I'd thought it would. "Same difference."

"No. It so isn't." He said firmly.

"But your so brotherly to Lizzie and me. You're a part of the family now." I smiled sweetly.

"Maybe to Lizzie." He gave me a pointed look. I knew this was the closest he was going to get to admitting to his not so brotherly new years kiss. Even as a prank that would be beyond gross if I was his real sister... Not that it wasn't gross anyway of course. It was just gross in a different way...

"Nonsense. You always look out for me. You're the big brother I never had." I was enjoying this way to much to stop, and if he wasn't going to mention his tongue entering my mouth, then neither was I.

His eyes darkened and his hands tightened on the wheel. "I look out for you?" He attempted a smirk but it was somewhat thin and crooked. "Since when?"

"Oh, you always have really. Must have been an instant sibling bond." I was getting a little frustrated with this topic, but now I had started, I couldn't stop.

"Oh?" His voice was strained now.

I forced my own voice to be cheerful as I spoke. "You were the first to realise I liked Sam, and you tried to stop me making a fool of myself in that Babe Raider outfit. Then when it all happened with Truman, you reunited us. I mean, just because it didn't last doesn't make what you did any less special."

He wasn't even attempting to hide his frown now. "We need to stop for gas."

"I thought you filled up last night?"

He shrugged. "Forgot." He pulled into a gas station and got out of the car.

I pouted a little in his absence. I had no idea what I'd wanted to acheive by insisting he was my brother when we both knew he wasn't even close, but my goal definitely wasn't making the journey even tenser than it had to be.

His mood hadn't improved when he re-entered the car.

"Would it really be that bad if you were my brother?" I asked him after half an hour of driving.
"Yes. I can't imagine anything worse than being related to you of all people. That would mean I shared your keener genes." He shuddered dramatically.

I suppressed the urge to ask whether that was because more because you shouldn't tongue your sister than because he didn't want to be smart. It was getting annoying how much it was playing on my mind; every time I talked to him I wondered if he was going to mention it, and any time I spoke to another family member I wondered if they saw it. It was driving me crazy.

"Yes, you having more than one braincell is a truly terrifying thought." I replied at length. "It's a good thing we aren't actually related."

A small smile returned to his face. "Yeah."

I smiled in satisfaction and turned back to the window.

"I think we were a little too old to get the sibling bond thing." He ventured after a while. "I don't think I'll ever see you that way." He glanced at me quickly, then fixed his eyes back on the road.

"Yeah," I agreed easily, contradicting everything I'd said earlier. "I know what you mean. But I meant it when I said you look out for me. Although maybe I didn't use the best examples."

"So you don't actually think of me as the older brother you never had?"

I laughed, "No, not really." I pushed his shoulder lightly, careful not to make him swerve. "I can't imagine anything worse. That would mean I shared your skirt chasing cad genes."

His smirk wobbled as he fought back laughter so he could reply. "You as a lesbian... Not actually such a terrifying thought." He ran his eyes over me thoughtfully and I blushed, not having realised what I'd said... Or rather what it could mean.

"Eyes on the road mister!" I glared at him with an embarrassed giggle.
"Der-ek!" I pounded on his dorm room door.

The door was suddenly swung open, and I struggled to avoid dropping the cups I was carrying, splashing brown-mixed cream on my pink shirt. "What?" He stood glaring at me, his hair sticking up all over the place, and I resisted the urge to remove a bit of fluff from it.

"I've been knocking for ages! I was beginning to think you weren't there. Although the loud rumbling coming inside your room was a dead give away that you were just asleep." I shoved the drinks into his hands and tried to salvage my clothing.

"What happened to no fighting?" He smirked.

"Who's fighting? I was just stating fact." I jutted my chin up in defiance.

"So, what are you doing here?" He pulled his shoulders up as he asked the question, and his old, stretched T-shirt slipped down a little over one shoulder.

I licked my dry lips before answering. "I need your help."

"Help?" A fake expression of puzzlement spread across his face. "Derek not know meaning of 'help'."

I rolled my eyes. "Assist?"

He shrugged.

"Come on, Derek," I pleaded, "When do I ever ask you for help?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Okay, a few times. But not often, and not usually anything big! Please?" I clasped my hands in front of me.

"Please what?" He turned his ear towards me and leaned forwards.

I sighed and slouched a little. "Please, Derek, you're amazing and perfect and only you can help me."

"Go on." He said, oh so graciously.

"It's my room-mate." I informed him.

"What about her?"

"She has a major crush on a member of your team. And no it isn't you, before you ask."

"And?"

"Well, they went out on a couple of dates but he hasn't called, and because he said he would I can't use the phone without her clawing it out my hands and hanging up so she can wait for the call." Sometimes I wondered if I would even date the girls I knew if I was a guy. They were great, but most seemed to go psycho when they liked a guy. Other times I wondered if I acted the same way.
"No, I meant what do you want me to do about it?" He spoke in a patronizing tone.

I fought back the annoyed retort bubbling up my throat. "I want you to get him to call so I can use the damn- I mean darn phone again, and go in my room without being assaulted by her whining."

"No can do."

"Why not?" Now I couldn't hold back the annoyance in my voice.

"Us guys gotta stick together. If she's that whiny there's no way I'm getting him to call. You want me to get him to dump her? 'Cause that I can do." He explained.

"No! Then I'd have to put up with her crying and..." I stopped, "I mean, she's not so bad. She's a really nice person, and he should give her a chance!"

"He already has, you said they went out a couple of times." He handed me one of the drinks after sniffing them to see which one was his.

"Yes, but..." My arguments ran out. I didn't know why I'd come to him for help; I'd known he wouldn't help and to be honest it was an inconvenience but not the end of the world. I hadn't even seen him since we got back to school.

"But what?"

I sighed. "Never mind. I'm sure it'll sort itself out eventually." I lifted my free hand in a half wave. "See you around."

"Wait," He called after me.

I turned, expecting some quip about the drink I'd spilled on myself, or something along those lines.

"You did get me a drink, and you asked appropriately You may have one request. Just not that one." He had put his drink down out of sight, and was gesturing at me to enter his room.

"Nothing else I want from you." I shrugged lightly and started walking away.

He rolled his eyes and walked after me, grabbing my arm and tugging me back until we stood in his room. He stood in front of me and folded his arms. "Why are you really here?"

"I told you; to get you to help me with my room-mate." I said impatiently. "But seeing as you refused... I'll be off now."

"Case, come on. There's no way you came here to get my help with your room-mate's love life. Your opinion of my romantic tactics isn't great."

I felt myself blushing with no idea why. "Well, I have no other reason to come here. Hey, wait! You just called me by my name! In an abbreviated form but all the same." I grinned.

I got a rare, genuine Derek smile in return. "Well, it has to be something important or you wouldn't have come. I wasn't about to make you run off in a huff without telling me."

"There's nothing, I just came about my room-mate." I replied stubbornly.

"In that case, out you go Spacey." He opened the door and shooed me out.

"Fine." I left with my head raised, something that worked against me when I didn't notice a
discarded plastic bottle I was about to step on and slipped over backwards, spilling what was left of my drink over myself. I heard a laugh from behind me and then a door closing.

After that I went back to my room to get cleaned up and think about why I had gone in the first place, though I had considerably more success in the first endeavour than in the second.

No matter how I approached the it, the answer remained out of reach. I knew he wouldn't help me, I knew he would take the opportunity to provoke me, and I knew I wouldn't get anything out of going. But I still had. Why?

I knew what Cher would say, and I didn't want to hear it; but unfortunately I'd already arranged to see her that day and she dragged what had happened out of me, and with it my puzzlement.

"Aww," She cooed as I told her about him cutting through my supposed reason for being there, "You guys are so cute."

"We are not cute." I insisted. "We've just known each other a long time and to be honest it was a pretty thin excuse, anybody would have seen through it."

"So you admit you made up an excuse to see him?" She said gleefully.

"No!" I denied it but I couldn't help but admit to myself that I hadn't got any better explanation. Maybe I had just wanted to see him. But that didn't mean it was because of what Cher thought it was because of. "I was probably just homesick and..." I trailed off, not sure how to complete the sentence.

"And... Derek feels like home?" Her eyes glinted mischievously.

"No... Yes... Not in the way you mean." I replied in confusion. "I lived with him for years, so yes he does represent home a little. But so would any of my family."

"Okay, if you say so." She said in a singsong tone, before noticing my discomfort and shutting up.

"Anyway, how are you and Josh doing?" It was one of those pointless questions people only asked when they couldn't think of anything to talk about, especially if inserted half way through a meeting.

"We're great. Were buying an apartment next month and it is so beautiful." She enthused, and Derek was forgotten. By her anyway.

We talked for about an hour about her new apartment, how she was going to decorate, and whether or not to throw a house warming party. Obviously we were both pro party so that discussion didn't last long. Although our ideas for the party differed quite a bit.

She was all for a grown up version of one of Derek's parties; I suggested a dinner party. But whatever, it was her party. It wasn't until she mentioned that she might invite Derek that I grew truly alarmed.

"Believe me, Derek is the last person you want to invite to a party. If you do it'll get completely out of control. Only parties I've been to with Derek, we got locked in the bathroom and my boyfriend cheated on me with my cousin. That's the kind of party Derek attends." I tried to warn her.

"Locked in the bathroom?"

"Really? That's what you take from that!" I couldn't believe her; everything I said about Derek she
twisted into her weird theory about us.

"I'm sorry, I'll try and shut up about it." She was silent for a moment, then: "Were you really locked in a bathroom together?"

I sighed wearily. "Yes."

"So, what happened?"

I gave her a withering look. "The same thing that happens any time I have to spend an extended period of time with Derek. We fought."

"Fought as in name calling, or fought as in wrestling?" Cher asked.

"Both. I thought you were going to drop this?"

"I was just curious." She defended herself with an innocent expression.

"Why do you insist on this... This ridiculous fantasy about Derek and me?" I said frustratedly.

"i'm just calling it as I see it." She replied in an annoyingly perky tone. It was then I realised Derek had a point about perkiness being annoying.

"See what?! He's my sarcastic, aggravating step-brother who sees me as his irritating, preppy, keener step-sister!" I wasn't sure why I was getting so frustrated with her. It's not like I haven't had people mistakenly think I liked someone before. Emily thought I liked Noel for a while and it didn't bother me half this much.

"Yeah, but you've got to admit, if you knew someone with the relationship you guys have you'd think something was going on as well." She wasn't a bit fazed by my outburst. "You get under each others' skins more than anyone else could, you're always there to save each others' butts, according to Emily you're way too invested in each others' love lives-"

I cut her off. "I get the point. But come on. Me and Derek? It would never work!" And I was getting the point. A fact that I found rather troubling. If I was honest, I'd started seeing the point a while ago, but I'd tuned it out and buried it under denial. The truth was nobody got me like Derek did; he was always the first (and sometimes the only) person to guess if I was upset or had a crush, or just had something on my mind. He was always there for me when I needed him, even when I didn't know it. He understood how much the little things mattered to me; if he didn't he would never be able to annoy me like he did. And as strange as it sounds, his advice to me was usually sound. Even if half of it was reverse psychology that I only recognised when I thought back on the conversation. But it was also true that it would never work.

"Why not? You guys would be so cute together!" She crooned.

"Don't let Derek catch you saying that." I laughed. "And it wouldn't work for so many reasons! One; we're way too different, we drive each other crazy even when we don't mean to. Two; he actually enjoys pissing me off. Three; he's not much of one for feelings whereas I am a typical hopeless romantic. Four; we're step-siblings! What would happen if we broke up or something? We'd be trapped seeing each other at family events and visits, which would be living hell if I still had feelings for him." I had been counting on my fingers and now I let my hands drop. "There's probably more, but I don't think they even matter when those problems still exist."

Cher giggled and I looked at her quizzically. "There are two things about that ridiculous speech that stand out. The first is that you swore, I mean seriously, I don't think I've heard you swear
before. And the second is that you must have thought about it a lot to come up with all of that bull." She answered.

"I swear," I replied defensively, "Just not without a good reason."

She looked at me sceptically "You didn't deny you have feeling for him," Here I opened my mouth to tell her that was because she already knew I didn't feel that way, but she continued before I could. "So I'm going to make it easier for you. Opposites attract; being different is actually a good thing, if you were the same you'd have nothing to talk about and nothing new to bring to the relationship. He probably enjoys fighting with you 'cause not only does he get your undivided attention, but sometimes you even wrestle which at our age is practically dry humping. With the things he's done for you in the past I'd say that even if he isn't by words he's definitely romantic. And the whole family thing could be a problem, but not only are you assuming something would go wrong, but you're forgetting that you've been in a position where you hated each other and had to live together; I think you could manage a few visits and events."

I sat staring at her incredulously as she dismantled my reasons for thinking Derek and I wouldn't work. I disagreed on one or two of her points; namely the idea the Derek was romantic and that our wrestling was... That; but she made it sound like the cons I had were actually pros.

"Now, any more problems?"

I opened my mouth then closed it again before clearing my head enough to speak. "You're forgetting the fact that I don't want to have a relationship with Derek. I don't see him like that."

"Then how do you see him?" The question was simple but harder to answer than I'd have thought.

"I see him as... Derek." I answered uncertainly.

Cher smiled sympathetically and mercifully let the subject drop at last.

We spent another half hour talking about parties, past and future, before saying goodbye and heading back for some sleep.

The next day my room-mate's crush called. The coincidence didn't escape me.
After a few days I was getting... Concerned that Derek hadn't made any more attempts at breaking me. It wasn't like him to give up, and although you wouldn't think it to look at him, he had a very long attention span when it came to it.

I nearly paid him a visit just to see if he was still alive and hadn't died in some freak hockey accident, but a phone conversation with Liz assured me he was fine. Either he'd met someone even more distracting than Sally (even she couldn't stop him playing pranks on me or make him forget about tormenting me) or he was planning something big. I found either idea worrying.

I found out some of what he'd been doing when I next saw Laurel. At first I assumed he'd been dating her, but in between the over the top Derek worship and the bragging about her own skill with boys, I discovered that so far all they'd done was hang out with some friends they discovered to be mutual. Although according to Laurel it was just a matter of time.

During the conversation it was revealed that Derek knew she was my friend. A definite past tense in my mind seeing as we'd only spoken twice during winter break and this was the first I'd seen her since getting back.

"He said you were step-siblings, how come you never told me you had a step-brother?" She asked, a slightly offended note creeping into her voice.

"I did! I told you before, I have two step-brothers and a step-sister." I reminded her.

"Well, you certainly never told me you had a gorgeous, hockey playing step-brother." She brushed my reminder aside and carried on. "We were all talking about having a movie night sometime soon; we were saying you should come. The others are all couples, and it gets a little boring when they all make out and stuff. Be good to have another singleton there."

"I don't know..." I started to shake my head.

"Derek said you'd say no, but he also said you'd come in the end and that if you didn't he'd just call you all night 'till you agreed." She laughed, "He's so funny!"

"Believe me, he wasn't joking." I informed her. I considered it. I'd met the friends they were talking about, and actually Derek had only spoken to them in the first place due to his fishing trips to whatever group I was sitting with at lunch. It was one of the reasons Laurel had been my only friend; she hadn't met him yet. I didn't know if he would call me all night or not, but I figured I could just unplug the phone anyway, which was by far preferable to sitting and watching him and Laurel flirt.

"Then you should come!"

"No, I don't think so. I'll probably be studying anyway, and Derek's taste in films is... A lot different from mine." I watched her fake disappointment and decided it was more than likely Derek who'd talked about inviting me; she was probably hoping for a clear shot at him while the others 'make out and stuff'. I hadn't seen this side of her before; when we'd met she'd seemed more like me, studious and sensible. But it made sense, with the exception of Cher all my friends had to have a thing for Derek at some point. Cher probably only remained immune due to the fact she was already engaged.

We talked for a while longer, but as I watched her join Emily, Kendra, Lucy and virtually every
other girl I'd ever known in the Derek Venturi appreciation club, I grew bored and excused myself.

The second part came when my English Professor pulled me aside after class. At first I was worried it was to do with an assignment or something, but it turned out to be so much worse.

"Miss McDonald-

"Ms, I prefer Ms." I corrected with what I hoped was an endearing smile. "It's not a big deal, it's just I always think of 'Miss' as a little girl like 'Miss Anne, it's time to do your french work', or a married guy's girlfriend because it's short for mistress, whereas 'Ms' has more of a grownup, respectable sound to it, don't you think?"

My Professor just stood there with the slightly dazed expression people often got when I spoke. I always tried not to read too much into it, but it was a little disconcerting.

"Anyway, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" I took a deep breath to keep myself from talking.

"I had an interesting talk with your step-brother yesterday-"

"Oh, no." So here was the big prank he'd been plotting. "What did he say? Did he say anything bad? What did he say? Did he blackmail you into anything? Because I can deal with him, I can..." I looked again at that dazed expression and took another deep breath. "Sorry, go on."

"He raised some concerns-"

"Concerns? What concerns?" I cut myself off and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, it won't happen again."

"He told me about your... Difficulty with change." He started speaking again after a pause. I opened my mouth to tell him I didn't have a difficulty with change, but stopped myself just in time.

"He said you saw a counsellor at your high school?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"He also mentioned he was a little worried that you had a lot on your plate right now. He recommended that I stop giving you extra assignments and asked that I let you off some of the homework for this semester."

By now I was giving myself a stress ulcer from not speaking.

"I just thought I should talk to you first; though I happen to agree that extra assignments may not be what you need right now. However I don't think being excused from the normal work load is appropriate." He paused to put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "But if at any point you find yourself struggling, feel free to come to me and I'll see what I can do."

I forced a smile. "Thank you, but-"

"And if you just wait for a second then I'll dig out the number of the campus counsellor." He turned to his desk and started moving the various papers, books, pens and who knows what else in his quest for the number.

"I don't think-"
"Here you go, give her a call and see if she can fit you in." He passed me a business card and ushered me from the room before I could explain that Derek was just a dirty little liar.

I quickly discovered that all of my professors had had a little chat with Derek; and that my boss had been asked to reduce my hours. Something he readily agreed to do when Derek had told him about my 'history of mental break downs'.

After speaking to my boss, something inside me cracked and I could no longer stop myself from stomping my way to Derek's dorm. I hammered on the door so hard I thought I might break it. My hand or the door; it doesn't much signify which.

After two and a half minutes of knocking, he finally answered the door. "Oh, hi. Laurel and I were just talking about you." He smiled triumphantly; knowing he'd broken me and I would have to reveal that to my so called friend.

I looked past him to confirm that she was there and clenched my hands, forcing the angry yells back down my throat. The brisk walk had helped vent just enough of my fury that I could postpone murdering Derek. For now.

"Hi Derek. My Professors mentioned that you said you were worried about me, so I thought I'd stop by and we could talk about those worries." I forced a smile onto my face, but I couldn't keep the acid from my tone or stop myself from glaring at him. "But, I can see you're busy, so I'll just come back later." I turned to leave and then turned back to face him. "Just to let you know; I'll be telling Mom and George about your heart warming concern for my well being."

"Hey, we're all friends here. If you wanna talk then I'm sure Laurel won't mind." Derek pulled me back.

Instead of snapping about how I hate being manhandled I widened my fake smile. "Sure." I squeezed by where he was blocking the doorway and sat down next to Laurel. "So, a problem I'm having is that sometimes it seems like somebody out there is going out of their way to infuriate me and make my life more difficult."

"See, to me that just screams paranoia. Maybe you should get some help with that." Derek tried his hardest to look concerned and understanding for Laurel's benefit.

"I also find myself without as many working hours as I was hoping for. See, my boss is under the impression that I suffer from an anxiety disorder that leads to frequent mental breakdowns, and doesn't want to 'overwhelm' me."

By this time Laurel was beginning to look bored and uncomfortable.

"He sounds like a very sympathetic and understanding employer." Even though his tone still played the game, his ever present smirk had revealed its self once more.

"Look, I'm going to give you guys some family time. I'll see you later."

"Yeah, bye." We both chorused absently.

"As much as it touches me deeply that you would go to the trouble of trying to lessen my workload by talking to my boss and lecturers, I would appreciate it if you voiced you concerns to me directly." I folded my arms and crossed my legs, giving him a firm look.

"All right then. When were you planning on joining a dance club or class or whatever?" He folded his arms right back and raised his eyebrows.
"I... I wasn't going to. At least not this semester." I replied, a little fazed that he actually had a concern to raise.

"Why not?"

"Because. I have my classes and my job and if I want any time to myself or time to spend with my friends and family then I can't afford to take on an extra responsibility." In truth, if I wanted to I could sort something out, but since turning down a career in it, I felt a little reluctant to dance. Like it was a dead end and I should be doing more productive things with my time. Like I'd turned my back on it

"Well, now your hours have been cut and you don't have any of those pesky extra assignments to do you'll have plenty of time, won't you."

"Derek, you can't just organise my life the way you want it. If I wanted to do dance then I would. But I already made that decision this summer, and now I have to focus on the path I did choose." I tried to explain, though I knew I was wasting my breath.

"You gave up one opportunity: you didn't give up dance." He corrected. "It doesn't mean you have to cut it out completely. What happened to the Casey who likened her dancing to me playing hockey?"

I had no real answer for that. In fact the mere fact of Derek not only paying attention to me, but also trying to help me without being asked, having an actual heart to heart without being under extreme torture, would have rendered me speechless even if I did have something to say.

"What's up? You look like you just got given a C in something." He asked.

It was definitely not that look. The look on my face was pure shock; when I get a C (which isn't often at all) there's an equal mix of outrage. After a few moments of him looking at me like I was an alien, I finally found my tongue again. "Why are you pushing this?"

He shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "When you don't dance you go crazy and I'm always the one you take it out on so I just thought I'd save us both a lot of trouble and get you to dance."

"Really?" My tone was sceptical. If not dancing drove me crazy, it would just make his goal of making me snap easier; why would he want to mess with that?

"Well, someone's got to keep you as close to sane as you get and Lizzie and Nora are back in London." He scratched the back of his head and sat down opposite me.

"Aww, Derek." I couldn't believe this; I was actually starting to tear up.

"What?" He asked as his now panicked face took in my watery eyes.

"You actually care about me." It came out half sob.

"Okay, I think you should go find Cher or Laurel or someone, anyone, else to cry at." He'd stood up again, but before he could make it to the door I'd jumped up and hugged him. "Casey?" His arms were stiff and wooden by his sides, and his voice was a little strained. "Casey, you can stop now."

I ignored his pleading tone. "Oh, shut up you big baby. I'm hugging you, not torturing you."

As he stood there unable to escape, I wondered why I never did this before. With his unwillingness
to move in any way that could be construed as him liking it, it was easy to keep him in the hug, and even with it being one sided it was nice.

"Case, seriously. Stop." He started to wriggle a little, a precursor to an escape attempt.

"Fine. I'll let you go." I raised my head and gave him a smug, slightly evil smile. "If you hug me back."

"I don't do hugs." He reminded me.

"Then I guess you're stuck."

Slowly his arms came up, went around me, then dropped as fast as lightning.

"That wasn't a hug."

"It's the closest you're going to get." He argued.

"Der-ek!" I whined.

"Fine!" His arms came up around me again, and this time stayed there. "Good enough?"

"Nope. Just a little while longer." This was the first real hug I'd ever got from him, I wasn't letting it end that quickly. Besides, I was enjoying it. I sighed in satisfaction as he did as he was told and kept his arms around me, breathing in his scent as I did so. Only then did I realise something; I was enjoying this far too much. "Okay, you can stop now if you want." I said reluctantly.

"Thank God!"

I started to let my arms down, but was pleasantly surprised when he squeezed me gently before releasing me.

"I should get going." I said awkwardly, and I could feel the blood creeping up to my face. I stepped forward just as he opened the door for me (I mean, how was I supposed to know he'd open it?) and bumped into the corner. "Ow."

Derek choked back a laugh, "You okay, Klutzilla?"

And the balance was restored. Nice, sweet Derek dissolved back into mean, annoying Derek.

I shot him a death glare and left.

An hour later I was at a coffee shop waiting for Cher while I drummed my fingers on the table and checked my phone for the time every few minutes.

When she finally arrived, I wasted no time.

"You want to know what the 'love of my life' did?" I made sure to use a sarcastic tone and quote marks when I said the love of my life part so she didn't think I was being serious. Not that even she was likely to think I'd ever say that about him.

Her eyes went wide with interest.

I didn't wait for her answer. "He led my boss and all of my lecturers to believe that I'm crazy. Like mentally ill crazy."
"He what?" She asked, in a get-out-of-here tone.

"I was looking for something a bit more sympathetic, or outraged! Maybe horrified?" I sulked. And quite frankly, why wouldn't I sulk? It was a pretty big deal.

"So, what happened?" She said, completely ignoring my sulk.

"No more extra assignments, my work hours have been cut and my English Professor is pressing me to see a counsellor." I narrowed my eyes a little, daring her to make light of it.

"Well, maybe you should. Emily said that Paul guy really helped you."

"I've outgrown that!"

"Really? Because Emily said you even called him during summer break to help you decide about the dancing thing." She said doubtfully.

My mouth dropped open. I knew she and Emily had become friends but come on! Discussing my need for counselling? "That... That was a major decision, and nobody was being any help! My family just told me to do what I wanted, and Derek was being... well, Derek, and I just needed to talk to somebody sane!"

"So why didn't you call Emily?"

I paused uncomfortably, unwilling to tell her that I hadn't called Emily because she'd just broken up with Derek a couple of weeks before. It wasn't a big deal, we were still good friends, I just felt awkward for a while. But I was never going to tell Emily that, and with their new friendship that meant I couldn't tell Cher either. "Because... Because..." I searched my mind for a reason I could give that would be even vaguely plausible. "I figured she'd just say the same as my family?"

Cher looked unconvinced.

"Fine, fine. So if Paul was here I'd go see him. But he's not, he's not even a full time counsellor! He isn't even qualified!" I stressed, "And there is no way I'm walking into the office of a complete stranger to talk about my problems!"

"Okay, okay." She held up her hands in surrender.

Silence reigned for a few moments.

I leaned back in my chair, deep in thought. "He says I should take up dancing again." The words slipped out without me even knowing they would.

"Who? Paul?"

"No." I looked at her funny, "Derek."

"Oh."

"He says now I have the time free from extra assignments and work, so I have no excuse." I didn't see the point in stopping once I'd already started.

"Are you going to?" She asked, making no comment on Derek's seeming concern. For that I was grateful.

"I don't know." I reached for my drink and just let my hands warm on it. Someone had left the door
open an cold air was blowing into the small coffee shop. I hadn't actually thought about it much since my conversation with Derek, only the conversation, the hug and what Cher would say about it all had entered my mind at all since leaving.

"Is there somewhere you could dance on campus? A club or a class or something?" She prompted.

"Yes." I didn't elaborate, it wasn't what I wanted to talk to her about right now. "I hugged him." I blurted out. "And he hugged me back."

"That's... Nice?" She seemed confused at the weight I'd given the words.

"We don't hug. Derek doesn't hug. We have never hugged." I looked at her still calm face. "Ever!" I tried to impress on her the hugeness of this event, but she remained unconcerned.

"Sure you do, he hugs you all the time." She brushed it off just like that.

"What? When?" My turn to be confused.

"Every time I've seen you together he had his arm around you at some point." She waved her hand dismissively.

"Those aren't hugs, those are him trying to annoy me. It only counts as a hug if both arms go around." I explained.

"And sometimes both do."

"But it's from the side."

"So?"

"Is it a hug if it's from the side?"

"Of course. Personally I think it's a hug even when there's one arm if there's a squeeze."

This was a new perspective for me. I'd seen Derek sling his arm around people before, but come to think of it, I didn't remember him squeezing anyone else, or using both arms unless there was a good reason. The revelation made me strangely pleased. He may have been hiding it by approaching from the side, but he hugged me all the time, others only got special occasions. Apart from Marti obviously.

"Why..." I trailed off, not brave enough to continue the question.

"Why what?" Cher asked, unaware of the size of the question I wanted to pose.

"Why... I mean, what makes you think Derek is interested in me?" I managed to choke out while staring down at my fingers.

She looked at me like I was being stupid. "Well, for a start all the stuff he's done for you-"

"But that could be a brotherly thing; you know, looking out for his sister." I interrupted.

"Brothers, as far as I'm aware, don't get that involved with their sister's love lives." She said doubtfully.

"He's very protective of Lizzie as well." I reminded her.
"Maybe about this new guy, but has he ever shown any interest in knowing about her boyfriends before?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then there's all the cute stuff, like the way he's always looking at you or teasing you and knows everything about you-"

"Okay, he does not know everything about me!" I protested.

"Casey-"

"He knows me very well, but that's just because he wanted to know how best to wreck my life." I took a breath. "So, what else?"

"The nicknames. It's so cute how he has all those nicknames for you."

"You know who else has nicknames for people? Bullies." I counteracted.

"Bullies call people Princess?" She asked.

"It's meant to be like snob, or snotty." I explained.

"And when he calls you Spacey!" Cher warmed to her theme. "So adorable!"

"Again, insult."

"And the way he flirts with all your friends." She actually giggled.

"Firstly; he flirts with anything in a skirt. He's actually known for it. And secondly; how on earth is that indicative of him liking me? Surely if he did he'd flirt with me and not my friends." I reasoned.

"Are you kidding? Not only does he flirt with all the time, but flirting with a girl's friends is a classic way to get her attention. You know, make her jealous." She sipped her drink through a straw. "And he didn't flirt with me."

I gave her a that's-what-you-think look before answering. "He does not flirt with me."

"He totally does! He's constantly checking you out, and always touching you and the voice he uses when he talks to you sometimes," She paused for effect, "Definitely a 'come to bed' tone, gives me shivers! But don't tell Josh that." Another giggle.

I rolled my eyes and changed the subject.

I had to admit, though I thought she was imagining things and I remained sceptical, she made an interesting point.
Chapter 16

As the days passed, more and more people got to hear the rumour that I was mentally unstable and this, though awful, at least gave me some breathing space before Derek tried anything else. In fact, nearly two weeks had passed before I heard the familiar 'Klutzilla' nickname being murmured when I stumbled or dropped my books. It didn't take a genius to know where my classmates had got that one from.

Unfortunately it didn't stop there; though for the rest of the month he was back to the old school kind of stuff. He somehow gained access to my text books (I had a theory about my room-mate's co-operation on that one) and stuck false pages in over the old ones, causing me first to make a nonsensical essay and second to almost destroy the original pages by trying to remove the false ones. He then managed to stick stupid sticky notes to me while passing me in the hallway on no less than five occasions. He also got Laurel, who found the whole thing hilarious, to distract me while he shook up my fizzy drink at lunch so that it soaked me when I opened it. The list went on and on and I developed a begrudging admiration for his resourcefulness. That didn't make me any less angry though.

By the time her party came around, I would have thought even Cher would be able to see just what a bad idea inviting Derek would be. But I would have thought wrong. It was a shame as well because I was having fun until he showed up.

Once he was there I couldn't bring myself to relax; I just kept expecting for either him to try another prank or something to rival the bathroom and Truman incidents to happen. In the end it was too much to take and I surreptitiously kept close by to keep an eye on him. This would have been a lot harder if Cher hadn't decided to join in the conversation he was having, thereby dragging me along with her.

I hadn't paid much attention to the conversation until one very drunk member of the group pronounced that he thought gay men just hadn't met the right woman yet in response to a male couple who were also in the group and had just announced their engagement. I was relieved to hear by whisper that he was a plus one and not one of Cher's friends.

I was about to debate this outrageous statement when Derek responded.

"I actually agree," He started, "If Larry here met the right woman I truly believe he could have a perfectly fulfilling relationship with her." If it wasn't for the devious look in his eye I would have interrupted, but as it was I let it go. He held up a finger before anyone could speak. "This is because all humans are fundamentally bisexual." Here he threw his arm around the drunk homophobic, "Meaning if... Sorry dude, what's your name?"

"Zane." the drunk seemingly hadn't got where this was going yet.

"If Zane here met the right man, he could also have a perfectly fulfilling relationship with him." He smirked as Zane's face went red. "There's a he and a she for everyone."

"Even you?" I hadn't meant to say it, it fell too close to the provoking him line, but it came out all the same.

"Hey, I'm the exception."

"Typical." I raised an eyebrow. "And what sets you apart from the rest of humanity?"
"There isn't a guy out there who could handle me." He said smugly. "But then again, haven't yet found a girl who could either."

I should have known it would all come back to his ego eventually. "What about Sally?" It was a cheap shot, but it had to be taken.

His smirk dropped, but he didn't look as distraught as I'd been expecting. In fact, he looked a little amused. "She couldn't handle me either. Did a fairly good job of holding out, but in the end she couldn't get all that she wanted from me." The next bit he mumbled a little into his drink. "Probably in part because I don't have breasts."

My mouth dropped open. "Sally's a lesbian?"

The smirk returned. "Emily didn't tell you?"

"Emily knew?" I returned.

"Well, yeah. The girl knows everything about everyone."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"Probably 'cause she knew you'd go all crazy Casey on her." Derek sipped his drink again. "Especially seeing as I think Sally might have had a bit of a thing for you."

"What?!" My voice practically hit ultrasonic.

"She never said anything, at least not to me. But the way she was always coming to our house, and how she never seemed to get annoyed at me talking about you..." His eyes were gleaming and his mouth twitched in an effort not to laugh.

"You liar!" I punched him in the arm.

"Hey, it could be true for all I know. She is actually with a girl now. Though I prefer to think of it as her not being able to find another guy to match me." He laughed and rubbed his arm.

Despite myself I laughed with him. When we finally stopped and looked around, we realised that the group had dissipated, leaving only Cher and Josh who were both watching us with bemused expressions.

"So Cher, when's your dad coming to see the apartment?" I tried in the hopes of taking the attention off me and Derek.

"Not for another two weeks. Josh's mom is coming up on Tuesday and she won't leave until then." Thankfully, Cher went along with the subject change.

"Why? Don't they get along?"

Josh spoke for only the third time I'd heard him speak that night. "Not since the divorce."

"Divorce?"

"Yeah, they get on well enough as long as they don't have to see each other but I think they find it uncomfortable." He answered without actually answering my question. "They probably wouldn't talk at all if it wasn't for me."

"Daddy says you divorce wives, not children." Cher said helpfully.
"Huh?" I was more confused than ever.

"You know, wives stop being wives but step-kids don't stop being step-kids. Daddy used to say it every time Josh came to stay." She explained.

"You mean, you too are..." I trailed off not because I was all that shocked, but because I suddenly realised all three of them were watching my reaction.

"Step-siblings. Yeah." Cher grinned.

I gave her a weak smile back. "How did your dad take it when you two got together?"

"Great. He saw it coming before we did and he was really happy for us."

Josh spoke again. "I think he was relieved she ended up with a guy he already knew and liked. Neither of us had a very good opinion of the guys Cher was attracted to."

"Oh, shush you. You're one of the guys I was attracted to so you can hardly complain." She gave him the evils but she was still smiling.

After that the conversation died. Derek went off to talk to one of his friends from hockey and Cher left to play host and mingle with her guests.

"So, guess it's just us two sensible ones left." I joked as Cher and Derek both joined a mini conga line winding tightly towards the counter with the beer on it.

"Yeah, I got mine before the conga line." Josh smiled. "Got a secret stash in my briefcase. There's chips in there too." He patted said briefcase which rested against the wall behind him. "It's funny, no one ever thinks to look in there."

I laughed. "You could have offered your fiancee some, she's right near the end of the line."

"Nah, she's enjoying herself." His eyes flicked towards her and his smile widened.

After a few moments of watching the conga line Josh spoke again. "So, Derek?" It was a short line but I knew instantly what he was referring to.

"Cher's been telling you her speculations about us, huh?" It wasn't really a question.

He laughed, "Sorry, had to ask."

"She is pretty convincing. If I wasn't one of the people in question I might believe her." I kept my eyes on the fast disappearing beer.

"Yeah, she has a flair for the whole matchmaking thing, though it doesn't always work out." He pulled a bottle out of his briefcase. "Want one?"

"No thanks. If Derek's drinking already then I better drive him back." I had no idea where that came from, we'd arrived seperately so for all I knew he could have had a designated driver with him. Though if he didn't then the number of cans I'd seen him down already was reason enough for me to volunteer.

"If you don't mind me asking, what exactly are you and Derek?" Josh asked after a moment.

My eyes snapped back to him. "Huh?" My mind was still caught up contemplating Derek's inebriation and didn't process the question right away.
"Cher said you don't think of each other as siblings, you don't get on well enough to be friends and you say there's nothing going on romantically. But you seem to be keeping a close eye on him."

I felt myself turn red, with was ridiculous because there was no reason for me to blush. "Someone has to keep an eye on him."

"Right." He just smiled.

Perhaps it was because he didn't press me that I decided in the end to try and answer his question. "To be honest, I really don't know what we are. I gave up trying to work it out a while ago."

"But if you don't know then how do you know you aren't friends or siblings or lovers?"

I didn't really have an answer for that but I tried anyway. "We both agreed we will never be siblings, but I guess we are friends. Kinda." I missed out the last one completely.

"Just think about it." He told me, "You'll want to have some better answers ready next time Cher gets hold of you or she'll never let it drop."

I nodded and smiled a little uncomfortably. "You mean she ever will?"

He grinned and his eyes went back to his fiancee. "Eventually. If you hold firm enough and don't give her anything to speculate about."

Cher came back to us a couple of minutes later and joined our conversation which by then had turned to Law.

"So you two future lawyers been talking shop the whole time?" She gave Josh a significant look and I knew she'd told him to interrogate me.

"Nope. For a while we were discussing busibodies who don't know when to leave well alone." He teased her.

I couldn't help smiling as I watched them; they were so good together. I wondered if I'd ever have what they had.

When the party ended (surprisingly without incident) I went to find my step-brother amongst the drunken rabble. I located him in the bathroom and waited for him to come out before asking him if he had a designated driver. Which of course recieved a puzzled 'no'.

I sighed, "Come on, I'll drive you." I put my arm under his swaying shoulders. "How do you get home from parties normally?"

He shrugged. "Sam."

"Of course."

The drive was silent, but luckily Derek was already looking a little more sober when we got to his dorm.

"So how are you getting back?" He asked when we stopped.

"I'm driving."

"You can't take my car!" He whined.
"Yes I can. It's either that or walk through a dark campus on my own." I said firmly.

"I'll walk you back."

"No thanks." I opened the passenger side door and gestured for him to exit.

"Why not?"

"Because you're drunk. If I let you walk back alone then you'll probably end up in a bush somewhere. And it's not that much further for you to walk to class anyway!"

"Can't you just stay here? You know Jay is never in, you could use his bed." He pleaded.

"All that just so you don't have to walk to class tomorrow? How lazy are you?" I shook my head.

"C'mon Case, it'll be just like the cabin last summer."

"I don't have any clothes with me."

"You can use some of mine. It's not like you haven't before."

"Something I'd rather forget, if you don't mind." That was a lie, his clothes actually smelled pretty good and made me feel like I was being hugged all the time. "And I'm pretty sure you aren't allowed girls in your dorm after hours."

"Please, the guys sneak girls in all the time and I never heard of any of them getting caught." He saw my doubtful look. "Besides, it'd be me who got in trouble, not you."

I sighed. "Fine. But you're driving me to back to my dorm tomorrow to get my books before class."

"You don't have class until the afternoon, right?"

"No, not until two thirty."

"Great." He grinned and attempted to exit the car, managing on the third try.

His dorm room was of course a mess, but he kicked some stuff aside so there was a clear path between the door and the beds. It was funny to watch as he nearly fell several times.

I looked at Jay's bed anxiously, images of him coming in and getting in the bed without realising I was there battling with thoughts of when the bedding was last changed and if he slept naked. Derek noticed my hesitation. "Why don't you take my bed and I'll take Jay's?"

That sounded much better. I knew Derek always slept in boxers and it would mean no surprise bedmates in the night. "Thanks." I made my way over and looked at Derek, who was already stripping down to get into bed. I blushed and looked away, though I kept glancing back every few seconds until he got under the covers. Purely in case he fell over or something. "Um, Derek? Where should I get changed?"

He laughed drunkenly. "Like I haven't seen you in your underwear before."

"Der-ek!" I was mortified. It was true, on a couple of occasions he had barged into my room just as I was changing. He always marched straight back out again, but he probably had seen pretty much everything. Still, that was different to getting undressed in front of him.
"Fine! I'm turning over anyway." He slurred.

"No peeking." I narrowed my eyes and kept them on him as I took off my clothes and slid beneath the covers, which turned out to be no easy task. When at last I was safely covered I said goodnight and rolled over, breathing in the deep, huggy smell of Derek from his pillow. Funny how someone who didn't do hugs smelled just how a hug should smell.

I fell asleep almost immediately.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to say about the paragraph starting 'Marti can't be at all my games', I really didn't realise how the latte bit sounded until I wrote it and I just had to leave it for giggles.

When I woke up I was really hot, something that had obviously influenced my sleeping position as I was in a strangely contorted pose with only half of my body under the covers. My back lay exposed to the air while my right arm and leg were buried in the duvet. I twisted so my entire body was out in the air to cool and let out a sigh of relief as the air circulated around my sweating limbs.

"Do you mind? I wanted to keep my eyesight."

My eyes snapped open and I leapt on the duvet, pulling it back over me and shooting a glare across the room. Derek was already up, though that was perhaps related to the massive hang over he was bound to have and a search for aspirin.

He was munching leftover pizza and watching the small TV in the corner of the room. "Want some?" He asked with his mouth full, waving the box aimlessly towards me.

"No thanks." I looked at the silent TV and wondered if the sound was broken. "How old is that, anyway?" I asked about the pizza.

He shrugged. "Two days."

"Gross!"

"Hey, it's fine! It's cold, but there's nothing wrong with it." He picked up another slice and the TV remote. He pressed a button and the sound came on. He caught my puzzled expression. "What?"

"Why was the TV on mute?"

"You were asleep." He looked back at the screen.

"You mean, you muted it so you wouldn't wake me up?" I paused for a second. "Why?"

"You looked like you could use the rest." He turned and looked me up and down. Well, as far down as he could see with my body buried in bedding. "Still do actually, but hey, when do you not?"

I rolled my eyes at the half hearted insult and reached for my clothes which I'd left folded by the bed. They were just out of reach, but I could touch my top with my fingers, so I started to gingerly pull it towards me. Before getting tangled up in the duvet and falling flat on my face on the floor.

"Wow, you've fallen over and you haven't even got up yet? That's gotta be a record." Derek laughed from across the room.

I flailed about a bit, trying unsuccessfully to unravel myself until he finally came over and dug me
"Where would you be without me?" He said when I was finally extricated, thankfully without exposing myself.

"In my dorm." I retorted. "Eating a nice hot breakfast."

He laughed again. "Come on Princess, I'll buy you breakfast at that coffee shop you like. I think they do croissants and stuff."

I looked at him suspiciously. He was being far too nice.

"Don't worry, I won't play any pranks or anything." He said, taking in my narrowed eyes. "At least, not until after breakfast."

My suspicion wasn't erased, but I nodded anyway. "I need to get dressed, go wait outside." I ordered him.

"Right away, your highness." He smirked.

I headed for Derek's dresser as soon as the door closed, pulled out some random items of clothing, pulled them on, and spent a couple of minutes in front of a mirror with Derek's comb. After digging through my purse for a hair tie I gave up and headed for the door.

"Okay, come on then." I said as I walked out of the room, ignoring the wolf whistles and calls of 'all right Venturi' that erupted from the people standing in the hall.

Derek accepted a high five from one of our many observers as we walked, and I rolled my eyes. I wondered what they'd all say if they knew I was his step-sister.

"What time do you have class?"

I turned to answer him, stumbling backwards and nearly falling until a hand shot out and caught me by the elbow, roughly pulling me upright as it's owner rolled his eyes at my clumsiness. "I told you last night, two thirty." I shook off his hand and carried on walking.

"If you didn't notice I was a little inebriated last night, so forgive me if I don't remember the details of what I'm certain was a very interesting chat." He said, in a tone that was probably meant to sound sarcastic and scathing.

I laughed and he scowled at me. "Sorry, it's just that you sounded like me when you said that." I laughed again at his affronted expression. "And where on earth did you learn the word 'inebriated'? It's not exactly your usual vocab."

"I can use long words if I want to." He huffed.

"Aww, is widdle Dewek upset?" I teased.

"No, just horrified at the idea of sounding anything like you."

"I'm sowy Dewek, I won't upset you again, I pwomise."

"Stop that!"

"Stop what?" I pulled a cute face and then realised I was doing it and stopped. I was meant to be teasing him, not flirting with him.
He grinned. "Did you just use your cute face on me?"

"No." I said, a little too quickly.

"You did, didn't you?" He laughed.

"I didn't!"

"Just admit it; even the mighty Casey McDonald isn't immune to my many charms." He pushed back his hair dramatically as he said it, making him look ever so slightly camp.

I laughed, but even though I knew he was just teasing the words made me a little uneasy.

Luckily we were nearly at the car and conversation automatically stopped for a while as we got in and put on our seatbelts. I remembered when I had to bug him to do his, but after Ralph was in a crash on the way to University and went to hospital for three weeks, Derek decided on his own that wearing one was a good idea. Ralph was fine in the end, although he broke his arm and his ankle and got a bit of concussion. He was actually quite proud of the broken ankle, as for some reason after it healed it looked like he had two ankles on one side and he liked to show people. It had still scared Derek though; he'd just been told Ralph was in an accident and was in hospital, and he couldn't get hold of anyone to find out how bad it was.

The coffee shop was fairly empty when we got there, and we got served very quickly. Especially considering even though he'd had pizza, Derek still ordered three pieces of cake. When I pointed out how unhealthy it was, he changed one of them to carrot cake, said that I couldn't complain any more and used it as an excuse to grumble at me about how a cake wasn't really a cake if it had vegetables in it. He still ate it though.

It was strange; though I wanted to kill him half the time... Actually, make that two thirds of the time; not responding meant I heard more of what he was saying. Usually he'd crack a joke about me and I'd start yelling, but now I wasn't going straight into a rampage I realised not all of them were aimed at me, that he had a knack of hiding a joke about himself in with the mean comments he made. He also apologised, in a round about way, for things he realised actually got to me.

I finished my breakfast at sat back sipping a soya latte. I didn't usually drink coffee; it's bad for the skin and teeth, it's loaded with caffeine and it's so bitter I have to have sugar with it which makes it worse; but I had a weak spot for the lattes at this place.

It was surprisingly relaxing being around Derek; it was probably because he was so laid back himself, at least when he didn't have a hockey game coming up. He gave off an aura of carelessness that calmed the worry freak inside me, making me just relax instead of constantly checking the time to see how long I had left before class or picking at my clothes and hair.

Speaking of clothes, wearing his helped; they were loose and warm and had that Derek hug smell about them, it was like wearing pyjamas but better. I thought again what a shame it was he didn't hug properly, though I smiled as I remembered the side hug he gave me on the walk from the car to the coffee shop. I still wasn't sure Cher was right about them being hugs, but they were still something close to a form of affection that he didn't seem to give anyone else.

I remembered last night and had to ask. "That line, the one about there being a man and a woman out there for everyone? That came from Sally didn't it?"

"Yeah, personally I'm not even sure about there being a person of the right gender out there for everyone. I just thought it would be funny to see the look on that Zane guy's face." He smirked. "Stupid jerk, like anyone cares what he thinks about gays. I say what a person does in their own
bed is their own business." I was surprised at the fierceness of his expression as he said it.

"And the person they're doing it with." I grinned, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"Yeah." He smiled, then the fierce expression returned. "It annoys me when people judge for stuff that isn't anything to do with them! Larry and Peter were standing right there! And why shouldn't they be together just because a minority of people don't like it? I mean some people might even think Josh and Cher shouldn't be together because their parents were married, but they're not hurting anyone and they're not actually related, not genetically anyway, why should they have to be siblings just because their parents fell in love first?" He went quiet a moment. "If it doesn't hurt anyone why should it matter what other people think?" He seemed to say the last part mostly to himself.

I was stuck on what to say after that. Derek very rarely got passionate about anything, and I'd never seen him get that passionate about anything that didn't directly relate to himself. His strength of feeling was confusing given the subject matter, as the only links I could think of were if he was homosexual himself (unlikely) or; and this had me downing my latte to smother the idea; Cher was right.

I gave him a quick glance and he seemed to be back to normal, so I took the chance to try to steer the conversation back to safer ground. "So, when were you planning on going to see the family next? It's been a month and Mom keeps bugging me to come down one weekend soon."

He shrugged. "Don't care. When's best for you?"

"Aren't you worried about missing any classes?" I asked, a little frustrated that he still wasn't taking his education seriously.

He gave me a level stare. "It's gonna be what? One, maybe two friday classes off? That's nothing. I'm pretty sure I can manage to persuade my teachers just this once."

I smiled a little at his use of 'teachers'. No one else I knew called college lecturers that. "And how are you going to do that exactly?"

He shrugged again. "I'll tell them I need the time off to take my loony step-sister home for a weekend for some family support."

"Der-ek!" I pouted.

"What? It's believable and they'll sympathise." His eyes glinted mischievously. "Especially if I bring you in to meet them."

"Forget it, I'll find my own way home." I crossed my arms and resolutely looked away.

"Calm down miss pouty-pants, I'll make up an uncle and kill him off or something." He flicked a cake crumb at me.

"Don't say that! What if you tell them that and then one of our uncles really does die?"

He gave me an are-you-kidding-me look. "Then I'll feel better about having lied."

"You wouldn't feel just a little bit responsible?"

"Umm, no. Because it wouldn't be my fault! Saying it doesn't make it happen."
"Really? You think Marti has to be at your games as a good luck charm, but you don't think wishing someone dead is a bad idea?" I argued.

"Marti can't be at all my games anymore, I just have her picture now instead. And it wouldn't be wishing them dead, it would just be a harmless little lie." He ran his finger around the inner rim of my empty latte cup and licked the resulting froth off his finger. "Besides, good luck charms are different than jinxes."

"How so?" I challenged.

He shrugged. "Just are."

"That's ridiculous; you can't just decide to believe in the good stuff and not the bad." I had to admit to myself at this point that I had missed the milder bickering we used to do. I wasn't there yet on the yelling and definitely not on the pranks, but a little conflict was... Entertaining and invigorating. And it also just felt more or less how we were supposed to be.

"Why not?"

"Because... Because you can't!" I sighed as I couldn't find a point to back me up. "Let's just agree to disagree."

He had been smiling and smirking all through the semi argument, but he scowled a little when said that. "What's so wrong with us arguing?"

"We were hurting people!" I reminded him.

"No we weren't! We were annoying people, stressing people out, but that was in a house with a new baby! Anything would stress them out." He reasoned. "We've always fought, and no one ever actually got hurt!"

"Liz got hurt when you yelled about Darren, and Sally got hurt when you pulled that stunt with Amanda and the top of the pile has to be us nearly stopping our parent's marriage." I listed on my fingers.

"Those are the only examples you can think of? Those are your grounds for this whole thing? We gave in with our parents, I fixed things with Sally, and the stuff with Lizzie was for her own good." He paused as someone came and cleared our table. "I just don't get it! We argue, it's our thing! I have no idea how to even talk to you when you don't fight back."

"We've been talking the whole morning!" We were back on unsure ground and I had no idea how we'd got there.

"And for most of it we've been arguing or it's been one sided. And every time you decide to stop the arguing before it escalates and the whole conversation just stops."

I frowned. To me the conversation hadn't seemed like that, but then maybe it didn't seem that bad to me because I was enjoying his company. I was just spending time with him without the worry hanging overhead that he'd prank me and we'd make a scene or any number of other things that weren't happening in part because I wasn't letting them. "Well maybe if you didn't take it too far when you don't get your way then the bickering would be okay, but I can never be sure when I argue with you that it won't end in me actually being hurt or humiliated!"

"When have I ever actually hurt you?" He scoffed.
"You do it all the time! With the insults and the mocking and the never ending setups designed specifically to make me look like an fool in front of everyone we know! Not to mention how you purposely sabotage everything I try to do!" I ranted. The thought that he had meant to hurt me, had strangely felt better than the idea that he hadn't even known, that he'd carelessly caused me pain without even noticing. Even if it was a lot less often than I was making out. "You know what? I'll walk back to my dorm myself. Drop off my clothes next time my room mate and her boyfriend have a double date with you and your latest excuse for a relationship." I picked up my bag and stormed out before he even said a word back.
Once I got back to my dorm room I started to feel a little stupid. Not only had I stormed out on him for revealing that he hadn't ever knowingly hurt me, but I'd also argued with him about how we shouldn't argue. But there was no way I was admitting how foolish I'd been even to myself; I was sure I was just forgetting some crucial part of the conversation that justified it all.

I lay down on my bed and reviewed the conversation in my mind, trying to remember what had set me off. We'd been talking about the conversation at the party, then about going home, then... Then that's where it all started to go wrong. We'd argued, we'd both actually enjoyed arguing, then I stopped it and suddenly we were both properly angry. Somewhere along the line our natural bickering had turned into a real fight and I couldn't help that admit that it was my fault. There'd been no danger in the argument we'd been having; it was about superstition for Pete's sake, hardly one that would end up in us wrestling on the floor; but I'd stopped it anyway and I couldn't now remember why. Oh, yes, because I couldn't think of anything to argue back. So I'd done what we always did and said something I knew would irritate him.

Except, it hadn't just irritated him. It had made him angry. Worse, it had upset him.

I sighed. It wasn't like I'd thought that was where we'd end up. I'd thought he'd try and provoke me some more, I'd have fun resisting but giving back subtle insults and then we'd be back to talking about going home.

Home. I hadn't called my mom to let her know what Derek had said about going home.

I leaped up and grabbed my phone. I'd call her right away and that would keep my mind off the fight long enough for me to figure it out. I fished a crumb out from behind my tooth and dropped the phone like it had burned me. I hadn't brushed my teeth since yesterday morning! They felt like they had a rug growing on them. I shuddered and grabbed my toiletry bag, dashing down the hall to the bathroom. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten about brushing my teeth! Stupid Derek asking me to stay the night and... I paused mid thought at how that sounded. I had a sudden image appear in my mind of Derek asking me to stay over, actually stay over. I shrugged it off, not bothering to wonder where it came from in my rush to cleanse my mouth, though not quite managing to suppress my curiosity as to whether he'd really use the sheepish and sexy (on anyone else) grin he'd used in my imagination.

Damn it, Cher! I cursed in my head. If she hadn't put those ideas in my head then I would have never imagined that! Or at least not without laughing; I'd often imagined Derek being turned down for a change, and I'll admit that sometimes the one turning him down was me. Only because I couldn't think of anyone else that would of course. All the same, it was her fault! And Derek's of course for doing something so stupid as to ask me to stay the night and for never letting go on this no arguing thing so I could just get him out of my head.

As I noticed my toothbrush timer stop beeping I took the brush out of my mouth. It was looking a little squashed, the way any toothbrush Marti ever used looked. I hadn't noticed the timer start beeping in the first place, and I certainly hadn't been aware that I was destroying the bristles through over zealous scrubbing. I was surprised my gums were still intact.

Stupid Derek messing with my stupid mind. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd somehow roped Cher in
to put those stupid thoughts in my head and it was all just some stupid prank...

I slammed the door as I re entered my room, thankful that I was alone and let out a frustrated noise.

I took a deep breath and looked at my phone lying there on my bed with the McDonald/Venturi house number already up on the screen. Back to forgetting about stupid Derek and phoning my mother.

The phone rang straight through to voicemail and I tried again. No one ever seemed able to get to the phone before that thing kicked in. A clicking, crackling noise on the other end let me know that someone had picked up.

"Hello?" George's distracted voice came through the reciever.

"Hi George, it's Casey. Is Mom around?" I listened to the noise filtering through from my siblings and felt a pang of homesickness.

"Sure, I'll just go get her."

I waited, trying to keep my thoughts on what to say to my Mom and failing completely. At long last she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mom." I said, dragging my thoughts back to the phone.

"Hi Casey." She paused and yelled something indistinct to someone on the other end. "So, did you talk to Derek about coming home?"

"Yeah..." I trailed distractedly.

"Casey? You okay?" Another indistinct yell.

"What? Why?"

"You sound distracted." Said the woman having a shouting match at the other end of the line.

"Yeah, just didn't get much sleep last night," I lied smoothly. And then ruined it by saying, "We didn't leave Cher's until late and Derek has the heat turned up way too high in his room so I couldn't sleep..." I winced at my inability to lie properly and waited for her answer.

"Oh, that's nice." She stopped and yelled again and I silently thanked whoever was distracting her. "So when will we see you again?"

"About that..."

"Oh no," Mom's exasperated voice said, "I thought you weren't going to fight anymore?"

"Well, we weren't but then we got into this fight about not fighting, and then we were fighting about our fights and-"

"You fought about not fighting." Mom interrupted tiredly but amusedly. "Tell me why that doesn't surprise me. So now you have no ride home, right?"

"Uhuh." I said meekly.
She sighed heavily. "Is there anyone else you could ask?" Four and a half years ago she would have asked me to make up with Derek and get him to drive me, but that was four and a half years ago, nowadays she knew better.

"Not that I know of." I racked my brains, trying to think of anyone I'd met who lived in London. Apart from Derek and Sam.

"Can't you just pretend to apologize?"

I took back everything I thought about her knowing better. "Mom! Why should I apologize when I'm not the one at fault?"

"So you can come see your mother who misses you?"

"No way! Maybe you should call Derek and ask him to apologize for a change." I pouted.

"Casey..." She sounded like she was going to say more, but then she yelled again and when she spoke again she sounded rushed. "Look, you guys really should learn to sort this stuff out between you. Like it or not, you're part of the same family and you're pretty much stuck with each other, so just make the best of it okay? Anyway, I really gotta go. Love you sweetie, let me know when everything's sorted." And she hung up.

"Love you too, Mom." I said to the empty room.

I huffed and stared at the ceiling. Family. That word grated on me so much. Nothing matters to me more than family, and I'm a firm believer in loving them no matter what. Which was why I so desperately wanted Derek not to be family.

My hand was still clutching my phone and I brought it up to my face so I could see the screen, before looking for Emily's number, trying to ignore that it came just after Derek's.

She picked up on the third ring. "Hello? Casey?"

"Yes, who else would it be?"

"I don't know, I didn't check the number before answering. Could have been some incredibly hot guy calling to declare his undying love to me." She said with a humorous sigh.

I laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you Em, but I haven't had a sex change and though I love you, I think we should stay just friends."

"Darn, you would make one hot guy, too." She laughed back. "So what are calling about?"

"I need a reason to want to talk to my best friend?"

"You had another fight, huh?"

"No! I mean yes, but that's not why I called." So it was a little lie, it wasn't the only reason I called.

"So why did you call?"

"Do you still have your old Derek file?" I asked her.

"Sure; you want me to scan it in and email it to you?"

"No thanks. I just wondered if you put Sally in the girlfriends section?" I asked nochalantly.
"Of course. I even put in Roxy for old time's sake."

I smiled. "Do you have any new info on her? Sally I mean."

"Why? Is she back?" Emily's voice grew alarmed.

"No. Were you worried she'd come back and Derek wouldn't be madly in love with me any more?" I asked jokingly, though also not so jokingly as that actually seemed to be what she was worried about.

"As if! No competition." She teased.

"Ha ha." I paused just long enough for her to get antsy.

"So why'd you want to talk about Sally."

Satisfied, I answered her question. "Have you heard about her new love interest?"

"No, not really interested in her love life after Derek." Emily replied.

"Oh, ok. So what do you want to talk about?"

"Casey." She said warningly.

"Alright, alright, I'll tell you!" I giggled at her nosiness. "Her new partner isn't the... Type we would have anticipated."

"What do you mean?"

I broke. "She's a lesbian!" I squealed and waited for the shocked gasp at the other end of the line, but I didn't hear it. "You already knew?" I asked, disappointed.

"Not exactly." She said slowly.

"Huh?"

"I always was a little suspicious of her. She always seemed to be trying to start fights with Derek. Emotional stuff isn't a big deal, he needed to slow down, they should just be friends, he needed to speed up, he should tell her loves her, he needs to write her a song right away." Emily droned. "No one could be that flakey. Not even you."

"Hey!" I was a little offended by that.

"Sorry." She replied, in a tone that said she wasn't sorry at all.

I was silent, trying to think how to bring up Derek without sounding obsessed.

"So, what did Derek do now?" Emily saved me.

"Apparently he doesn't know how to talk to me when we're not fighting." I pounced on the opportunity.

"He said that?" She said, in an adoring tone that didn't seem to go with what I'd just told her.

"Yeah, he said that." I answered, a little confused by her reaction. "Right before he made out he was completely innocent and never once did anything to hurt me."
"Wow." Emily said.

"Em, he worked for years with no other goal than ruining my life, how can he have not meant to hurt me?" My exasperation coloured my voice. "Anyway, we had this fight because he says there's nothing wrong with us fighting which is ridiculous and now I have no way of getting home to visit the family."

"Can't you just suck it up?" She politely overlooked the fighting about not fighting and I mentally hugged her.

"Em!" My voice was pained.

"Well, what are you going to do then?" She asked.

"I was hoping a certain mutual and amazingly wonderful friend might convince him to apologize to me so he can drive me." I sweet talked.

She laughed and didn't stop laughing for twenty seven seconds. I counted.

"You can't be serious?" She said at last.

I sighed. "I guess not."

"Case, just go talk to him. Maybe you can reach a compromise."

"Derek? Compromise? I don't think he knows the meaning of the word." I moaned.

"Then don't see your family. Miss Simon's first laughs, and let yourself be a stranger to him as he grows out of this precious stage in his life."

The girl knew my buttons almost as well as Derek.

"Fine! I'll talk to him. But you're going to be the one I complain to for hours when he refuses to compromise and acts like a jerk!" I surrendered.

"Bye Casey." Emily laughed.

"Em I wasn't done-

She hung up on me. My best friend hung up on me. I pouted. Why was no one on my side?

After a moment I redialed Emily's number. She didn't even have time to be annoyed before I blurted out, "What would happen if we did?"

"Did what?"

"If Derek and I... You know," I couldn't bring myself to say it. "What about all of our friends?" I mostly meant her and Sam, but others were included in it too.

"What about us?"

"Well, it would be weird. Everyone thinks we're like siblings; how would they act when they saw us together? And well, we've dated some of our mutual friends. Both of our best friends in fact." I added pointedly.

She laughed. "I think what would happen is nothing. Me and Sam-"
"Sam and I..." I muttered under my breath.

"We're long over it; we're your friends now. And quite frankly, everyone at Thompson thought you went out before graduation."

"What?!" This was news to me.

"You didn't think everyone was staring at you guys just 'cause Derek was in pyjamas did you? When you two became study buddies and walked into school without a second glance at anyone but each other it was kinda a natural assumption. Truman didn't help matters when he went around telling everyone about what happened at the party. In his own words of course." She said, her tone voicing her distaste. She always knew Truman was an asshole.

I made a noise to display my disgust at Truman. "That's a point if ever I saw one. I'll have to remember to tell Cher."

"About everyone thinking you were-"

I cut off her confused voice, "No, about Derek convincing me to take Truman back."

"I don't think it was like that, Casey. You were moping and obviously wanted to go to the dance. Derek made sure you did. He didn't know you'd go insane and fall for that bull that Truman fed you." Emily argued. "Besides, you broke up with him again pretty soon after."

I paused. "Everyone really thought we were..." Nope, still couldn't say it.

"Pretty much. There was only really me and Sam who knew the truth. We filled in Ralph and Kendra after."

For some reason this pleased me. Maybe it was that the whole of Thompson High thought I'd managed to land Derek Venturi, most popular guy in school. He even beat Max hands down and hello, captain of the football team. I wasn't even going to compare him to Truman; it was offensive to Derek. "And what did they think? Did they think it was gross? Were they shocked?"

"Not really. I mean, some people were, but not many. To be honest a lot of people had thought it was coming from the start. Mostly they were surprised you'd gone public." She explained. "Why do want to know? I thought you and Derek are never going to happen?"

"We're not." I said quickly, relieved that she couldn't see my red face. "I was just... Curious."

"Uuhh." She said, unconvince. "Case, I really gotta go now. I was kinda in the middle of something. But seriously, stop procas... pocras..."

"Procrastinating?" I finished for her.

"Yeah, stop doing that and go get your ride home."

"Yeah, yeah. Bye Em."

"Bye Case."

I hung up and sighed for the umpteenth time that day. It was getting to be a real habit.

I tried my hardest to do the opposite of what Emily had said by procrastinating. I did what little tidying there was to do in the room (until that moment I'd thanked my lucky stars every day that I didn't end up with a room mate who did the pig sty thing) and decided to shower. Though I put
Derek’s shirt back on after. I had no idea why. Apart from that it smelled nice.

After that I dug out some work to do, but couldn't concentrate properly and gave up.

"Alright, time to go visit my darling step-brother." I told myself, willing my body out of the door. I didn't budge. "Or I could just stay here..." I sat back down, before standing up again. "No, I will do this. It's not like I haven't talked to him before." I took a breath and walked to the door.

I was rescued by my ringing phone, which was getting more action that it had had in a whole week.

I looked at the screen and frowned. Laurel. "Casey McDonald speaking." I said coldly.

"Hey Casey. We're going to do that movie night we talked about. You coming over? We'll be at Derek's at eight."

I groaned inwardly. Why did they have to do this tonight? "Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"I thought we already agreed-"

"No, we agreed that Derek would be a jerk if I didn't go, but since when does that make a difference?" I cut her off sharply. I didn't know what I had against the poor girl, I was friends with Emily all through her Derek worshipping and she didn't even have the bookish side I'd been witness to in Laurel.

"Well if you're sure."

"I am. But thanks for asking." I tried to sound more friendly as we said goodbye. Any urge I'd had to go and speak to Derek had disappeared the moment Laurel had started talking, so I had another go at my school work. It took me until three to finish one small assignment I'd already done most of.

The first call came at seven and I made the mistake of answering it without checking the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"It's rude to cancel plans at the last minute." A familiar voice said, coldly and mockingly.

"I didn't cancel any plans. I didn't have any to cancel." I put as much ice in my voice as possible. Probably not a good move if I wanted to get back on his good side and get him to take me home, but rational thought pretty much went out of the window when it came to him.

"You had plans with friends. Friends who wanted you to turn up tonight and just called me upset because you said you weren't going to make it."

I snorted. "Laurel couldn't care less whether I come or not. She only asked me so she'd look good in front of you."

"Oh yeah? Is that why she insisted I follow through on my threat to keep calling you until you changed your mind?" His tone was accusatory, making me feel guilty for doubting her friendship.

"She probably just thought it would be funny." I said weakly. If there was one thing that got to me then it was being guilt tripped. Or disorganized. Take your pick.

"She even talked me into renting Ghost." He said sceptically.

I was taken aback. How did she know I adored Patrick Swayze? "She chose Ghost?"
"No, she just told me to pick one you'd like," I could see him roll his eyes in my mind's eye. "But the thought was still there. As was the nagging."

"Well, maybe you two can snuggle up and watch it together, but I have better things to do. Bye Derek." I hung up before he could answer.

He rang back five times and each time I hung up, after the fifth I turned off my phone. Then I turned it back on again in case someone else called, and just turned it on silent, leaving it where I could see the caller ID come up on the screen.

True to his word, he kept ringing for another hour. Then the texts started. All they said was 'give up' but he must have set his phone to send them continually as by the end of five minutes, there were over fifty of them crowding up my inbox.

I sent a still more simple reply. No.

In fairness my reply may well have been longer had it not been so difficult to text on a phone that was constantly receiving messages.

The spam texts cluttering my inbox had reached one-hundred-and-thirty-two when I was startled from my half reading of Night's Master. I'd always wanted to read it after I saw it at the library, but until Cher and Emily had talked me into reading Fifty Shades I'd been too wary of the sexual content. There was a lot of it. I blinked, slowly coming back to reality and trying to figure out what had snatched me from the fantasy world in my book.

It didn't take long as it was still going on; there was a persistent tapping coming from the door. I frowned. Cher was having a cozy night in with Josh and she was the only one who visited my dorm.

"Who is it?" I called out timidly. Ridiculously I was worried in case it was murderer or a rapist or something. But hey, it wasn't so far fetched that they'd knock, easier access and all that.

"A psychopath come to chop you up into mouth sized pieces, now open up."

I didn't have to open the door to know who that was. "Go away Derek."

"Not going to happen."

I was silent.

"I can keep this up for as long as I need to, now give up already." He was still tapping on the door. "I'll start tapping randomly."

I clenched my jaw as the tapping became irregular and out of sequence.

"Or how about I remind you how much you wanna watch Ghost by imitating the hero until you open the door?" The irregular tapping was now joined by Derek's loud rendition of 'I'm Henery the eighth'. Seriously, as a guy who claimed never to have watched Ghost how did he know this stuff? "Come on Case, open up. I'm Henery the eighth, I am, Henery the eighth I am, I am, I'm getting married to the widow next door, she's been married seven times before. I'm her eighth old man called Henery, Henery the eight I am... Neither Demi or Whoopi managed to withstand the 'dreamy' Patrick doing this, what chance do you have?" He paused, "And seriously, where did Whoopi Goldberg get her name? I mean, Whoopi? What kind of name is that?"

"Derek, if you don't go away I'll call campus security." I threatened.
"I'm Henery the eighth..."

"Der-ek! Just leave!"

"Henery the eighth I am..."

I wrenched open the door, possibly wrenching a muscle in the process. "Der-ek!"

"Oh, hello there Miss ignoring-the-phone-my-devilishly-handsome-step-brother-kindly-bought-me," He smirked triumphantly (another reason I don't like the title 'miss'? Because Derek uses it in his stupid made up names that made him sound like a child), "I was just singing a little song? Wanna hear it? I'm Henery the-"

"Shut up! You're causing a scene!" I cut him off angrily.

"Hey, you're still wearing my shirt." He ignored my admonishment. "No time to change now. Let's go." He grabbed my wrist and pulled me forwards.

"Derek, let go!"

He kept pulling.

"I'm not wearing any shoes!" I informed him, hoping to go back to get them and slam the door in his face.

He stopped and turned, glancing down at my sheep printed bed-socks before throwing me over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"Der-ek!"

"That's right baby, say my name!" He taunted cheerily.

"De-" I cut myself off. "Let me go!"

We passed a few people in the hallway, who instead of coming to my aid just looked on amused.

We reached the entrance and someone actually held open the door for him. By this point I was thumping on his back and ordering him to put me down despite his telling me to 'quit it', and I was getting angrier by the second.

When we reached the Prince, I took my chance, trying to dislodge myself from his grip as he bent to unlock the door. Good thing the car was older than central locking.

I moved violently to the side causing him to stumble, and kicked him in the shin. He dropped me, but the plan wasn't completely successful. My left foot landed on a stone and the pain set me off balance, making me fall painfully to my hands and knees.

"Shit!" Derek swore, rubbing his bruised leg. "What the hell did you do that for?"

I looked up at him from my knees, my tearing eyes taking in the hard, angry glint in his eyes. I swallowed hard. "You're the one who kidnapped me from my dorm and wouldn't let me go! What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, maybe come to the freakin' film night?!"

"I don't want to go to you stupid film night!" I raised my voice to him for the first time since I'd made my vow not to respond. I took a deep breath and pulled myself to my feet, wiping my grazed
hands on my jeans. Before I could walk away, he grabbed my arm.

"Why not?"

"Let go of me!" I hissed.

"Not until you say you'll come with me." He insisted.

"Why? So you can provoke me into yelling again? So you can indulge you stupid obsession of making me crazy?" My palms and knees were stinging and I couldn't help my eyes watering a little.

He looked at my watery eyes and obviously got the wrong idea. "No, no crying! Come on, Case, you know I don't do crying!" He let go of my arm and held up his hands like he was asking me not to hit him, the expression on his face panicked and torn.

I had to laugh as my anger dissipated somewhat. He was adorable when he panicked.

"What?" He asked, confused and frustrated, his wide brown eyes narrowing a little in suspicion.

"You. Are you really that afraid of people crying?"

"I'm not afraid!" He protested indignantly.

"Then why are you so freaked?" I taunted.

"I just... Don't deal with tears well." He tried.

"Why not?"

"I don't know!" He yanked open the car door. "Now, are you coming or not?"

"Not." I folded my arms.

"Fine." He said shortly, walking around and getting in the drivers seat.

I waited until he turned the ignition before getting in the passenger side.

He looked over at me, a less than amused expression on his face. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you said you wanted me to go with you?" I said with forced calmness.

"I never said I wanted you to, I said Laurel wanted you to." He corrected. "And you said you weren't coming."

"I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"I figured if you were trying that hard you must really want me to go." I shrugged. I wasn't entirely sure why I'd got in the car. Maybe it was the look on his face when he gave up. Maybe it was because he gave up. Who knows.

He didn't say anything.

"Wow, Derek Venturi speechless. What did I do right?" I was oddly pleased by his silent affirmation, if a little surprised.
"Shut up." He muttered as he backed up the car and started to drive.

Chapter End Notes

Couldn't resist trying to correct the whole Derek setting Casey and Truman up fiasco, though I couldn't find much of a reason. That whole episode is wrong on so many levels... I think even most Demily shippers would have hated it 'cause he only went out with Emily when there wasn't much option left. And there was no way in hell Derek would help Truman on that one, even if you go with the 'brotherly' motivations.

Also, I actually think Thompson High did think they went out; those stares were just way too OTT!

'Kay, I'm done ranting. Hope you liked. :)

To my surprise, Laurel seemed genuinely pleased to see me when we pulled up. She was actually waiting outside, and mid February in Kingston isn't all that mild.

"Casey!" She grinned, a look of relief swimming through her eyes. She rubbed at her nose with her sleeve and stepped forward for hugs. Which of course Derek avoided, but I felt obliged to give.

"Hi, Laurel." I said, a little embarrassed. I couldn't help but feel a little idiotic having told her earlier that day that I wasn't coming. It made it look like Derek had talked me into it, and even though he kind of had it made me feel easily led.

"Told you I'd get her here." Derek now had a look of pure smugness on his face which I longed to wipe off, but had no idea how to. I felt myself tense as his pleased and arrogant eyes turned on me, flashing me a triumphant smirk as if everything that had happened to get me here was part of the plan, the emotional strop that got me into the car included.

I fought back a grin, wondering if he really thought I couldn't see through his bull.

When we got inside, I could see why Laurel had been waiting outside, and why she'd looked so relieved at our arrival. Two couples were sat on the beds canoodling and heaven knows what else in a way that made me feel distinctly uncomfortable at being witness to it. I was surprised to see that one of the people involved was actually Derek's room mate; the guy never seemed to be at the dorm and by the way Derek had talked about him I hadn't thought they hung out.

At Derek's firm insistance that they 'either get a room or cut it out' the couples reluctantly separated and an uncomfortable small talk started up until we decided to put on one of the movies. There being more girls than guys, we managed to watch Ghost when a vote was called.

"That vote was fixed!" Derek protested immediately, "You girls would have voted for whatever each other voted for!"

"That is so not true!" Laurel and I said simultaneously, and collapsed into a giggling fit when we realised it probably didn't help our case.

Laurel grabbed the dvd and put it in. "Anyway, you rented it, it's only right we watch it." She said, a little flirtatiously.

My laughing grin froze and I turned slightly to see his reaction.

He smirked. "That was just to get Spacey here. Doesn't mean I was planning on watching it."

His room mate seemed to find this hysterical until Derek gave him a death glare.

The suspicions I'd had when he knew to sing 'I'm Henery the eighth' were confirmed over the following one-hundred-and-twenty minutes, as Derek made repeated comments on things as or just before they happened. He'd definitely watched it before. A fact I pointed out as soon as he made a comment about what he would do if he was dead and had one last chance to 'touch' a woman again and how because Sam/Patrick didn't he's gay, before he'd even possessed Oda Mae/Whoopi Goldberg.

"I haven't seen it, but after you watched it every day for a week straight and talked about it all the time, I might as well have." He replied. I wasn't convinced.
By the time it had finished I was watching him and not the screen. It had started because I was trying to judge whether he was feigning dislike or not (I actually think he liked it, especially Whoopi Goldberg's parts), but after I started, I couldn't stop. Every time he quickly hid a grin or stifled a laugh I smiled, and every time he made a rude comment I laughed at the faces he pulled. I'd always liked how expressive his face was; it was how I saw through his 'Lord of the Lies' baloney almost every time, how I knew when he was bored or upset or hiding a grin, and I felt as though his language of facial expressions was well worth learning as well as I had.

When the credits rolled, he noticed me looking at him with a corny smile on my face and he blushed. Actually blushed. And strangely it made me grin instead of laugh at him.

He coughed and made a cave-man, macho speech about putting on something more manly before he grew breasts.

I didn't even attempt to watch the violent, gun filled rubbish they put on next; instead I continued studying Derek whose face was more open now that he wasn't in denial mode. His grins and laughs were no longer suppressed, and I got a perfect view of them. I didn't even complain when they put on another testosterone fest of a movie.

A few minutes through the second macho film he nudged me. "Something wrong Space-Case?"

I shook my head.

"You've been staring at me for like an hour and a half," He stage whispered, "What, did I grow another head I don't know about?"

That shook me out of it. The thoughts that ran through my head were pretty much, oh my gosh, I've been staring at Derek for nearly two hours straight. What am I doing?!

I blushed all over and averted my wide eyes abruptly. Why had I been staring? It wasn't like there was a hell of a lot to see; he'd just been watching movies.

"You sure you're okay?" He asked, his face giving away the concern his voice was hiding.

I nodded. "I'm fine." I mumbled embarrassedly, still trying to work out what exactly had been so darn fascinating.

He looked unconvinced but let the matter drop.

I spent the rest on the movie staring fixedly at the screen without really watching. I kept catching my eyes drifting towards their earlier object and pulled them back before he could notice. When it finished at last we didn't bother putting on another as it was late, later than I'd realised, and we all needed to get back to our ever more inviting beds before too long.

I tried some light hearted small talk with Laurel and the other two girls, all the while wondering what Derek was thinking, whether he had interpreted my brainless staring as romantic interest. Whether it was romantic interest. Because that was the thing, I still had no excuse for how I'd been looking at him. I hadn't felt any different than before, but then if I was honest that didn't necessarily mean much. After all, my own best friends seemed convinced I'd been interested for a long time.

For the first time I allowed myself to give it some serious thought without instantly condemning the idea and splashing it with reasons I didn't like him. This time I let myself think about why I might like him.

He was funny, and strangely I even liked his sarcasm. He could be ridiculously sweet for someone
who was mostly determined to be the opposite of sweet. He was the most loyal person I knew (though maybe not when it came to a lot of his girlfriends). He could manipulate me as well as I could manipulate him, and that was a rare degree of equality in my relationships. He seemed able to make anything happen; after dancing for all of a week he won the competition with me, one he got involved we managed to save the lodge, when we had nothing for Christmas he made it worth celebrating. He was also ridiculously smart. I’d never openly admit it but he was easily as smart as me, maybe, *maybe* even a little smarter. After all; he’d outsmarted me a few times, and when he put his mind to it he could pass exams everyone else studied the whole year for after only a few weeks. And though I was loathe to admit it, he had a brilliant smile; even his smirk was infectious.

At the last part my treacherous eyes strayed back to look at that self same smirk and a small smile immediately sprang to my own lips.

I shook myself. It was way too late at night to be thinking about this. I excused myself and Derek pressed me into accepting a lift back from him. Part of me was grateful, I really didn't like the idea of walking back in the dark, but another part now felt painfully awkward and embarrassed at the thought of being alone in a car with him while still in two minds about my... *Feelings* about him.

It took hours for me to fall asleep as I alternately blocked the internal debate and allowed it to shoot thoughts and memories back and forth in my tired mind. In the end I drifted off from sheer exhaustion and woke up sluggish with no memory of my dreams.

As soon as I ingested some caffeine (that morning I needed it) the war waged on. I wondered briefly whether to call Cher or Emily and decided not to. They would just confuse me more.

In the end I called Lizzie. She was my voice of reason always, and though nowhere as effective as getting through to me as Derek, she was my best option given the situation. Though after a moment's thought I decided not to outright tell her what my dilemma was.

I rang as soon as I managed to calm my thoughts enough to be coherent. She would only have an hour before school and I didn't want to waste it rambling.

"Casey?" she answered, sounding a little surprised that I was calling her this early. I was lucky her new hobbies got her up so early.

"Hi, Liz. Hope I'm not being inconvenient?" I asked, a little worried that she might be too busy to talk to me. Since my last visit I'd reluctantly realised that on occasion she might have better things to do than listen to her neurotic sister.

"No, I'm just getting ready for school. I have about half an hour before I'll have to hang up." She reassured me. I smiled a little, knowing she'd told me half an hour to allow for how long it might take to get me off the phone. "So what's up?"

"I just wanted your opinion on something." I paused, trying to remember how I was going to phrase this. "When I like someone, how do I act?"

"Umm, I dunno. You talk about them a lot. Like all the time a lot." She started. "You go all klutzilla when they're around. You make pro and con lists about why you like them... That's all I got off the top of my head. Why?"

I thought about that for a second. I'd always talked about Derek a lot. I had to employ a no Derek talk rule with my boyfriends, and it didn't even work. For me it was hard to tell when I was being Klutzilla or just a klutz, but I had made a lot of embarrassing fumbles around Derek over the years. And as for the pros and cons, I seemed to make separate lists, but lists all the same. It was still a bit
of a grey area.

"Casey?"

"Huh? Yeah?" I said, snapped out of my musings.

"Why did you wanna know? You think you like someone?"

"Maybe." I replied cautiously.

"What is he like?" She asked.

I pondered that a second before answering. "He's... Challenging."

"Care to elaborate?"

"He doesn't always let me win. In fact, he never lets me win." I searched for more words that wouldn't give the game away. "He teases me. But he's also... Thoughtful. He knows me well enough to know when I'm upset and how to make me feel better... even if he doesn't always use the knowledge."

"Sounds like a hell of a guy." I could have sworn she was laughing at me as she said that.

"Yeah." I said uncertainly.

"So, what's the problem? Why don't you know if you like him or not?" Her voice still hadn't lost the amused tone.

"Because he drives me insane! He's the very definition of infuriating! The good things he does are always hidden and the bad things out on display!" I stopped myself from saying any more.

"So you don't know if you're more annoyed or enamoured." She stated.

"Exactly." I said, relieved that she got it without me having to tell her any more.

"Would you even be asking me about a guy you didn't like?" She asked.

"I..." I thought about it. "I don't know."

"I..." I thought about it. "I don't know."

"Think about it. If you didn't like him but he annoyed the hell out of you, would you even be considering the idea of liking him?" She reasoned.

"I guess not." I said doubtfully.

"Well then." She stopped talking to do something. When she came back she changed the subject. "So, Mom says you had a fight with Derek and you don't know when you'll be home next?"

"Yeah. I saw him last night, so hopefully we're not fighting any more." I fidgeted as I thought about spending five hours alone in a car with him.

"She also said you spent the night in his room." She said nonchalantly.

I lapsed into a coughing fit at this. So she had heard that part after all.

"He doesn't have a couch." She mentioned calmly. "So where did you sleep?"

"In his bed... I mean, not with him. He was in his room mate's bed. His room mate was out." I
rambled nervously.

"Oh, okay." She was silent a moment, then, "So why did you stay at his place?"

"We went to Cher's party and he got drunk, so I drove him back, but he wouldn't let me leave with the Prince so I stayed over instead of walking back in the dark." I explained hastily.

She didn't say any more on the subject and we talked about school and university for the fifteen minutes until she said she needed to go. I surprised her by not keeping her on the phone and we both said goodbye.

I put the phone down with a sigh of relief. She'd given me more to think about on the Derek front, but I'd felt uncomfortable talking to her like that about her step-brother seeing as she and Derek were actually siblingy. I wondered briefly if it would confuse her if something did happen with me and Derek, but decided it probably wouldn't. She was very grown up for her years, and she knew Derek and I didn't have a family kind of relationship.

I looked at the clock and stuffed a granola bar in my mouth before heading out. I'd think about this some more later.
Chapter 20

By the time I had my phone in my hand to ask Derek about a ride home my confidence in the fact that we were back on good-ish terms was fading. Not only that, but a five hour car ride with him seemed like a bad idea, given that we always fought as it was and now I was beginning to admit that maybe Cher and Emily weren't so wrong about how I felt after all.

I sat staring at his contact information for what felt like hours, trying to push the ongoing debate on my feelings from my head. Lately it had been falling on one side in particular, and they weren't thoughts I wanted going through my head while I spoke to him. When at last I'd managed to smother the thoughts completely, I pressed the call button and raised the phone to my ear as if it might bite me.

"Hello, Derek Venturi, King of Cool speaking."

I bit back a laugh, "Sorry, must be the wrong Derek Venturi, I was looking for Derek Venturi, idiot step-brother."

"I'm sorry, I don't think he exists. Maybe your anxiety has spawned an imaginary friend to help you cope." He said in mock seriousness.

"Oh, so he's my friend is he?"

"It's your imagination." I could almost hear his noncommittal shrug.

"In that case, maybe he forgives me and can give me a lift back home sometime soon?" I said in a sugary tone.

"You do something to upset your imaginary friend, Case?"

"I kinda yelled at him when maybe he didn't deserve it." I hoped that would satisfy him but couldn't help adding, "Much."

"Really? You saying you were wrong?" His voice was deceptively neutral, as if we were actually talking about someone else.

I cursed under my breath, he had to push for a complete victory didn't he? "No, not entirely... But maybe a little." I forced myself to say, before continuing. "But if he did me this favour I'd make it up to him."

"How would you make it up to him?"

"Imaginary pancakes at an imaginary diner on our way home?" I suggested.

"Add some imaginary gas money and an apology in person and he just might. I hear he's free this next friday?"

"It's a date." I said, and then quickly covered my mouth in horror. He was silent for a moment and when he started to speak I said 'gotta go' and hung up before I could hear what he was going to say, then hyperventilated for a few minutes. When I got my breath back I almost regretted hanging up; I was now insanely curious about what he was going to say, what he thought about my little Freudian slip. I swore, though as usual it was fairly mild and did nothing to lessen my nervous frustration.
I clenched and unclenched my hands a few times before giving up. "Fuck!" I said aloud, but though it did ease the irritation a little, I felt immediately self-conscious and ashamed.

"Wow! What was that about?"

I spun around to face my room mate, as I hadn't heard her come in. "What?"

"You with the big nasty word." She barely glanced up as she started digging through her bag.

"Oh. Just got something on my mind." I could feel the embarrassment burning me up inside.

"Uhuh." She replied absently. "Anything I should be worried about? Sharing a room with you and all."  

"No, just, umm... I..."

"That bad, huh?" She looked up from the text book she'd recovered from her bag.

I smiled awkwardly.

"Let me guess, a guy?"

"Kind of." I answered hesitantly. "I don't really want to talk about it right now though." I shot her another nervous smile and escaped from the room.

The week passed slowly, the only really enjoyable part being when I called home to tell them we were coming on Friday, and when the day finally came I rushed out of my morning class without asking for extra reading so I could have some more time to freak out before Derek came to pick me up.

I wished more than ever that I hadn't cut him off; as it was I didn't know how to act. Did he think I meant a date? I did sort of ask him out then called it a date. Or maybe he assumed it was just a figure of speech? Would he act weird or make fun of me or be completely normal?

My head was spinning and I spent my time repacking my bags three times until they couldn't be better organised, then forcing my eyes to stay on the pages of my book. When I finally heard a knock on my door I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I stood up, stumbled over my bags, and landed with a thump against the door. "Coming." I called out weakly. Carefully pulling myself to a stand, I smoothed down my clothes and hair and opened the door.

"Ready to go?" Derek asked. I scrutinized him but he seemed to be acting normal.

"Yeah, just give me a sec." I turned and picked up my bags, making sure my letter to my room mate specifying that I would know if her and her boyfriend made out on my bed and would kill her, was in plain view. "Okay, let's go." I walked past him, being very careful not to trip again or smash into him.

We walked to the car in near silence; Derek absently texting someone and me trying not to stumble and running through lists in my head to make sure I had everything I needed. I was surprised when he offered to let me drive the first stretch, but declined in case my klutzilla tendencies led to our early deaths. Though I didn't tell him that of course.

"Is this more of that making it up to me stuff?" He asked a little suspiciously when I shook my head
and climbed in passenger side.

"Are you admitting you're an imaginary idiot step-brother?" I deflected. He looked confused for a moment before he realised what I was talking about. "Well I am too good to be true." He smirked, starting up the engine and pulling off. I rolled my eyes. "There's no way I thought you up."

"Aw, you give yourself too little credit." He reached over to ruffle my hair and I batted his hand away. "So I'm assuming you've already planned exactly when and where we're going to stop for my pancakes?" He asked after a minute.

I nodded and turned to the window, trying to hide my blush at his reference to our maybe almost date. "You gonna tell me?" He asked like he was talking to a child.

"Oh, right." I flustered, not having realised that I was supposed to tell him where we were stopping. I unfolded the map that was in my bag and pointed to a red circle I'd drawn around the diner I'd chosen. "Here."

He glanced at the map before returning his gaze to the road. "Not for a couple of hours then." He stated, drawing a sandwich out of the glove compartment and unwrapping it one handed. "Der-ek!" I tore the sandwich from his hands. "You shouldn't do that while driving!" I admonished.

"You unwrap it for me then." He shot me a smirk and reached for the radio controls. "You shouldn't eat while driving anyway!" I tried again.

"Better than not doing and passing out from low blood sugar." He argued, the smirk never leaving his face. "Then you should have eaten before setting out!"

He reached to take the still wrapped up sandwich back and I batted his hands away. "I didn't want to fill up before our 'date', now did I?"

I blushed so much it felt like my head would explode. I couldn't tell if he was completely sarcastic or not and the uncertainty was torture.

"Fine!" I mumbled and, eager to take his mind off my verbal blunder even at a risk to my life, unwrapped his damn sandwich. His smirk widened into a grin as he took it. "There's another one in there." He mentioned after taking a bite, no doubt to display the icky, chewed up gunge through his open mouth.

I pulled a face. "I don't even want to know what you would have put in there." He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

After ten minutes of watching him eat his epically proportioned sandwich I gave in and reached into the glove box. I pulled out the cling film package and kept my eyes on Derek, watching for some evidence that I was going to find something disgusting in there. Nothing. I opened it. 
"Cucumber?" I asked, surprised.

He frowned. "You like cucumber, right?"

I nodded before realising he probably couldn't see it with just his peripherals. "Yeah, I just didn't know you knew that."

His smirk made a return as he took another bite and told me through another disgusting mouthful, "Purple fog."

I gasped a little. "That was years ago!"

He shrugged and the topic was closed.

After an hour of trying to put up with Derek's driving music, I couldn't take it any more and asked him to turn it off. The answer was a resounding 'no'.

"Come on, Derek, we have nearly four hours to go. It's only fair we alternate the music!" I whined, knowing the tone would annoy him no end.

"Exactly! Four more hours stuck in a car with you. Don't you think that earns me the right to listen to what I want?"

"Ditto!" I sang.

"Fine, we'll listen to your crap... Oh, wait! I think I might have left your CD's in the trunk. And the antenna is broken for the radio. Too bad!"

"When did you break the antenna?" I asked. It was only just over a week since I was last in the car and it hadn't been broken then.

He shrugged. "Some time last week."

"What did you do?" I tried to picture how it would have happened but all I got were images of him messing around with his friends and snapping it off while doing something stupid.

"I was upset. It was there." He said carefully.

I turned to him, shock plastered on my face. Since when would he hurt the Prince deliberately?

"You did it on purpose?!"

He shrugged. "Blessing in disguise; now I don't have to listen to that noise you call music."

I let the matter drop. For now. "Doesn't matter. I bought an MP3 adapter.” I grinned triumphantly, pulling it out of my bag.

"Doesn't that still need the antenna?" He asked doubtfully.

"Yes and no. Whatever broken stub is left should still pick up the signal. George has one, remember?" I giggled a little, remembering the little sports mascot thing George had tied to his car antenna. It had got caught on something when coming out of the garage (they actually used it now the Prince didn't live in there any more) and snapped the antenna off at one of the telescopic segments. It was strange looking at newer cars without the metal bar coming up from the roof; growing up it had always been an important part in my mind.

He groaned. "Please tell me you're lying."
"Nope."

"Well, my music is staying on!" He turned up the volume.

I waited for a spot on the rode when he'd need both hands and pressed the eject button, snatching the CD and holding it out of Derek's reach.

"Hey!" He made a reach for it anyway.

"Der-ek! Keep your hands on the wheel!" I shouted, horrified.

"Put my damn CD back in!"

"No!" I rolled down my window.

"Don't you dare!"

"Oh, I dare!" I raised the CD to the open window.

"Put it back or I'll-"

"Or you'll what?" I asked sweetly, edging his precious music closer to death.

He opened and closed his mouth before visibly relaxing. "You know what? Go ahead. It's a copy anyway; I can just burn another when we get back."

"Doesn't save you on this journey though." I pointed out.

He shot me a triumphant look and pulled another CD from the drivers door.

I lowered my hand in defeat. "Can't we just listen to my music for a little while?" I pleaded. "I'll buy you ice cream as well as pancakes."

"Trying to bribe me, Case? Nice." He nodded approvingly. "But it won't work."

"If there's one thing I've learned from you it's that everyone can be bribed. You just need the right incentive." I replied. "So what is it?"

"I'm happy with my pancakes and my music, thanks."

I slumped back in my seat and dug out my headphones. I hadn't wanted to be anti-social, but there was only so much of this music I could take.

Derek glanced over at me. "Hey! You're meant to be keeping me company, I can't talk to you with your headphones in."

"Well, you should've thought of that before you forced me to listen to this sorry excuse for music." I touched a button on my phone and forced myself to relax as the music reached my ears.

Half an hour later he tugged on the wire, pulling the headphones out. "Fine, you can put your damn music on." He grumbled.

I smiled happily and set up the adapter, deliberating whether to put on something over the top girly in revenge, or something he wouldn't mind. In the end I decided on Bowling for Soup, loud and preppy enough to lighten my mood but not really girly. Maybe he'd actually let me listen to it for a while. I let it play and zoned out for a moment, thinking about one of my papers and mentally
listing a few points I was going to make, imagining my lecturers reaction to my well written work. A noise snapped me out of it a little, and I absently listened as Derek sung along to one of the songs.

_Sometimes, it's not the things you say,_

_Sometimes you're just in the way,_

_Sometimes I feel like I can't live without you_

I jerked upright, immediately reading way too much into him singing it.

_Sometimes, I swear you make me sick,_

_Sometimes I just wanna kiss you,_

_And tell you I love you,_

_For you I'd eat tofu,_

_And I don't like tofu,_

Here he couldn't keep the laughter out of his voice and I laughed too. He looked at me with a grin when he heard me laughing and my breath caught as his eyes stayed on me as he sung the next line.

_But you make me so happy, sometimes._

I couldn't tear my eyes away, even when his went back to the road. I also couldn't keep my over analytical mind from it's dissection of the look he'd given me, and the attachment of the lyrics he'd sung. The reasonable part of me knew it was me that put the playlist on, he was just singing along. Badly. But another part questioned why he'd chosen that song to start singing, I was pretty sure he knew 'High School Never Ends' and he didn't sing to that one.

I replayed the song, saying that I liked it and wanted to hear it without his caterwauling, pondering the lyrics even as he ignored my supposed motivation and joined in for some of the lines.

He shot me glances and my mind immediately picked up the lyrics playing when he did. My eyes clung to his as he reached one of my favourite lines.

_I know sometimes I bring her down,_

_But every once in a while,_

_I make her smile._

His voice dropped a little, but he was definitely singing it. If anything, the fact he sung that one quietly instead of boisterously fuelled my inner musings.

I snapped my mind off the ridiculous path it was following. It was just a song, he would probably sing to the next one too.

Sure enough, he didn't stop singing until the playlist ended and we were nearing the diner I'd chosen.

"Turn off here." I told him as we neared our exit.
He just nodded, remaining silent until we pulled into the parking lot. "This place better do chocolate chip." He said, mock petulantly.

I laughed. "I checked their online menu, they do." I assured him.

"Wow, organised." He teased. "That's so sexy, how do you fend them off?"

I shoved him as we entered the diner. "Shut up. Some people find my organisational skills very attractive I'll have you know."

"Doubt it. It's probably more the control freak thing they like; bit of a kink in the bedroom, ya know?" He continued. "Take of your shoes, don't trail mud in my room!, 'how dare you drop your dirty shirt on the floor, pick it up!'" He used his 'Casey' voice and added a mock-alluring pout. "Probably drives 'em wild."

I laughed, I couldn't help it.

"With that and your habit of pushing people onto beds and yelling at them, you'd make a great Dominatrix." He went on, presumably encouraged by my laughter. "'Madame Casey'," He tried out, "I can picture it now. You do own a leather cat suit, right?"

I blushed. "No, I would never own something like that!"

He smirked, "Shame. Doms make a fortune."

"Sit down and decide what you want." I avoided his gaze, too embarrassed to look him in the eye.

"Yes mistress."

"Shut up!"
Our sort-of-almost-date was a strange mix of fun, disgusting (Derek really needs to learn to enjoy food with his mouth closed), annoying and therapeutic. My nerves in the car had made me all but forget my promise not to argue and since then the insults, sarcastic comments and exclamations of 'Der-ek' had flown freely. It was surprisingly relieving and enjoyable, even when we actually wound each other up it wasn't so terrible, and I began to realise why Derek hadn't wanted it to stop. It wasn't so that he could torment me at all (or at least not completely), it was so he could talk to me, interact with me. It occurred to me that Derek didn't do well talking to girls without constant flirting or family overtones. It was a natural flow between us, and it worked for us. It also turned out he wasn't the only one with no real idea how to converse without conflict; with the 'date' to compare it to, I could see what he'd meant about our conversation being stunted the day I'd stormed out.

All in all it was typical 'Casey and Derek' behaviour, but after so long resisting it, I revelled in it almost as much as if it had been a real date. And as for him, I was ridiculously pleased to note the excited glint in his eye each time I rose to the bait instead of backing down or shutting down.

We'd been settled into a comfortable silence, only broken by Derek's CD which he insisted was going back in once we left the diner, when we pulled up outside the family home.

We only had seconds before Marti would come rushing out of the door to greet us; my mom had been texting me on her behalf for hours wanting to know how long we'd be and I knew from these that Marti was intermittently checking out of the window to see if we were there yet.

I was working up the courage to say something, anything, before we went in. I knew that our focus couldn't be solely on each other once the family knew we were there, and I just wanted a little more of his attention before his Smarti arrived.

"I'm sorry." His voice startles me out of my reverie.

"Huh?" I asked, with no idea what he was appologising for or why.

"I, uh... I never meant to... You know... Hurt you." He was staring straight ahead and I could see how uncomfortable he was.

"What do you mean?" I pressed, still clueless.

"What you said that day in the coffee place. I didn't know any of that stuff I did... I didn't know-" I cut him off, needing to save him from this straining topic. "I was just being dramatic. You know me; I'm queen of the drama, right?" I said lightly.

"Still-"

"Really, nothing to appologise for. I'm sure I've done just as much to upset you as you have me in the past. Probably more actually." I couldn't stand to see him like this with me; not when we had been so easy and comfortable just moments before. His appology meant something, it meant a lot, but I wanted easy Derek back again.

"Yeah." He said uncertainly, and I felt the sudden urge to do or say something Derek-like.
"By the way; you can take the trash out." I dropped the carefully gathered rubbish from our earlier sandwiches and drinks over his head, laughing as a piece of cling film got stuck to his hair.

He choked back a laugh and tried to look menacing. "You are so going to pay, McDonald!"

"Bring it on Venturi." I goaded, sticking my tongue out at him.

He replied by squirting me with his plastic sports bottle of water. A shot that somehow missed everything outside of my clothes and dribbled straight down my cleavage.

"Der-ek! That was cold!" I complained, trying and failing to hold back a giggle as he celebrated his shot.

"Here, dry off with this." He chucked a used paper napkin at me.

"Ew!" I threw it back and after a couple of seconds of throwing it back and forth, I found myself fighting off his attempts to drop it down the back of my shirt. His hands kept brushing against me and he repeatedly gripped my arms to clear his goal, and I suddenly recalled Cher's comments about wrestling and dry humping. I flushed red all over, but I was enjoying it too much to stop and leave the oasis of the car.

It wasn't long before an excited Marti was hammering at the windows, distracting me enough for Derek to win, and we were forced to leave the Prince and go inside.

I glanced regretfully at his back as he hoisted his screeching little sister over his shoulder and headed for the house.

As soon as I saw how happy my family was to see me I felt a little guilty at my reluctance to leave the car, but I couldn't help feeling a twinge as Derek's eyes and conversation were taken over by our boisterous relatives. I shook myself. What the hell had happened to me on that car journey? I'd gone from only just admitting I might like him, to getting jealous of my own family because he was smiling at them. It was this more than anything that made me decide to head for the kitchen. I needed time to clear my head and tone down my all too obvious behaviour before anyone noticed.

I hadn't counted on my sister following me though.

"So how is it going with the guy you might like?"

I jumped and spun around at her voice, splashing the glass of water I'd been getting down my front. I took a moment to breathe before answering. "Well, I'm pretty sure I like him." I couldn't keep the cynicism and resignation from my tone.

"So what's the problem?" She immediately asked.

"I don't think he sees me that way."

"What makes you think that?"

I stopped for a moment. What did make me think that? Everyone (being Cher, Josh and Emily) seemed pretty sure he did see me that way, so far it was only me thinking otherwise. "I'm not sure." I told her truthfully.

"So why don't you ask him?"

She made it sound so simple. If only my head would agree. "Because if he doesn't it could mess a
lot of stuff up. I need to be as sure as possible before I can even think about that." In all honesty I wasn't so sure everything wouldn't get messed up even if I never said anything; with my new possessiveness over him I could easily ruin everything anyway.

She stared at me for a moment. "Okay. Well don't wait too long; it'll drive you crazy if you do."

We decided that from now on I was going to look closely at my interactions with Derek and try and ascertain if there was anything on his side instead of just waiting for him to make a move as my initial instincts told me to. I thought for a while of calling Cher and Emily for moral support but thought better of it; I didn't need them colouring my observations and leading me to make a fool of myself.

The first evening there was nothing much to observe; we were still completely occupied by our family, and we went upstairs (me to Lizzie's room and him to Edwin's as Mom and George had finally taken over our rooms) having barely spoken since the car.

The following morning we all ate a frantic breakfast before Mom insisted me, Lizzie and Marti should come shopping with her for some girly time while the boys looked after Simon. I felt a little irritation in the delay of my observations, but couldn't say no to my obviously excited mother.

Once out, Lizzie and Marti ran on ahead to look at a display that had caught their eye, Lizzie loving her new role as the big sister. This left me alone with my mom who was now grinning a little scarily and shooting glances at me.

After a little while she spoke. "So, Lizzie tells me there's a boy?" She asked, failing completely at a casual tone.

I blushed and tried to think of a way out of the situation.

She took my silence as agreement. "Does he have a name?"

"Yes, he has a name, and no I'm not going to tell you what it is!" I replied.

"Aww, that's no fair! Lizzie knows who it is, why can't I?" She whined childishly.

"Lizzie doesn't know." I half laughed.

"She seems to think she does." Mom shrugged.

I repressed the sudden anxiety I felt at the thought that she was right. Even if Lizzie did know, she was being supportive and hadn't told anyone. There was nothing to worry about.

"Can't you at least give me a clue? If it's someone Lizzie knows, I must know them too." She wheedled.

I sighed before answering. "He's..." I struggled to find something to tell her that wouldn't give everything away. "He's friends with Laurel." Not a lie. Not even vaguely a lie. Just a... Deflection. Yes, that would work. Nothing wrong with deflecting your own mother. Not like lying.

She seemed to sense that that was all I was going to give her and we picked up the pace to catch up with the other McDonald-Venturi girls.

Even with my new Derek obsession (which I had to admit wasn't so much new as... Newly
I managed to have a good time with my mom and my sisters, playing around in the shops and trying on random outfits that we knew we wouldn't buy, eating junk food at the food court and eating more ice-cream than could possibly be good for us. It helped distract my over-active imagination from its goal of driving me insane.

When we got home I realised just what a welcome relief it was. The next few hours were a hell I'd not expected; everywhere I turned there he was, my mind grew exhausted with trying to unravel him and I felt like crying from his confusing jumps between teasing and nice. Especially when my mom interrogated him about me liking a boy to see if he knew who it was. He cajoled me mercilessly about it; he was really quite mean. He made quips about my Klutzilla tendencies and how I probably acted in front of the 'mystery guy', reminding me of just how unattractive it was to spill things down myself or trip and land on my face. He insulted my fashion sense, although that one didn't hold as much sting; repeatedly called me boring, and suggested I let Marti do my make-up for my first date with whoever he was. Marti seconded the suggestion and sulked when told her no.

As Marti's sulk escalated, I was forced to tell her that I didn't think the guy liked me back; an admission met first cheerily and then suspiciously by Derek. And that was where it got confusing. He sat next to me on the couch with his arm around my shoulders while taunting me about my old boyfriends and how my mystery guy's lack of interest was probably a good thing and I should probably swear off dating. Then he switched to telling me to barbie doll up and act like a bimbo to try and get the guy, then when I seemed genuinely upset (mostly by him telling me how unattractive I was and that I should be a bimbo) he offered to talk to whoever it was and try and sort it out as he was sure I was wrong and the guy probably had enough bad taste to like me back.

This just made me give an ironic laugh, and he seemed to get frustrated.

After three hours of dizzying swings between nice and nasty, I escaped his presence under the pretence of doing school work. This left him and Mom to talk to each other as Marti and George were making dinner (the take-out had already been ordered; as much as we didn't want to burst their bubble, none of us had any intention of eating whatever bio-hazard they managed to concoct) and Lizzie and Edwin were playing on the kinect; something that meant all of us had at one point had one of Edwin's errant limbs hit us as he tried to match Lizzie.

I carefully monitored the conversation for a little while; afraid that between them they would try and succeed at figuring out who I liked. I needn't have worried. Derek seemed to be avoiding any topic that didn't have direct links to him, and without them already knowing, my secret remained outside of Derek-world.

However, Lizzie's 'helpful' interjections made the conversation infinitely more dangerous.

Just as my Mom got a small niggle of recognition in her eyes as Derek mentioned spending time with his friend Laurel (he made it sound like he met her first and I was desperately trying to assimilate his friends), Lizzie decided to remind them both that whoever it was that I liked was a friend of Laurel's. Derek just narrowed his eyes a little, as if trying to figure out who I could have meant; most of Laurel's male friends had girlfriends. Mom immediately seemed to make the connection and looked between us both with wide eyes. Lizzie shot me a knowing grin. I wished that the floor was hungry.

Shortly after, Marti and George finished their creation and we were all called in to examine it. A daunting task.

Mom tried to be nice about it, Derek made rude comments, Lizzie and Edwin started a guessing game as they tried to work out what it was meant to be, and I stood by helpless with laughter.
Although we all screwed our eyes shut and tried a bite when confronted with George's slightly hurt expression and Marti's pout.

It was agreed by all, including the chefs, that it was a good thing take-out had been ordered.
Chapter Twenty-Two

I offered to do dinner on the Sunday, as I felt guilty insisting that we leave at no later than five p.m that day so I could get all the sleep I needed for Monday's classes. In the end it worked out well, as while things were cooking away I could do some work without worrying about appearing anti-social. At this rate I'd remain on schedule with all my assignments despite the impromptu home visit.

Thus it was with high spirits and a self-satisfied smile that refused to be mocked that I sat down to dinner with my family.

"So, Casey, how is Cher?" Mom asked only a few moments after we had all taken our seats. She heard me talk about my friends enough to know that I was a little invested in Cher's happiness and that she was quickly becoming as close to me as Emily ever was.

I smiled. "She's doing great. She's finding putting up with Josh's mom a little wearying, but she goes home soon and Cher's dad will be coming up to see them. She's really looking forward to showing him the apartment."

"Doubt Josh is quite so excited about good old Dad coming down to inspect them." Derek commented.

"Der-ek, it's not an inspection! He just wants to make sure his daughter is happy, which she is, and spend some time with family." I chatsized.

"I know how I'd feel in his position, and it wouldn't be overly happy. The guy's been shoving him towards corporate law since he was a kid, and now he not only has to tell him he's thinking of joining a firm like Brisnuskavich and Simmons-"

"Hey!" George butted in, in a hurt tone.

"But he also won't be gettin' any for over a week unless he wants to be dismembered by the guy in the spare room." Derek continued as if his father hadn't spoken.

"So Josh and Cher have known each other since they were kids then?" Mom asked interestedly.

I blushed at the thought of telling her their relation, given my recent revelations regarding my own step-brother.

"Yeah, apparently when their parents divorced Josh decided to stick with Mel as a step-dad instead of tagging along in all his mom's relationships." Derek said through a mouthful of food.

If Mom was surprised she didn't show it. Maybe she didn't get it yet.

"Cher and Josh are step-siblings?" Edwin blurted. "Wish I'd known that was allowed before I developed family bonds with mine!"

Lizzie shoved him with an elbow and for a second I wondered... But I was brought back before the thought had a chance to form, by Derek.

"Course it's allowed! Don't you remember Cruel Intentions?" He said like he was talking to an
idiot.

"Cruel Intentions was kinda warped, I don't think their relationship was meant to be healthy." I pointed out, cursing myself as I did so. Saying that about it was counter-productive at best given my own situation. "And since when do you watch chick flics?"

"Hello? Sarah Michelle Gellar playing a bad girl? Who wouldn't watch that?" He replied as if it was obvious, saying nothing about the first part of what I'd said.

"So Derek and Casey could get married?" Marti asked her Dad, who spluttered into his food, and suddenly the whole table was laughing.

Except me.

"I don't think so Marti." Mom tried to say calmly.

"Why not?" Marti asked. "Then Casey would be my step-sister and my sister-in-law!"

"Because Smarti, getting married means getting as far as the altar." Derek told her. "If by some twist of fate I asked Spacey to marry me,"

And my chest tightened just at him uttering those two words. I silently rolled my eyes at myself. I thought I'd grown out of the teenage scrawlings of 'Mrs Casey fill-in-crushes-last-name' on my binder.

"And if she somehow said yes without criticising my proposal so much I took it back, she'd take so long planning it that we'd die of old age by the time she'd finished." He continued. "And that's not including the Casey freaks out in between, or the ridiculous amount of time I'd have to spend taking dancing lessons before she thought I was good enough to lead her out for the first dance."

"Or the amount of time it'd take them to agree on a wedding song." Lizzie added.

"Or the amount of time it'd take for her to find the perfect dress." Derek again.

"Or how long it'd take Derek to find a best man who's never had a thing for Casey." Edwin supplied.

"Nah, it'd still be Sam." Derek told him.

"Getting a date fixed when both Abby and my Dad were available..." Lizzie again.

"Mom would be so over the moon I was getting married in the first place that she'd blow off whatever she had going on." Derek shrugged.

"Finding bridesmaids that haven't gone out with Derek..." Edwin again.

"She has sisters! And I haven't dated all of her friends!" Derek defended himself.

My head was swimming. Were they really talking about this?

"And we'd have to hope he managed to stop throwing up long enough for her not to cancel to avoid kissing him." Edwin raised his fork to make the point and Lizzie laughed as a piece of broccoli fell off and landed in his lap.

"Hey! When did this turn into an attack Derek session?!" Derek attempted to stem the tide.
"And nevermind Casey's freakouts, what about Derek's fear of commitment or emotions of any kind?" Lizzie took up the attack Derek challenge.

"If I asked her I'd mean it!" Derek's voice went unheaded by the others as the discussion gained momentum, but it reached my ears loud and clear.

"Oh, come on Derek, you'd have to stand up in front of a church full of people and tell them you loved me." I said, with just a touch of bitterness.

He just looked puzzled, "I'd have thought they would already know anyway seeing as we were in the church in the first place!"

"Okay, okay! I get it!" Marti broke in. "I just thought they'd make a cute couple!"

Lizzie and Edwin grinned at her little girl cuteness, before starting a new onslaught. "Not cute, terrifying!"

Edwin followed Lizzie's lead. "Horrifying!"

"Imagine the freakouts!"

"The arguments!"

"The screaming matches!"

"The loud make-up sex!" Edwin, as usual, pushed it too far. "We'd hear it all the way from Kingston!"

"Ewww!" Marti shouted. "There's a kid here ya know!"

My eyes were glued firmly to my plate and my face felt like it was going to be red forever, until Mom rescued us from our siblings by telling them to knock it off.

After that things went more or less back to normal, though I couldn't bring myself to meet Derek's eyes for hours.
"All right, what's the matter with you?" Derek's voice snapped me out of my reverie.

I caught my eyes moments before they would have landed on his face. We were three hours into the drive home and I still had the overwhelming urge to run away. The conversation at dinner had hit way too close to home and had left me feeling mortified. Sometimes I love my family but others, others I begin to wonder if my mom has my adoption papers stashed anywhere I can find them and possibly track down my less crazy birth parents. Then I remember that if I had been secretly adopted then my mom's crazy organisational skills would ensure that I'd never find out anyway. "Nothing. Nothing's the matter." I said a little too quickly.

He glanced at me, a look that nearly lasted long enough to get me to yell at him about watching the road. "Seriously Case, you've barely spoken the whole time we've been driving. What's wrong?"

I sighed. "It's just... The conversation at dinner, it was..." I struggled to find words to say how uncomfortable it had made me feel without letting him know why.

To my surprise he laughed. "I know what you mean. Nothing like family to remind you of all your flaws."

I breathed out my relief, grateful that he'd thought up an excuse for me. "Yeah, although you didn't exactly help matters. You were the one who started it after all."

"Technically it was Marti that started it." He corrected.

"All the same. All that stuff about how it would take me the rest of my mortal life to plan a wedding and that I'd complain about the way someone proposed." I muttered, venting the aggravated embarrassment.

"I said you'd complain about the way I proposed. Whoever you end up with will probably do it perfectly. All candlelight and roses and heartfelt declarations of undying love." He replied, sarcasm dripping off every syllable.

"And how would you do it?" I snapped my mouth shut in horror the moment the words passed my lips, but by then it was too late.

A smirk graced his face. "It probably wouldn't be planned at all. We'd just be in the middle of something and I'd just blurt it out to annoy you."

"But you said you wouldn't ask if you didn't mean it." I said, confused.

"Who says I wouldn't mean it? Spontaneity doesn't mean dishonesty. Just means you'd probably get to pick your own ring."

I didn't really have an answer for that, so I dug out my book and attempted to read.

"Told you you'd complain. If I ever did that I'd never hear the end of it, and the only answer I'd get would be a eardrum busting DER-EK!" He looked pleased with himself for his squealy impression and the cheeky look on his face nearly had me forgive him everything. Nothing in specific. Just everything.
"Well, you'll never know, will you." I replied as coolly as I was able.

He was silent after that, and I was strangely disappointed.

"So when will you be able to drive us back home next?" I asked after fifteen minutes exactly.

"Not for a few weeks; coach has us doing extra practice after our last game." He grimaced as if remembering something embarrassing.

"But you guys won, didn't you?"

He nodded tightly. "Just. And it shouldn't have been a hard game; Queens' beats those guys every season."

"Well maybe that's why; they must pretty bored of losing. Good incentive to practice if ever I heard it." I really didn't get hockey. Surely if the teams have different people and more time to train inbetween seasons then they can't be expected to perform to the exact same level as last time? How can you anticipate how good a team is by whether they won a game they had different players for?

He threw a small smile my way. "I guess. And it isn't like we're planning on losing against the same guys as we did last year."

I smiled back, glad not only that I seemed to have cheered him up, but also that he'd avoided going into details or terminology; I was still a little muddled on most forms of sports. I wondered if I'd stand better chances with Derek if I knew more about hockey, then dismissed the idea entirely. As Jane Austin said; 'Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well−informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others'; meaning that men love to explain things, it makes them feel clever, so if you don't know something ask them instead of finding out yourself. A rule I had only started using since Truman.

"So, you found anywhere to dance yet?" He asked when I didn't reply.

"Not yet." I lied. I had, and I was going to join up once I got into a schedule with work and home visits, but Derek would only tease me about my minute perfect routines.

"I heard there's a club and a team." He said accusingly.

"There is." I answered, figuring no excuse was better than a bad excuse.

"So, why haven't you at least joined the club?" He asked.

I didn't answer.

"C'mon Case, this isn't still because you think dance isn't your future any more, is it?" He asked accusingly. "Cause I already told you-"

"No," I cut him off, "I just want to make sure I have the time first."

"You're the unquestioned champion of organization; you'll make the time." He insisted.

"Just... Let me do it in my own time." I told him.

He opened his mouth to argue.

"I swear, I'll get around to it. Just not now." I spoke before he could.
After a few seconds and a glance at my stubborn expression he nodded and I breathed out gently, relieved that he had dropped it.

"So..." Derek breathed. It sounded strangely like someone who wanted to keep talking but couldn't think what to say. If I was any closer to finding a topic of conversation I would have spoken, but suddenly all I could think about was the fact that he wanted to talk to me. Eventually he seemed to think of something. "How's the thing with your room-mate working out? She let you use the phone more now?"

I nodded before realising that wouldn't help progress the conversation. "Yeah, she seems really happy. I think they both are. Whatever got him to call her, it was a real blessing for them." I couldn't help the little probing comment; I wanted to see if he'd give away any sign that it had been him.

A small twitch at the corners of his mouth was all I got. "Yeah, he probably always planned on calling. Maybe he was just busy."

"Derek, you're a guy. If you really like a girl, are you ever to busy for a phone call?" I asked sceptically.

He smirked. "I'm not usually the one doing the calling."

"Pig." I sneered, when I realised he was basically implying the female race couldn't stay away from him long enough for him to get around to it.

"Prude." He laughed, "Besides, when was the last time you actually waited for a guy to call you when you really liked them?"

I deliberately left him out of the question, meaning I came up with too long ago to remember. "I'm a modern, independent woman; I don't need to wait on a guy to call in case he thinks..."

"Thinks what?" Derek asked when I trailed off.

"That I'm needy... Obsessive or something." I mumbled, furiously fighting back the stinging in my eyes when I remembered Truman calling me both those things down the phone when I broke up with him the second time.

Derek's eyes shot to my face. "Why would anyone think that?"

I had to laugh at that coming from him. He had a policy of no call backs if a girl called more than three times before he called them.

"Seriously." He said, darting glances at my face every few seconds as a substitute for proper eye contact. "I mean, you can be a little..." He struggled to find a way to put it without offending me, "Aggressive. But that's just because you know what you want and why should you wait around for them to figure it out?"

I smiled a little at the irony. "Because boys are stupid?" My eyes, earlier refusing to focus on his face, now didn't want to leave it.

"All the more reason for you to make it easy for us and just tell us." He smiled a little. "Sometimes we don't do so well with subtle."

"I'm not exactly subtle when I like someone." I pointed out. "It's hard to miss the massive klutzilla attacks and incoherent ramblings."
"Have you ever considered that they might be a bit preoccupied with trying to hide their own klutzy behaviour to notice?" He said, like I was being an idiot.

"Yeah, right." I laughed.

"Everyone gets nervous around people they like, Case. Just because someone isn't causing a stair avalanche or spilling stuff, doesn't mean they don't feel just like you do. Doesn't mean they don't start rambling or making idiots of themselves. Doesn't mean they aren't just so freakin' scared of making themselves look more stupid than they already do!" His right hand had left the steering wheel to gesture while he spoke.

"Derek, two hands on the wheel!" I shrieked as we came up to a corner.

"Shit!" He clamped his hand back around the wheel and clenched his jaw.

I took a few breaths and swallowed. "So, how are you meant to know?"

He glanced at me. "Know what?"

"If someone likes you, feels nervous around you? How can you tell if you're both too caught up in trying not to act stupid?" I asked.

He gave a small, distracted smile and shrugged. "You ask?"
Even having left no later than quarter past five, it was ten-thirty by the time we made it back and I was feeling sleepy from the journey.

Derek walked me to my dorm room to see that I got in all right and I shot him a grateful smile as I whispered goodnight and gently opened my door. I looked around to check if my room-mate was back from her parents' yet before breathing out and turning on the light. I poked my head back out of the door and made a loud 'pssst' sound to draw Derek's attention.

He looked back towards me and I gestured with my hand while whisper-yelling, "You want a drink?"

He smiled tiredly and walked back towards me.

I shut the door behind him and made my way towards the small counter with a microwave, kettle and a small collection of mugs on a cup-tree perched on top. I plucked two mugs and opened the cupboard underneath to pull out drinks making stuff. "I only have tea and cocoa." I said quietly. It was doubtful my neighbours would hear my normal speaking voice through the walls, but it was late and I spoke quietly automatically.

"Cocoa's fine." He said through a yawn, stretching his arms back above his head.

I nodded and tried not to stare as he completed the stretch and sat down on my bed. If I was a guy I'd call him a cock tease for that.

"How many different teas you got in there anyway? I'm betting on at least ten." He broke the silence as the kettle boiled.

I grabbed the three boxes from the cupboard and threw them at him. "Just those." I smirked, more amused than annoyed by the taunt.

He looked at the boxes, "Ah, but this box has seven different flavours in it." He said triumphantly, waving the box around to prove it.

I laughed. "That's still only nine, or did you forget how to count?" I poured the hot water into the mugs, very nearly splashing myself with boiling water when it came out faster than I was expecting, and stirred, only remembering the instructions to make it a paste first when soggy little balls of powder floated to the surface, resisting all attempts to stir them in. I gave up and handed Derek his cup.

He gave a half smile in thanks and used his spoon to slurp some of the bubbles that had formed on top.

I pulled my eyes from his lips and cleared my throat. He looked up, expecting me to say something and I panicked and said the first thing that came to mind. "So, what do you do when you like someone? I mean, I go all klutzilla and Emily goes all swoon-y and motor-mouth, what do you do?" I couldn't help the heat from rising all over my body, but I hoped he was too focused on his drink to notice.

His mouth pulled into a tight smile, like he was uncomfortable talking about it. "I act like an
asshole."

I laughed, "Which is different from usual how?"

The smile turned a little more genuine. "Shut up."

"Sorry, go on. So how do you act like an asshole?" I coughed down my giggling fit.

He shrugged. "It's like all my natural and incredible charm just vanishes and all I'm left with being is an arrogant moron who acts like he's king of everything. I go from antagonistic Casanova to idiot school boy pulling people's pigtails."

"Antagonistic?" I questioned.

He glared. "I heard it from you enough times to look it up."

I dismissed his slightly defensive explanation with wave of a hand. "No, I meant how did you antagonize Sally? Or Kendra?"

"There wasn't a lot of talking or 'courtship' with Kendra, and I teased Sally all the time; okay not to the extent that I..." He cut himself off with a deep breath, as if narrowly avoiding catastrophe. He collected himself. "And besides, it kind of wears off when I get involved. Partly 'cause I don't feel much like I need to try anymore so the pressure is off, and partly because they start trying to train me like a damn misbehaving puppy. It gets old real fast, so I watch myself a bit more closely, which is a lot easier to do when they're your girlfriend. I'm not really sure why, probably less pressure, like I said."

I thought about that for a moment; the only times I'd really seen his charm vanish were when interacting with family, namely me. I inwardly rolled my eyes; there was lack of charm and then there was whatever he was when he was with me.

"I also have a habit of coming off as even more retarded than I already am." He added with a rueful smile that I assumed was a by-product of being tired.

"You're not retarded. You're actually one of the smartest people I know." My forgotten blush flared up again as his eyes shot up to meet mine, but I didn't look away. "If you put as much thought into academics as you do girls and hockey you'd probably get grades almost as good as mine." Possibly better, I added in my head.

He laughed uncomfortably. "I don't know about that."

"Well, I do." I said firmly.

"Actually, I would not want to face you on the ice; I prefer my limbs and ribs intact. Though I wouldn't want to be on your side either with your klutzilla tendencies." His eyes grew distant as though picturing it.

I sat down next to him and shoved his shoulder. "Hey! I wouldn't be that bad!"

He bumped my shoulder in return, causing a little of my cocoa to splash over the rim of the mug and onto my skirt. "I'll have to take you to practice sometime so you can prove it. Before the others arrive though; we can't afford to have all our players taken out by a crazy girl with a hockey stick." He taunted.
I dipped my fingers in his drink and flicked the liquid in his face in retaliation.

"Hey!" He protested, before responding in kind.

I shrieked and shielded my face too late. Tepid cocoa ran down over my lips, and I stuck my tongue out to lick it off, trying to ignore the triumphant smirk plastered over Derek's features.

"You know, the amount of germs that could have gone from my fingers into that cocoa..." He said casually, watching as my eyes widened in horror. "From the prince, from the door of that diner restroom, from any number of places really."

"Ewww!" I immediately reached for a make-up removing wipe and wiped at my face frantically.

"Here, let me help you with that." He reached over and rubbed his fingers over my face.

"Ew! Derek!" I automatically withdrew.

He followed my movements and continued touching my face. Unfortunately, my brain took this moment to block out the previous comment about germs and zero in on the fact that Derek's fingers were running over my lips. My mouth dropped open in a gasp, just in time for one of his fingertips to slip between my lips.

We both froze.

Derek snatched his hand back like I'd bitten him and his face went pale. "I... Umm... I better be getting back. It was a really long... Tiring drive. Need to hit the hay."

I swallowed back the lump in my throat at his reaction. "Yeah, goodnight." I let him out of the door and leaned against it once I'd closed it behind him.

I sighed. Why was I such a klutz?

I woke up the next morning to my room-mate getting in. She'd driven back at five a.m and was dead to the world in minutes. Unfortunately, having been woken I couldn't get back to sleep again.

I pouted, throwing the duvet back and sitting up against the headboard. Last night's cocoa mugs were still on the counter and I wrinkled my nose at the mess. I'd meant to clean them up before going to bed, but the whole Derek thing had distracted me and I was already tired.

After cleaning the mugs I left to have a shower, spending nearly half an hour just standing under the spray, yawning periodically. I allowed my hair to dry naturally for a change while I sat in bed going over the work I'd done at home, then attempted reading for a while.

I checked the clock at half past seven and got ready for class, though I didn't need to leave for class for nearly an hour. The coffee shop would open at eight and I could use the caffeine.

The rest of the day passed in a tired blur, and I felt lucky I didn't fall asleep in class. I need my full eight hours to function properly and I'd barely got six. Amazing the difference two hours could make.

I blame this for the fact that I completely forgot about meeting up with Cher as I'd arranged before the weekend until she was knocking on my dorm room door asking if I was okay. I opened the door and let her in, checking my phone for the missed calls and texts she insisted she'd sent. Dead. I must have forgotten to charge it the previous night. I cringed, realizing that I was supposed to have sent my mom a text to let her know we got back okay. I quickly remedied this once I'd connected
the charger.

"You have a good weekend?" Cher asked cheerily.

I gave a tired smile and yawned. "Yeah, great. Went out with my mom and my sisters, had some home cooked meals. Got humiliated by my family. It was fun."

She laughed. "How did they humiliate you?"

I pulled a face. "They sat there talking about what a bridezilla I'd be if I married Derek."

"Derek?" She instantly leapt on his connection to it. If I didn't know she was deeply in love with Josh and overly invested in me and Derek becoming a couple it would have sparked a fair bit of jealousy and possessiveness in me. "Why were they talking about you marrying Derek?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "Calm down, it was just something Marti suggested when she found out you and Josh were step-siblings."

"Was Derek in on this conversation?" She asked.

"Yeah, he was the one that started all the bridezilla stuff." I tried not to let on how much that had upset me. I was used to Derek and hadn't taken it to heart, but with my newfound feelings for him it had stung more than a little.

"What did he say?" She sat down on my room-mate's bed and leaned forward in interest.

"He said I'd complain about the way he proposed, I'd spend so much time planning it we'd die of old age, that I'd make him take ridiculous amounts of dancing lessons, that I'd spend forever choosing a dress..." I trailed off with an involuntary sigh.

"Sounds like he spent a lot of time thinking about it." Cher giggled.

I blushed a little at the thought. "Not really."

She smiled knowingly at that. After a moment she asked, "Why would you complain about how he proposed? He couldn't think even you would do that?"

"He said he'd just put it randomly into conversation just to annoy me." I smiled wryly.

She gasped. "He's thought about how he would propose to you? And to you specifically? Oh my gosh!"

I looked at her strangely. "It's not that big of a deal. He puts a lot of thought into things that could annoy me, especially ruining important moments in my life."

"Yeah, and if it were ruining your graduation or giving an embarrassing speech at your wedding I'd agree with you; but seriously, guys don't contemplate how they'd propose to someone unless they would actually consider proposing to them." She said adamantly.

"You obviously don't know Derek. He'd contemplate anything that might make me mad." I insisted, although a part of me was grinning like an idiot at her assertion.

"And if he did, would you?" She asked teasingly.

"I... I don't know." I avoided her eyes.
"I meant be annoyed, of course, not marry him. Because you'd never do that, you don't see him that way." She challenged with a mocking grin.

"Shut up." I responded oh, so eloquently.

She just grinned wider. "Unless you've changed your mind about that...?"

I muttered something inaudible.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that. Would you mind repeating yourself?" Cher taunted.

"I may have... Just the teeniest crush on Derek." I mumbled, this time just loud enough for her to hear.

She raised her eyebrows. "The teeniest crush?"

I glared at her. "Maybe."

"You sure it might not be a pretty big crush? Maybe even more than a crush?" She pushed.

"It's... Possible." I conceded.

She made an undignified sound and grabbed my hands, pulling me to stand and making me join her in a goofy dance. She let go and reached for her phone. "You've got to tell Emily." She ordered, dialling and handing me the phone.

"What? No, I don't want to!" I argued, but it was too late, Emily had already picked up.

"Hello?" Emily's voice came from the other end. "Cher, are you there?"

I raised the phone to my ear with a sigh. "Hi, Emily, it's Casey."

"Hey, Casey. Why are you calling on Cher's phone?" She said amicably.

"She want me to tell you something..." I trailed off, reluctant to continue.

"Yeah?"

"I..." My eyes shot to Cher who gestured me on. "I may or may not have... Feelings... For Derek." I closed my eyes.

There was silence for a moment before she shrieked down the phone so loudly that I had to hold it away from my ear to avoid causing permanent damage. "Seriously?!"

"Um, yeah?" I said warily.

"And you told Cher first?! NO OFFENSE CHER!" She yelled down the phone. "But I'm your oldest friend, it's my privilege to hear these things first!"

"Sorry," I winced, it wasn't really my fault that Cher found out first, but all the same I felt guilty.

"You can make it up to me." She said cheerfully. "When you two get together, I get to know first, alright?"

"Okay?" I agreed tentatively.

"Good."
"Though you know we might not get together right?" I told them both.

"Why not?" They both asked in unison.

"Because I don't know if he feels that way about me." I reminded them.

"Oh, please! He's been mooning over you ever since you moved to London!" Emily exclaimed just as Cher said, "Don't be silly, of course he does!"

"One; he's never 'mooned' over anyone, even Sally just got sulks. And two; there's no 'of course' about it. You have absolutely no evidence to support your insane theory that he..." I took a deep breath, trying to release the tension my rant was building up.

"Looooves you?" Cher crooned playfully.

I scowled.

"Oh, but we do. You just don't believe any of it. Anyone with half a brain cell would be in no doubt of his feelings knowing everything we all know." Cher continued.

"Casey, if you don't believe us, why don't you ask him? Maybe he can convince you." Emily said soothingly, proving she still knew how to handle me a little better than Cher.

Derek's words from the car echoed Emily's in my head. Apparently the world was trying to tell me something. Too bad I wasn't in the mood to listen. "I'm sorry, I just don't think he does. And until I feel otherwise, I'm not going to embarrass myself by asking him anything. Or telling him anything." I said firmly.

Cher gave me a look and Emily sighed down the phone.

"You guys done?" I asked after a moment. They were silent. "Good. So you want to talk about something else?"

We spent the rest of the afternoon bitching about Cher's ex-stepmom/future mother-in-law and Emily's snoring room-mate (Cher had a ridiculous amount of minutes, allowing Emily to join in the conversation on speaker phone). It was a well spent afternoon.
Chapter Twenty-Five

I paced around in front of the coffee shop, trying to get my feet to carry me in there. So what if he was in there? I found this place first, I always had my coffee there. Why should I leave just because my annoyingly attractive step-brother was currently sat inside with three girls hanging over his shoulders looking at something on his phone?

I took a deep breath and walked over to the door, but froze with my hand half-way to the bar. I couldn't. I wouldn't enjoy my coffee one little bit if Derek was there flirting with girls in my line of sight. I'd just pick up a bottle of juice from the mini convenience store near the lecture hall. With any luck they'd stock one of the ones with guarana in it to replace the caffeine kick. Lord knows I needed it after the night's sleep I'd had.

Someone pushed past me with an irritated 'excuse me', opening the door and making me stumble through it a little. I turned to go but it was too late.

"Space-Case!" A cheerful voice called out. I turned to face the origin of said voice and found that I was being gestured over.

I reluctantly complied. "Hey Derek." I gave a strained smile.

"Case, this is Sandra, Cameron and Beth." He pointed at the girls in turn. "Girls, this is Casey."

The girls said hello with just a touch of hostility. I returned the sentiment.

"I was just showing these lovely girls some pictures of our little brother." He turned the phone to face me. A picture of Simon gnawing my mom's chin gazed out at me and I couldn't help but grin at the image.

The girls' smiles turned more genuine and friendly the second the words 'our little brother' left his lips. I wished they'd stayed hostile.

"He's adorable." A blonde whom I was pretty sure was either Cameron or Beth crooned.

"Yeah." I agreed, more that a little disgusted that Derek was using our baby brother to pick up girls. I sent him a glare. "Anyway, I'd better go get my coffee." I excused myself with yet another fake smile and turned towards the counter.

"Oh, yeah. I wanted a refill actually. Why don't you stay here and I'll get yours too?" Derek stood and strode off before I had the chance to object. I wasn't sure whether I was pleased that he was getting me coffee, or annoyed that he'd left me with his groupies. I decided to opt for the latter.

After a few moments of awkward silence, a girl who was almost certainly Sandra glanced at her phone screen. "We'd really better be going, class starts in ten."

At her words they all stood and chorused 'bye Derek' before leaving.

I sighed in relief and sat down in one of the now empty chairs. Derek was going to pay for this. It was one thing flirting in front of me, he'd always done it and he didn't know how I felt, but it was another using Simon to get laid. I wondered how many times he'd done it in the past. I took out my phone and looked at some of my own pictures of the baby. I hoped he'd got more than his share of
McDonald in him to even out the jerk Venturi genes.

I jumped as Derek appeared behind me, looking over my shoulder at the picture on my phone. "I like that one." He said, and I could feel his breath pass through my hair. "Got you what you had last time, hope that's okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah, thanks." I locked my phone and put it away, reaching for my drink.

"I can see why you come to this place, the coffee's great and the girls..." He let out a low whistle as he sat down.

"I don't come here for the girls." I said witheringly.

He laughed, "Course not. You're strictly into... What word is socially acceptable to say out loud in a coffee shop?"

"There isn't one. And I don't come here to meet guys either." I said firmly.

"Oh, I'm sorry Princess, did I offend your delicate sensibilities by assuming you might actually have a libido?"

I pointedly looked away.

"Though it's not really an assumption; you definitely didn't go out with Truman or Max for their stunning intellect and great personalities." He continued.

I shot him a death glare, but wasn't really sure what to say to that so I changed the subject instead. "So which one are you going out with? Or two. I doubt even you could manage all three without getting castrated."

He looked confused for moment before his face cleared and he let out another short laugh."None. They're great girls an' all, but too easy." He rolled his eyes as I opened my mouth to lecture him on talking about girls that way. "Before you get your panties in a twist, I didn't mean it in an offensive way. I meant I want a challenge, and you saw them, they were already hanging on my every word."

"You want another Sally." I reasoned.

He pulled a face. "Don't get me wrong, Sally was, and probably still is, great, but once was enough."

"Then what do you want?" I asked with an eye roll.

"I dunno, someone who puts up a fight when I'm being a jerk, and not just when I'm being me. Sally was amazing, but she knew what I was like when I got into that relationship and she still pushed me to do things I wasn't comfortable with just because she wanted to know she could." He picked at a dry coffee drip on the outside of his mug.

I tried to drown out the part of me that wanted to say 'why not me' by laughing it off. "And the difference between you being you and you being a jerk is..?"

"Ha ha." He said sarcastically.

"Seriously though, you never know who might be the person you're looking for until you give them a chance." I took a sip of my coffee before anything else could come out of my mouth.

He gave me a strange look."You'd be surprised."
I swallowed and looked down at my mug. "So what was it all about if you're not interested in them?"

"Because you of course have never flirted with someone you didn't want to sleep with." He snarked.

"A lack of interest only means you don't want to sleep with them to a man slut like you; I don't have to be interested in someone's pants interested in them." I retorted, ignoring the fact that wanting to get laid was exactly what I'd meant when I'd asked him.

"Man slut." He chuckled. "Cool name. I almost like it better than skirt chasing cad."

"Only you would actually want to be called a slut." I sighed.

"Not true, Kendra really liked it being called a slut. She's a real demon for dirty talk." He winked.

"Ugh." I pulled a disgusted face while trying to hide a blush; hearing what he did with his ex-girlfriend made me more than a little uncomfortable.

"Oh no, I've hurt you poor virgin ears again, haven't I?" He teased. "Would you prefer we talk about puppies?"

A sudden memory of a certain teacher and a certain imaginary pet came to mind. "No. And besides, just because I don't sleep with anything that moves, doesn't mean I'm any less able to talk about it than you." I inwardly groaned when I realised what I'd just left myself open for but it was too late to take it back.

His teasing smirk widened into a wicked grin. "So do you spit or swallow?"

I choked, spraying a few droplets of coffee across the table.

"Well I guess that answers that question." He laughed.

"Der-ek!" I managed through coughs.

"I'm sorry Case, you want me to let you reconsider puppies?" He said in the most patronizing tone he could muster.

I shook my head defiantly.

"You sure? 'Cause I don't want to explain to Nora how her eldest choked to death because I had an adult conversation with her." He goaded.

"I wouldn't call any conversation with you 'adult'." I muttered.

"Case, you wound me." He clutched his chest dramatically.

"Well, you do have the mental maturity of a twelve year old. At best." I raised my cup to me lips again.

He seemed to wait for me to take a sip before answering. "I can assure you, I'm all man where it counts."

I spluttered a little, but managed to keep all the coffee in my mouth this time, only coughing twice before swallowing it down. "I'm sure you are." I tried to make my voice drip with sarcasm and condescension, but I wasn't sure if I quite managed it.
"Did you want me to prove it?" He waggled his eyebrows.

This time there was no chance he didn't see my blush, I was glowing like a lightbulb. "Grow up." I frowned at him.

"Oh, I 'grow up' quite a bit when handled properly." He winked, clearly trying to test just how red I could go.

"Are you going to turn everything I say into a double entendre?" I sulked. Why did I have to blush so darn easily?

"Are you going to make it so easy?"

I decided to try him at his own game; maybe I'd feel less mortified if I could just see him turn a little pink. "I can assure you, I'm not easy."

He laughed delightedly. "Now who's speaking double entendres?"

"I've no idea what you mean." I widened my eyes innocently. "Nothing so vulgar could get past my lips." I pouted purposefully, inwardly squealing in triumph when his gaze lowered to my mouth.

"Maybe we should test that theory." He smirked.

"And how would you suggest we do that?" I leaned forward across the table. This wasn't taking the direction I'd thought it would, but there was no way I was leaving without seeing him embarrassed.

"What's the dirtiest thing you've ever done?" He asked, his tone still teasing but his eyes still darting back to my mouth every few seconds.

"On my own or with help?" I smirked, trying to suppress a resurgence of my blush at my own words.

I was rewarded by a faint tinge on Derek's face that I never would have noticed if I hadn't been looking for it. "Oh, um, okay, I was not expecting you to say that." He admitted.

I leaned back. "Too much for you?"

His eyes flicked back to my lips for a moment. "Definitely not."

I smiled in what I hoped was a wicked way, before catching sight of the time. "I'd better get going."

I was pleased to see he was a little flustered. "Right, okay. Well, I'll see you soon? I mean maybe tomorrow. Here. When you get your coffee."

I nodded, fighting back a giggle. "Sure. Goodbye man slut."

"Bye."
Chapter Twenty-Six

I peeked through the window before I entered the coffee shop. It was one thing Derek saying he'd be there, but who knew if he'd actually keep to it? I didn't want to walk in and look around for him like some stood up date, or worse, see him with more girls, without any warning.

He was standing at the counter, and I felt a brief jealous lurch in my stomach to see the smiling barista girl at the register opposite him, but suppressed it in favour of pushing open the door.

As the door opened he turned to face me, the smile he'd been directing towards the girl serving him now on me and widening. Without realising it at first I grinned back and stepped forwards, not noticing the guy to my right as he moved in front of me. I collided with him, his drink splashing over us both and the cup crashing to the floor.

"I'm so sorry!" I held my hands up as he turned to face me.

He glared and shoved past me, causing me to lose my footing on the now wet floor.

I closed my eyes against the impact, falling hard on my arm and letting out a half gasp half sob in pain and shock. I bit my lip against the already fading throb in my arm and tried to push myself up.

"Case, you okay?"

I glanced up to where Derek was leaning down to help me up. "I'm fine." I snapped, mortified by my ever strong klutziness. I ignored his outstretched hand and placed my own on the ground to push again, sliding my foot under my body. I slipped a second time, this time held up by Derek's sudden grip on my arm.

He pulled me to stand and looked me over. Seemingly satisfied, he dragged me over to a chair and handed me a wad on paper serviettes. "One second, just gotta go get our drinks." He left the table to go back to the counter, roughly shoving into the side of the guy who I'd knocked into on the way. He shot a sarcastic apology over his shoulder as his victim flailed to stay upright.

My still flushed face betrayed me with a small smirk before I started mopping up the excess liquid and cream from my clothes, hair and skin. I sighed in frustration as I patted at the dark stain on my pale green shirt. That was never going to come out and I was going to need to go back to my dorm and change before class.

A cup of coffee landed on the table in front of me while I was still contemplating my ruined clothes. "Stupid jerk shoulda looked where he was going." Derek muttered as he took his seat.

"It was my fault, really. Klutzilla strikes again." I tried for a self-mocking smile and ended up with a slightly tearful wince.

"So that makes it okay to push you over?" He looked ready to stand back up and have another go at the guy.

"He didn't push me over, I slipped." I corrected.

"After he shoved into you!" He looked at my red eyes. "You sure you're okay?"
I nodded. "I probably shouldn't stay long though, I need to change before class."

"You might wanna wait until they've cleaned up the floor; don't want you slipping over again." He teased. His tone was as it always was, but he still looked a little concerned.

I glanced away, my face going pink again over the allusion my epic clumsiness. "Yeah, I'd most likely break something this time." I said self-deprecatingly.

He laughed. "I still don't know how the Queen of the Klutzes is such an amazing dancer; common sense says you should be tripping and stumbling every other step."

My eyes darted up at the badly hidden compliment.

He allowed his smirk to relax a little into a smile. "Probably balances out somehow. Maybe you should trip over more often and boost your dancing up a notch that way."

I returned his smile. "You should know better than anyone that I trip over more than enough as it is. You have like a hundred videos of it, and that's not counting the spills, the bumping into things and the dropping things."

"And a few of all four." He pointed out. "My personal favourite is still you dropping cake on Vicki though."

I groaned, "Don't remind me of that, please."

"Why not? It all worked out, and if anyone deserved having a cake dropped on them it was her. She could've stood to have eaten it too; she was stupidly thin back then."

I giggled. "You must not have thought so at the time, you made out with her after all."

"Are you ever going to let that drop?! I was fifteen years old! Not to mention anything I could do to piss you off might as well have had naked play boy mansion girls holding pizza and sitting on a sports car plastered over it. I swear, if I'd have got as much pleasure from anything else as I got from winding you up, I could have been a master in it."

I raised an eyebrow. "And just what kind of pleasure was it you got from tormenting me?"

He winked. "That's a secret between me and my used tissues."

"Ew! Der-ek!"

He laughed. "You asked."

"I was expecting at least a slightly less disgusting answer!" I lied. I did know him after all.

"You should be flattered! I had a lot of material to work with in that area and you still topped them time after time." He leered.

"Me? What happened to it being pissing me off?" I tried to keep the slight squeak from my voice.

He looked away and I could have sworn he blushed. "You know what I meant!"

"We're talking about you pleasuring yourself, forgive me if I'm a little confused." I said in as matter of fact tone as I could manage.

"You're the one that brought it up." He mumbled as he picked up his coffee.
I smirked and put my own cup to my lips.

We finished our coffees in silence and Derek drove me back to my dorm to give me extra time to change.

As he turned to leave I called out to him. "Derek?"

He faced me again.

"Tomorrow?"

He smiled and nodded.

Our morning coffee became a routine over the next few days, along with the invariably dirty conversations, the competitions at embarrassing each other and the flirty undercurrent.

Which is why I was so annoyed when Cher decided to join me one morning.

I tried to convince her not to, but without implying my meetings with Derek were something they weren't, I couldn't give her a good reason not to come. I gave in with as much grace as I could as tried to decide whether I wanted Derek to sulk about her presence or not.

As we entered the coffee shop, I decided on not. As much as I would love him to show signs he liked our time alone, the look on Cher's face when she saw him inside desperately prayed that he wouldn't give her any more ammunition.

He looked up at us as we approached the table he was sat at. Cher had to pull up a third chair while I sat down and Derek's face was unreadable as she said hello and went to order her own coffee. Derek had already bought mine; he knew what to order and I was very rarely late enough for it to cool too much.

"We have the same class this morning and she wanted to swap notes and get a caffeine fix." I explained, not really sure why I was or if it was necessary.

He nodded his acknowledgement. "S'okay, Cher's cool. I like to encourage it when you make friends with people who don't suck."

I rolled my eyes. "None of my friends 'suck', Derek. Just because they either don't like you or do like school or poetry does not mean they suck."

"I am sorry, but anyone who doesn't like this," He waved a hand over his body, "sucks. School and poetry are just side effects of suckiness."

I ignored that comment in favour of sipping my coffee.

Cher was back in what seemed like double time with a drink piled so high with cream that I couldn't even tell if there really was liquid underneath it. When I raised my eyebrows she shrugged.

"Soya cream; not as fattening so I figure I can have more of it."

Cher sat about eating (there was no way she could drink that much cream) her drink, eyes darting between us. "So, you do this often?"

I blushed and fumbled for an answer but Derek got there before I could. "Most mornings. Actually don't think we've missed one since we started last week."
Cher's grin and raised eyebrows made me want to punch her. "Every day for how long?"

"A little under a week." I cut in quickly, shooting her a death glare as a warning to shut up about it. "So you enjoy having your dad come to stay?"

Cher rolled her eyes. "I did, but he's still here." She paused to slurp coffee out of the small gap she'd created in the foam. "He's great, but seriously, there's only so many times I can listen to him argue the case for us moving back to LA and Josh taking up a corporate intern position in his firm. We made our choices, and he knows we're too stubborn to change our minds, so why keep on about it? He's proud of Josh for sticking by his convictions but for some reason that makes no difference. I mean, it's like he does it purposely to wind Josh up."

I smiled sympathetically. "At least you got to see him for a while. He'll be going home soon, right?"

"He should be, yeah, but he's already mentioned that he could probably get another week's leave from work." She ate another teaspoon of cream.

I nodded, feeling awkward and at a loss of anything to say between my usual dirty banter with Derek and the girly chat I usually had with Cher. "So, notes?" I pulled my bag onto my lap and pulled out my notes; passing them across to Cher as Derek gave me a look that said 'nerd'.

"Thanks." She started flipping through to find the right page (if she'd asked I would have explained my colour index, but she didn't so I let her figure it out herself) while stirring what cream she could into her drink.

"Oh," I broke the gap in conversation, gaining Derek's attention. "Mom told me not to bother going home this weekend; Marti has a teacher training day on Monday, and they've got permission from the school for Liz and Ed to have a day off too, so they're coming here for the weekend."

"Cool, I can live without a five hour drive there and another back." He nodded, looking a little relieved.

"Coach still pushing you?" I said in annoyance. Now that I looked, Derek seemed exhausted.

He looked up in surprise. "It is his job, Case. It's tiring but I knew it would be when I signed up; it'll calm down a bit once we're all in shape."

"You're already in shape!" My face flushed as the words left my mouth, but Derek didn't seem to notice.

"As a team, Case, as a team. Us newbies need to get into the dynamics of the team; get to know the rest of the guys and get in synch. There's more new players this year than there have been for the last couple of years and we need to make up for it in practice. It's not the same as high school hockey; half of us are here on sports scholarships and we need to be good to stay in school." He explained, sounding more serious than I'd heard him sound about anything. "It was hard work to get here, but it's nothing compared to how hard I have to work to stay."

That shut me up. It wasn't exactly easy for me either, but I was a naturally academic person, I would have worked just as hard if I wasn't on any kind of scholarship, and I enjoyed the studying. For Derek it was different; he had to keep an eye on his GPA and his performance on the hockey pitch, without letting one fall in favour of the other. And he hated studying. It was the first time I'd realized just how hard it was for him here. "I could..." I hesitated, not knowing whether he would appreciate the offer. "I could help you with some of your work, you know, if you want?"
His eyes sparkled a little with a smile, but his mouth was occupied with his drink. He swallowed. "Yeah, that'd be great."

I smiled, meeting his eyes and already imagining late night study sessions with hot chocolate and sitting close together so we can both see the textbooks.

Cher closed the binder with a dull thump, waking me from my reverie. "Great. Thanks, there were a couple of things I missed when Lara-Jade splashed her water over my feet." She pulled a face in remembered annoyance. "I would offer you mine, but I think you pretty much covered everything I did."

I turned my now much diminished smile on her. "It's fine."

"Yeah, Case loves showing off her brains. Stems back from doing homework for the popular kids to make them like her." Derek smirked.

I scowled. "At least I know how to do my homework."

"Hey, I got into the same school you did." He pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. "Because of my help."

"Aww, are you admitting you did my homework so I'd like you?" He taunted.

"Are you admitting you got into Queen's because it's where I was going?" I shot back.

Derek actually looked flustered for a moment.

Cher laughed. "I'd say that's a yes."

"I didn't even know she was going to Queen's! We announced where we were going at the exact same time!" He defended, more than a little late.

"You knew it was on my short list though," I reminded him. "I even discussed it with you."

"It was the only place I got in!"

"Queen's, a highly regarded college of the caliber Casey would attend, was the only one out of presumably dozens of low brow colleges with less than half the good reputation, that would accept you?" Cher questioned. "Sounds a little off to me. You sure you didn't sabotage your other applications?" She observed his sulky pout. "Aww, Casey, I think you have an admirer."

Both me and Derek blushed at that.

"Cher, stop it." I warned.

She grinned at me mischievously, but let it drop. "So, Derek, how are things going for you?"

Derek took a moment to answer her, clearing his throat a little. "Good. Things are good."

"Uuhuh." She nodded as if he'd given a much more in depth answer. "Been busy?"

He nodded back. "Yeah, between hockey practice and assignments I can only fit in one or two wild parties a week." His smirk was back up already, but the pink tinge in his cheeks hadn't yet faded.

She gave a knowing smile that was directed at both of us, and picked up her drink again.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I stared at the phone in my hand, not really seeing it. The screen had gone black, hiding the screen with Derek's contact details on it and locking it against accidental button pressing.

I knew I had to call him.

I had been meaning to ask him again about helping him with his work for two days, but during our morning coffee meet ups I'd wimped out. And I had no idea why. I'd offered to help and I was following through on it, what was there to be nervous about? I'd helped him before.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself to unlock the phone and press the call button, when it started ringing. I jumped and dropped it. Cursing a little, I leaned over to pick it up off the floor. My eyes widened in surprise as Derek's name flashed on the caller ID and I chuckled a little at the coincidence, staring dumbly at the screen for a few seconds before it occurred to me to answer it. "Hello?" I choked out, a little embarrassed at my mindlessness.

"Hey, Case. I was just wondering about what you said. You know, about helping me with some of my work?" His voice sounded a little distant down the phone.

"Yeah?" I prompted when he didn't continue.

"Well, when were you thinking of? I mean when are you free?" He sounded slightly nervous but then cleared his throat and breathed a small laugh. "I guess a better question would be when aren't you free, but still."

I breathed a withering sigh, which I was sure was audible down the phone. "I don't know, when do you next have a gap in your busy schedule of drunken debauchery?"

Derek laughed. "I have practice tomorrow, and I told the guys I'd be at a party friday night, but I'm free now if you're around? You know, if you're not having an early night in a pointless attempt at the beauty sleep you so badly need?"

"Sure. I'm already in my pajamas, but I guess you've already seen that before so you won't be too mentally scarred." I ignored his jibe and checked the clock, making sure it wasn't too late. Not that I'd say no even if it was. Not at this point.

"Great. I'll be there in five." He hung up.

I pulled the phone away from my ear, frowning at it in puzzlement before shrugging and deciding just because Derek's dorm was more than five minutes away didn't mean he wasn't somewhere that was.

I stood up and checked my appearance in the mirror. Not too bad, but my hair could do with brushing. I picked up the brush and started dragging it through my hair, still a little crinkly from being tied up during the day.

A knock at the door interrupted me before I was halfway through. I stilled the brush and stood up
to answer it, a little surprised at how quick Derek had been. He hadn't even been the five minutes he'd said he would be.

Derek stepped in almost before I'd opened the door. "I have an assignment due Friday morning and I'd completely forgotten about it and now I haven't even started it and Casey I have no idea what I'm going to do." He looked panicked and sounded worse.

"Hey, it's fine. We'll do it." I herded him over to sit on my bed and flicked on the kettle. "What's the assignment?"

His expression blanked for a moment before he pulled a binder from his bag and opened it, finding the page he wanted. "Here."

I read the page. "Okay, so it's not that bad. It's just five-thousand words."

He groaned. "In one night."

I pushed his shoulder. "You have tomorrow as well you know."

"I have like three hours, tops. I have a full day of classes and then practice. After that I'll be exhausted; I'll barely be able to stay awake to eat and shower, there's no way I'll be able to fit this in as well." He hunched over his knees, cradling his forehead in his hands.

I sighed; I knew where this was going. "It really won't be that hard. We can get this done tonight." *Even if it means I won't be getting any sleep*, I added inwardly.

He looked up at me from his hunched position, hope and cynicism warring in his expression. "We've done worse. Five-thousand words is nothing compared to catching you up on the whole of senior year in high school." I raised my hand again, this time rubbing his shoulder in what I hoped was a comforting gesture. He looked questioningly at my hand and I dropped it back to my side. "Just calm down. I'll fix us some drinks and we can get started."

He nodded, still not looking entirely convinced.

Two hours later we had half an essay plan and one-thousand words of actual essay (Derek didn't believe in essay plans but attempted one because of my nagging). It was pushing nine-thirty and I was already yawning, but there was no way I was kicking Derek out into the cold with under half an essay when I'd told him we'd get it done, so I raided my room-mate's instant coffee for Derek and dug out a supposedly energizing tea from my assortment box for myself.

"What's another word for 'copy'?" Derek grumbled.

"Duplicate?" I suggested. It always amazed me how Derek could command a wide vocabulary when arguing with or insulting me but it dried up nearly completely when an actual use for it emerged.

He didn't outwardly acknowledge me, but muttered something under his breath as his hand moved over the paper.

"You know, you wouldn't have to keep writing things out by hand if you took better care of your things. Or if you got a job and saved up money for a new laptop." I couldn't help but lecture. His last laptop had died a not so mysterious death a few weeks ago when a can of very sticky beer had been knocked over it when he and his room mate had invited some others from their dorm for a guys night.
He paused in his quiet muttering and pencil tapping to glower at me. "You know, you could have let me write this up on yours."

I blushed. The thought actually hadn't occurred to me. "Okay, we can type it up on my laptop." I pulled out said piece of machinery and started it up, carefully keeping my tea arms length away from it. I used typing up what was already written as an excuse to move in close and read over his shoulder as I typed; enjoying the slightly fruity smell of his hair (he'd deny it 'til death, but Derek spent more money on hair products than I did; he even used my shampoo a couple of times when he ran out) and the simultaneously relaxing and exciting feeling I got being so close to him. I wondered how I'd never noticed before; I'd always had this feeling around him, but my mind seemingly glossed over it instead of seeing it for what it was. "There," I said about fifteen minutes later (it was a little hard to concentrate so it took longer than it should have), "All typed up."

"Thanks."

"Thanks." He reached over to take the laptop to continue his work, his hands brushing mine as we transferred it between us and causing me to drop one side a little. He frowned at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I answered, an embarrassed smile, not only at nearly dropping my laptop after saying how he should take better care of his things, but also at being caught so close to him, forming in reply to his frown. This was getting ridiculous; I was barely even helping him, distracted as I was. I took a deep breath in and slowly released it through my nose as his gaze turned back to his work. "Derek?"

"Mhm?"

"The coffee shop, is it..." I cleared my throat, unable to continue my question which had been along the lines of 'is it like a date. Are we dating. Will we date'. Instead I changed the question. "Is it... I mean, should I, I don't know, maybe call your lecturer when we go tomorrow morning and see if we can get an extension?"

He gave a worried look, clearly worried I was saying we weren't going to be able to finish his essay tonight. "I can't, I've already had two extensions from him since christmas."

"But what if your crazy, neurotic step-sister had a crisis and you'd sacrificed your study time to help her deal?" I couldn't believe what I was suggesting; I'd only just stopped getting concerned looks and 'how are you' s from my teachers and I was going to remind the world of Derek's little rumour about my mental health? Maybe they had reason to be concerned...

His expression changed to surprise. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, biting my lip to stop myself from taking it back.

He grinned tiredly. "That might just work."

I smiled weakly back at him.

"You know, you're not so bad for a keener." He said in a thoughtful tone.

"Hey!"

"But tell anyone I said that and I'll deny it." He smirked and nudged me with his shoulder.

"I'll just pretend you went the whole way complimenting me and thanking me instead of that painful excuse for a half compliment." I told him.

"You do that." He glanced at the laptop screen. "So are we still trying to finish this, or are we
relying on the crazy step-sister extension?"

"We'll give another hour or two until my room mate gets back, then I'm kicking you out." I reached for my drink.

"Awww why can't I have a sleepover? I promise I make a great bed warmer." He joked.

My grip on my cup faltered, and it was lucky for me that it had taken a while to type up what was written of the essay and the water had cooled, because half the cup splashed over my front.

"Case, I know you want to get rid of that keener rep, but really? Wet T-shirt contests are a bit pointless when there's only one contestant and one judge." Derek admonished with laughter spilling around the edges of his voice.

"Shut up!" I retorted intelligently.

"You're so adorable when you blush." He teased. "Like a little red ball of nerdy pajamas."

"Der-ek!"

"What? I thought you wanted a compliment?" He said innocently.

I glared and looked down at myself. "At least it isn't sticky. Kind of like that herbal skin cleanser Lizzie bought me." I muttered to myself, trying to convince myself that I didn't need to go wash it off in the shower right the heck now. I returned my glare to Derek. "This is your fault you know!"

He laughed and raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry Casey, did I make you wet?"

My eyes widened in horror. At the coffee shop I was prepared for this kind of talk, but here, in my dorm room after dropping tea all over myself, I wasn't quite ready for it.

"If I can do that just by suggesting a sleepover, imagine what I could do if I actually tried." He continued.

Nope! Not imagining it! Don't imagine it! STOP IMAGINING IT! My inner voice screamed as my slack jaw scrambled to say something, anything, to bring us back to a safer topic.

He laughed again at my expression. "Why don't you go have that shower I know you're going crazy wanting to take and wash off all that faintly flavoured boiled water with some germy tap water. Added bonus is you can make it cold while you're there." He winked. "I'll keep working 'til you get back."

I hit him on the shoulder and grabbed a towel and clean pajamas from my drawers. "No rifling through my underwear. I have it colour coded so I'll know if you do." I warned him as I walked to the door. I turned back as I opened it. "And don't even bother looking for my diary; I'll be back before you have a chance to find it."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be good." He waved me out of the room.

"Somehow I find that hard to believe." I mumbled under my breath as I made my way to the showers.

He was asleep on my bed when I got back, slouched against the wall, laptop still on his knees and neck at an angle that looked painful.

I watched him a moment before shaking his shoulder and ruffling his hair to get him to wake up.
"Come on Derek. Sleep later, in your own bed."

He opened one eye and scowled sulkily. "I take it back."

I suppressed a grin at his sulky face. "Take what back?"

"The thing about you being not so bad for a keener." He reminded me.

"What was I meant to do? Let you sleep on my bed in a position that would probably signal the end of your hockey career?" I put the towel in the laundry. "You need to get back to your dorm and get some sleep."

He grimaced. "Yeah, I guess. Just better hope you can get me that extension."

"Trust me. I have a way with teachers." I reassured him.

"He's gay; bribing him with blow jobs won't work." He teased.

"Not if I do it." I paused for a second so I could say the next bit without laughing. "You could give it a shot though."

To my annoyance he just laughed. "Nah, don't think I'm his type, and he's definitely not mine." He stood up and stretched, and I looked away before he could catch me staring. He yawned, setting me off on a yawn of my own that made his smirk a little. He was one of those weird people who didn't get contagious yawns and he mocked me for my easy susceptibility to them; I yawned just from reading about someone yawning.

"I thought you were everyone's type?" I said sarcastically in response to Derek admitting there was a person alive who didn't want to sleep with him.

"Apparently there are a few rare people who do not find me attractive." His smirk grew. "I think they mostly have mental issues though."

I rolled my eyes because of course he would say people would have to be crazy not to fancy him. Not that I had much grounds to disagree. "Come on, grab your stuff. Time for the sex god to go home and get his beauty sleep."

Derek nodded and collected his things from where they had somehow scattered across the room. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Case?"

"Yeah?" I looked up from shutting down my laptop.

He came back towards me and leaned down. I flinched away in anticipation of a Derek style prank or attack and he laughed before pressing his lips to my hair. "Thanks." He smiled and backed up, heading for the door again, and pausing again. "Oh, and Case?"

"Mm?" I managed, a little too stunned to form words.

"Tell anyone I just did that and I'll tell them I found a vibrator in your sock draw." He winked and left me still sitting speechless and now blushing on my bed.
Yeah, I yawned when I wrote them yawning... Please tell me I'm not the only one who does that?

And I leave it up to you decide if he made up the vibrator or not, I just needed something to balance out the fluffiness before Derek got too OOC
Chapter Twenty-Eight

I lay in bed the next morning (five am still counts as morning) clenching my hands in the sheets and going over mental visualizations to prepare me for the day.

This was it.

After last night I couldn't take it anymore; the not knowing, the extremely high chance that Derek would find someone before I got the courage to tell him how I felt (although maybe not the full extent of how I felt; I wanted him to stick around, not run a mile), the way my mind conjured and analysed every single moment I'd spent with him to find what Emily and Cher saw... I was going out of my mind.

I pictured telling him outright; a simple 'Derek, I really like you and was wondering if you would consider dating me'. I pictured asking him if the coffee shop mornings counted as dates. I even pictured just grabbing him and kissing him. Even imagining it was making me nervous, and it was inevitable that an epic klutzilla moment to outstrip even my worst moments was going to occur. But that was okay, I convinced myself, because Derek already knew that about me and apart from a few bouts of fairly vicious teasing, he was fine with it.

The minutes rolled by and even though the crawling time was grating on my fragile nerves, all I wanted to do was stay there safe in bed when the moment came that I had to get up and leave. I picked up my phone and texted Emily (I had promised after all) to tell her what I was going to do today. The message sent, I sat and stared at the screen a minute. There was no going back now. I turned off my phone to avoid Emily's reply and left my dorm room.

Standing outside the coffee shop I spared myself a small self mocking laugh at my new habit of lurking around outside, before pushing the door open and sitting at the table most out of the way of passing staff and customers. The less collateral damage of my impending klutz attack the better. I forced myself to relax back into the chair and allowed my eyes to rest on the door.

I didn't have long to wait.

Derek pushed through the door and cast his gaze around the room, stopping when his eyes met mine to give me a greeting smile and nod before he walked to the counter to order.

I focused on breathing, my attention so caught up that I didn't notice Derek sit down until an amused voice asked what the hell I was doing. I looked up, my breathing already become erratic again. "Nothing."

He gave me a confused look. "Okay. So, time for my crazy step-sister to call in and get me an extension." He passed me his phone, already open on a contact. "This better work or I'm screwed." The anxious look from last night returned to his face.

"It'll work." I assured him, the phone already halfway to my ear and the dial tone already sounding.

After a moment an exasperated voice answered. "Save it, the assignment deadline is final."

I floundered a second before a glance at Derek's worried expression set me back on course. "Hi, this Casey McDonald, Derek's step-sister."
"Oh, hello. I'm sorry for the abrupt greeting, but I can only assume this call is about Derek's assignment due tomorrow morning?" The tone grew a little less snappy and a little more weary.

"Actually it does, but I was hoping you would just hear me out? Derek has a really good reason for needing an extension." I waited a beat.

"Go on."

"I assume he's made you aware of my recent... Difficulties?" I asked, not really intending on waiting for an answer this time. "I've been having a really hard time with stress and anxiety lately, and with the rest of the family back in London... Well, Derek's the only person I can really go to with any of this. I'm afraid I may have taken advantage a little these past couple of weeks, and I'm really sorry, but the whole thing is my fault and I was really hoping you could see your way clear to giving him just an extra few days? I promise not to make him neglect his studies again, I was just really having a hard time."

The voice at the other end was quiet, probably taking a little while to decipher my strange, ranting speech. When he finally answered he was a little unsure. "He's already had several extensions..."

I took a breath to start talking again. It was time to bring out my greatest weapon; incessant talking. "I know, I know, but it's not right for him to suffer for helping out family. He was just being a good step-brother and-"

"Alright, fine. He has until monday morning at the latest. No more extensions. I don't care if his aged granny is on her death bed; everything had better be in on time from now on." He cut me off.

I smiled in victory. It had taken much less than I'd thought it would. "Thank you so much."

He grumbled an incoherent parting sentiment and hung up.

"You've got until monday." I grinned.

Derek gave me a look like I'd just brought his puppy back from the dead.

"What? No thank you?" I teased.

"I said thank you last night." He raised an eyebrow.

I blushed a little as the memory of him kissing my hair crowded my mind and I remembered what my goal for the day was. I opened my mouth to talk but nothing would come out. I cleared my throat and tried again, the second attempt only succeeding because of Derek's expectant expression. "I... Uh... Derek?" I managed after a few seconds.

"Yeah?" He drew out the word, exacerbating my mortification at my present lack of lingual skills.

"Is this... I mean, are we..." I broke off to rally myself.

Derek's eyes became scrutinizing.

"Would you ever consider..." I stopped again, this time without meaning to, wondering quite when I'd become so nervous asking people out. It'd been fairly bad before but this was just ridiculous. But then this was Derek.

"Case, breathe. It's not that hard." Derek instructed, clearly trying not to laugh.

I glared at him and refused to say anything else.
"Wow, I don't know whether to laugh or be flattered." Derek grinned, a big, wide, open grin. He took in my flustered glare. "It's okay Case, I know."

My heart stopped and my jaw dropped. Was I really that obvious?

"I mean, I wasn't sure, not after that 'date' turned out to be a figure of speech. Or maybe a freudian slip." He looked askance at me, but gave up when all I managed was a small squeaking noise. "But come on, you just lied to a teacher for me." He grinned again. He watched me for a moment as I tried to get myself back under control. A small amount of anxiety showed in his eyes when I still proved speechless. "That was what you were talking about, right? I'm not just making an idiot of myself here?"

I was stuck on whether to nod or shake my head, the answers to those questions being two different things.

"I could have misread everything, but you-" He cut himself off. "Casey, you better say something."

I swallowed. "Do you-"

He cut in before I could finish the question. "Do you really have to ask?"

I nodded.

He laughed and shook his head. "And people think I'm dumb." He shot an amused glance in my direction before continuing. "Casey, I've been in love with you since that stupid dinner with our parents when we tried to break them up. Why'd you think I hated you so damn much? Come to think of it, why do you think I was so against them getting married?"

My mouth was so far open any onlooker would think my jaw was dislocated.

"I mean, sure, it took me a little while to figure it out, but even my Dad knew when you started dating Sam. I guess it was fairly obvious when I wrestled my best friend to try and stop him asking you out." He scratched his head in remembered embarrassment. "Though Edwin only caught a clue when you went out with Scott and I couldn't help outing the guy."

"Everyone knew?!" I managed, my nerves and mortification quickly morphing into annoyance and incredulity.

"All the Venturi's at least." He shrugged. "I'm not exactly a subtle guy."

"Marti?!" I asked, still hung up on the whole last person to know thing.

"She was the first one to figure it out." He said proudly, though his mouth twitched in a fight between annoyance and a smile a moment later. "I'll never forgive her for that comment about you marrying Sam. Little traitor."

I looked aghast, wondering if there was a single person who hadn't figured this out before me.

"If it helps, I'm still not sure about Nora." He offered.

It did help a little. "Why did you never say anything?"

He shrugged again, the nervous look returning to his eye. "I never really thought I had a shot until you started hanging out with me in college. I was close to telling you when we visited your Grandma, but between New York and Jesse... Well, sticking around with me and helping me make
it through college didn't really compare." He looked embarrassed by this admission, but didn't attempt to take it back. "Not to mention you did kinda call me your brother not all that long ago."

I grimaced at the memory, wondering what had possessed me to say that. Even before I recognised my feelings for Derek, I sure as heck knew he wasn't my brother.

After a moment a thought occurred to me. "Did Paul know?"

"Seriously, Case, I don't know for a fact who knew so quit asking me and try telling me whether I got it right." He just looked annoyed now. "I'm kinda out on a limb here, doing the whole feelings thing for you. Least you could do is tell me if I've got a shot."

Only then did I realise the extent of what Derek had just admitted. He didn't just say he liked me, or he thought I was hot, or he had a crush on me, he said... My eyes widened and my jaw threatened to drop again. "Did Derek Venturi seriously just make a love declaration?"

"Casey!"

"Sorry, it's just a bit of a shock." My mind refused for a second to get past the little fact of Derek saying the 'L' word.

"Seriously, if you don't say something in the next ten seconds I'm outta here and we are never talking about this again!" Derek warned.

I summoned up my inner Derek. "You really have to ask?" I taunted.

Derek took a second to process, and then he was half over the table, his lips pressed to mine and his hands firmly grasping my shoulders. He broke contact and looked down when a tinkling noise sounded.

His coffee cup had been knocked over and had rolled onto the floor, it's contents flooding the table and soaking into Derek's shirt.

I laughed. "Wow, you just did a me. Do I get to call you klutzilla now?"

"Shut up." He glowered, his lips twitching as they tried to smile.

"Man, I wish somebody had recorded that." I continued to tease. "Who would've thought? The Derek Venturi, secret klutz and romantic. Next you'll tell me you write poetry in your spare time."

He snorted. "In your dreams. Actually, no, not even there."

"But you did say you love me, and you protected my honour from Scott and rescued me from Truman, and you took me to prom." I pointed out.

"I did not take you to prom!" He denied, mopping at the spilled coffee with the small, clearly inadequate wad of paper napkins on the table.

I smiled at his unease. "Yes you did. You even said you were taking me to prom."

"You were there with Max. And I was there with Sally."

"Then there was the time you danced with me on national television." I carried on, ignoring the Max and Sally comment.
"Only 'cause I screwed it up for you in the first place! Same reason I came back to get you and give you that dress for prom." He defended.

"Admit it, you're a big softie." I smirked.

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Derek, you're the sweetest guy I've ever known." I said it like the insult it was.

"Oh, you are so getting it now!" He threatened.

"You wouldn't do anything, you love me too much." I gloated.

"Wanna bet?" He leaned forward menacingly.

I mirrored his position. "Bring it on."
Chapter Twenty-Nine

My epic klutzilla moment turned out to have just been delayed, as I found out when Derek offered to drive me to class (walking actually wouldn't have taken much longer, but it meant another few minutes revelling in our newly revealed feelings for each other) and I walked into the passenger door that I somehow hadn't noticed was being held open by Derek. Trust me to ruin it when Derek decides to go outside his comfort zone and be chivalrous.

I not only hit the door, but staggered back into the curb, tripped and fell flat on my back, hitting my head against the floor. I groaned, half pain and half embarrassment, and lay still for a moment, waiting for the throbbing feeling to pass.

"And there it is! I was beginning to worry." Derek taunted, earning a squinty glare.

"Der-ek! I'm actually hurt here!" My voice started out loud, then lowered in volume as it hurt my head.

He crouched down next to me. "What? I'm not allowed to enjoy seeing your klutzilla stuff happen over me?"

"Not if it means mocking my pain!"

He rolled his eyes. "You're such a drama queen. C'mon Princess, places to be." He reached out to pull me up as he stood again.

"Forget it! I'll walk." I grumbled, batting his hand away and standing up by myself.

"Casey." He sighed, trailing behind me as I walked away. "Casey, stop."

I carried on walking.

"Would you just stop a minute!" He darted in front of me, blocking me from stepping forward. He took in my folded arms and the corner of his mouth quirked. "I'm sorry, okay? I couldn't resist. You alright?"

I glared at him a moment before relenting. "Yeah, probably have a bump, but I'll live."

"Good. Want me to take a look?"

I thought of the feeling of his fingers running through my hair, but the thought was quickly cancelled out with a mental image of what my hair would look like afterwards. "No, I'll be fine. Let's just get to class."

Derek nodded and we climbed into the Prince, me wincing a little the pain in my head spiked. I wasn't too bothered by the pain, it was already fading and I'd sustained worse during previous klutzilla moments.

I ran my fingers along my scalp gently, making sure there was no blood. It was an afterthought; I already knew it wasn't that bad, but I felt the need to check anyway. I glanced over at Derek, meeting his eyes as he did the same, and receiving a smile. "What?" I asked, fighting the sappy grin from my face. If Derek had proven anything with his mockery outside the car it was that he
was still going to make fun of me at any available opportunity. Truth be told, I wasn't even sure that was something that I wanted to change.

"Nothin'. Just thinking about the fact that I truly am irresistible." His smile morphed into a smirk. "I even got you; queen of all geeks and prudes."

I bit down a laugh and gave him the glare I knew he wanted. "There's still time for my momentary lapse of judgement to end, you know."

"Nah. Once you've had Derek Venturi, there is no substitute. You're stuck with me now." Derek claimed, barely keeping his eyes on the road as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Because you're just so caring and charming. An all around knight in shining armour." I replied sarcastically.

"Nope. I'm just ridiculously good in bed." He let his gaze drift from the road just long enough to wink at me.

I snorted. "Man slut."

"Princess."

"Cad."

"Prude."

"Jerk."

"Nerd."

My mind ran dry of insults. Temporarily at any rate. Instead I opted for dignified lack of response.

Derek chuckled in victory and turned a corner.

"We were meant to go left." I pointed out.

He carried on driving.

"We're going the wrong way!" I tried again.

"No we're not." His eyes glinted mischievously and I got a bad feeling.

"Where are we going?" I asked slowly.

"Somewhere out of walking distance from campus." He answered, confirming my fears.

"Der-ek! We are not skiving!" I argued, continuing when he didn't answer me. "I only just talked you into an extension and you're already skipping class?!"

"No, my dear step-sister, we are skipping class. I only just got you and I'll be damned if I'm letting you run off to think about it and change your mind without at least spending some time convincing you not to." Derek countered calmly.

"And you think kidnapping me is going to do that?!" I asked disbelievingly.

"I think making out with you and being there to reason with you when you start freaking out is
"going to do that." He corrected.

"I'm not making out with you when you're forcing me to miss class!"

He smirked confidently. "We'll see about that."

"Der-ek!" I screeched, before taking in his unruffled expression and sitting back in my seat to sulk. I couldn't help but admit to myself that the chances of me holding out and not exploring the physical benefits of being with Derek were slim. Sex I could wait for; I'm not easy; but kissing and making out, maybe going past a couple of bases... Well, I'd been curious as to how accurate the claims of Derek's many ex-girlfriends were for quite a while now.

After about a quarter of an hour, Derek pulled into a wooded lane, following it round to a car park, stopping the car and pulling me out after him. I wriggled past the steering wheel and rolled my eyes, wondering why he couldn't have let me get out my own side.

"Come on." He kept a hold of my hand and pulled me along behind him, heading into a park.

I cursed myself for all the time I'd spent in Kingston without actually leaving campus more than two minutes behind me. I had no idea where we were. If I had then Derek's assertion that we were going out of walking distance from campus would have been majorly incorrect, even if it would have been a long walk. I followed obediently until we reached a small, secluded spot near a cliff edge and Derek sat down, gesturing for me to do the same.

I looked pointedly away from him while I caught my breath; being dragged along behind someone is not the best way to walk over parkland. I was vaguely aware that Derek was staring at me.

"What?" I snapped after a few moments.

His hand fell warm over mine before he answered, drawing my attention to him without conscious effort. "You freaking out yet?"

I considered the question. "No."

"Good." He breathed, relief plain in his tone.

"I'm still angry with you." I informed him before he could make a move.

He ignored my folded arms and cross words, leaning in to kiss just beside my ear. "I know." He said quietly, his breath heating my skin and sending a shiver down my spine. "Aren't you cold?"

The chilly weather was more than enough to make the tips of my fingers and nose icy, but I shook my head in denial, determined to hold out a little longer.

His hand fell warm over mine before he answered, drawing my attention to him without conscious effort. "You freaking out yet?"

I considered the question. "No."

"Good." He breathed, relief plain in his tone.

"I'm still angry with you." I informed him before he could make a move.

He ignored my folded arms and cross words, leaning in to kiss just beside my ear. "I know." He said quietly, his breath heating my skin and sending a shiver down my spine. "Aren't you cold?"

Eventually my resolve cracked and I turned my head to press my lips against his, clutching the arm not occupied by my shoulders and turning him further into me. He didn't put up any fight, kissing me back as soon as our mouths met, and squeezing me tighter, his hand coming to rest on my hip as mine slipped under his arm and grasped around his lower back under his jacket. Without quite knowing how, I ended up in his lap, my body pressed up against his and soaking up all the heat it
could as our kiss quickened, breaths coming out in short gasps as we pulled away for milliseconds at a time.

Those girls were so wrong. It was so much better than they described.

Derek groaned as I lightened the kiss, pulling back and slowing it down a little until our lips just caressed each other, his mouth chasing after mine. I stubbornly kept my distance, having no inclination to end up shirtless in the cold. Derek gave up the chase, instead leaning down to kiss just below my ear, working his way down to my shoulder.

I bit my lip and futilely tried to summon the strength to push him away as his impossibly warm hand inched up under my shirt. "Derek." I murmured, hoping he'd get the message.

He just made a noise of acknowledgement and sucked at the curve of my neck.

I whimpered a little, wondering if he'd leave a mark, wondering if it would last over the weekend.

I froze.

"Derek." I said again, this time more urgently. What if my mother saw the mark? What was I supposed to tell her?

He groaned again, annoyance plain in his tone, his head dropping to rest where his lips had just been. "What?" He said resignedly.

"What do we tell our parents?" I asked, my voice a little shrill even to my own ears.

He sighed. "Here we go."

"I mean, what if they're upset?" I continued, a little hysterically.

"Casey, that makes no sense!" He spoke up before I could get any further. "Why would they be upset? They've been praying for us to get along since before we even met. If this is how that happens, then they'll be happy."

"But what if they think it's weird?" I had horrible images of my mom looking at me, all confused, disappointed, maybe even disgusted.

"We're not related! We're step-siblings! Nora even said they never expected us to be like brother and sister." He argued.

"She also said they hoped we would!" I countered.

He sighed again, a harsh release of air that spoke his annoyance and frustration. "Well we're not, and they've known that for a very long time."

"Oh God!" I gasped a horrible idea coming to me, not for the first time but with more weight than previously. "What if we tear the family apart? I mean, just because we want to be together now, doesn't mean we always will. What if we break up and they take sides and the family falls apart and it's all our fault?"

"Casey," Derek grasped my shoulders and made me look him in the eye. "When have you ever known them to take sides? We've had some pretty nasty arguments before, and it didn't turn to Venturi against McDonald. Why would it now?"

I swallowed as his hand came up to cup my face, keeping my gaze on him.
"It'll be fine." He said quietly.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. Besides, it's a little late now. I'm in love with you, and I've said it twice now. Pretty sure if you break my heart because of 'what if' there's gonna be hard feelings." He smiled a little.

I choked back a sob and returned the smile unevenly.

"It's gonna be okay, Case. I promise." He repeated, guiding me back in for a kiss.

I shivered and nuzzled further into him, trying to get more warmth.

He pulled away and stood up. "Come on; if you're done freaking out we can head back to campus. We'll go to my dorm, get me a fresh shirt, and then hang out until it's time for the next class. Okay?"

I nodded and took the hand he offered to me.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it would all be okay.
Chapter Thirty

I took a deep breath. Then another. Then another, until I started to feel dizzy so breathed normally again.

It's going to be fine, I told myself, repeating what Derek had said about our parents just being happy that we were getting along. It didn't work. All I could picture was their disgusted faces when we told them, the disappointment in their eyes.

I swallowed the tearful lump in my throat and opened my dorm room door, blinking furiously to keep back the nervous tears as I made my way outside.

"Casey!" Lizzie jumped on me as soon as I was out of the main door, making me jump and make an embarrassing squeaking noise. She hugged me tightly for a second before grabbing my hand and leading me to the car.

I stayed mostly silent on the way to the restaurant, smiling and laughing when appropriate but not offering anything in case it prompted questions. Like 'how are things going with that guy you like', or 'have you seen much of Derek lately, and other things I would struggle to answer without lying. Not that this prevented anything.

"So, Casey. Any more news on the mystery guy?" Lizzie asked in a sly, teasing voice.

My breath caught. "N-no, not really. I mean, maybe, but..."

I was thankfully drowned out by Marti's shouts as she saw Derek overtake us, waving to her. I relaxed back into my seat in relief; I could see the exit into the restaurant parking lot coming up, there wouldn't be enough time for Lizzie to interrogate me further.

George and Edwin had been dropped off at Derek's dorm so that there was room for me in the seven seater and so the boys could have a little male bonding time (minus Simon who was still asleep in his car seat) while us girls had a break from them. This meant Mom, Lizzie and Marti went over to say hi to Derek while Edwin and George came over to me. Edwin said he didn't 'do' hugs. I hugged him anyway. Derek used to say he didn't do hugs. Turns out he's a bit of a cuddle monster with girlfriends though, and I've always know he hugs Marti a lot. This somewhat marred my opinion of people who say they don't do hugs.

Derek stood watching, grinning when we made eye contact over Edwin's shoulder, Mom passing him Simon for a moment while she tipped a stone out of her shoe. I wondered if he was even half as nervous as me. A quarter? Even an eighth?

Reunion complete, we headed inside. The place wasn't anything special, just one up from a cafe really, and we were allowed to find our own seating, something that put off family discussions for a few minutes while a table near the window or a table in the corner were debated. It wasn't long enough though.

Pretty soon we were all sat ordering our drinks, Lizzie's teasing face coming back as I put down the drinks menu.

"So, you didn't answer my question in the car." She reminded me.
The words stuck in my mouth when I tried to answer. Everyone was watching apart from Edwin and Derek, who were throwing balled up paper napkins at each other. And Simon who'd gone back to sleep, but he didn't really count in this instance.

"Have you said anything to him yet?" She persisted.

"Uh, yeah... Kinda..." I said vaguely, hoping she'd take the hint and drop it.

No such luck. "What did he say?"

My eyes darted to Derek of their own accord. "Can we talk about this later?"

Lizzie sighed but relented. I must have looked every bit as uncomfortable as I felt.

"Heads up!" Derek and Edwin shouted, paper ball flying over the table to hit Lizzie in the face.

"Edwin!"

"How do you know it's me?! Derek's been throwing them too you know!" Edwin defended himself.

"Yeah, but Derek can aim!" Lizzie retorted.

"Yeah, would have hit me if he threw it." I sent Derek a slightly flirty glare which he returned with a smirk.

Usual family banter prevailed over the course of the meal, until I had nearly forgotten about telling them Derek and I were an item and was chatting and joking normally, completely at ease.

Then we left, splitting into groups for the separate cars. Derek and I both in the prince this time as it made more sense than for him to drive them back to their hotel, them to drive me back to my dorm and then Derek to go back to his dorm and them go to their hotel. I felt a sudden panic as we said goodbye, my arms still around my mom with my finger trapped in Simon's grasp when it first hit.

I walked slowly over to where Derek was stood waiting, willing my nerves to shut the heck up before I did something stupid and blew it all. The family couldn't find out just before they left; it would be really bad timing and we wouldn't get to talk it out, I wouldn't get to explain myself.

But it wasn't me that ruined it all.

"You okay?" Derek asked, pulling me towards him by my waist and kissing my temple before I had time to react.

I froze, glancing towards our family. They were all watching. "Derek." I pulled away, unable to take my eyes off the people I loved who had just seen my step-brother act not so brotherly towards me.

Their faces were unreadable at that moment, and my panic was ten times stronger than ever before I'd even blinked.

Derek frowned and raised a hand to my face, cupping my cheek and pulling my gaze towards him.

"What's the matter?"

I swallowed and my breath caught.

Understanding filled his face. "You didn't tell them yet, did you?" He stepped back, dropping his
hand from my face and glaring at me. "I thought we were meant to tell them in the car?"

Blood rushed to my face. I'd forgotten that. I'd known as I walked out of the dorm building, but I'd conveniently forgotten before climbing into the car. And now they knew, and Derek knew I'd wimped out, and, oh god, George and Edwin had known since before dinner. I felt a little nauseous for a moment. They'd hugged me and said they'd missed me and hadn't treated me any differently and they knew. The relief was quickly combatted by the hurt, angry look Derek was giving me and the fact that I still didn't know how Marti, Lizzie and Mom had reacted. I took a deep breath to apologize and explain to everyone, but was cut off by Marti.

"Tell us what?" She asked, her innocent, fake-unknowing voice not fooling anyone.

"I-We-Derek and I," I stumbled out, the words merging and jumbling into almost complete nonsense.

"How long?" Lizzie said when I couldn't get the rest of the sentence vocalized. She didn't sound shocked or disgusted, she sounded... Happy.

"A couple of days." I answered meekly, sneaking a look at my mom's face. She was looking at George, her face hidden from view by Simon's head.

Marti broke group and ran over to me, surprising me with her full weight and momentum as she threw herself into hugging me.

Derek's anger was fading into an amused half-smile at his little sister and I breathed a sigh of relief. Surely if everyone else was okay with it then Mom would be?

"Smerek!" Marti gestured for him to join the hug and he gave a laugh, attempting to cover it with a long suffering eye roll. Marti squished us together with more strength than she should realistically have, Derek's hand falling on my lower back and making me want to lean into him.

"So the guy you liked was..." Mom gestured vaguely in Derek's direction.

I nodded. "Derek, yeah." I bit my tongue, fighting back excuses, reasons and explanations. I'd already upset Derek by not telling them, I couldn't make it seem like I was ashamed of him any more than I already had.

Mom smiled weakly. "Wow. And I was the last to know." She laughed quietly, her tone a little hurt.

"What? You found out the same time as Lizzie and Marti!" I protested, feeling bad about it all. I should have confided in her.

"Nah, I already knew." Lizzie grinned smugly.

"Me too!" Marti piped up. "I already thought so, but Dimi told me ages ago."

"Dimi..." I made a mental note to kill Emily for blabbing to her baby brother.

"So, for the sake of Casey's remaining sanity; is everyone okay with this?" Derek asked impatiently, the edge to his voice telling me he hadn't completely forgiven me yet.

"Of course." Mom and George spoke in sync.

Lizzie and Edwin exchanged small smiles. "Yep. Totally cool with it." Lizzie answered for the
both of them.

Marti just squeezed us tighter. "I love you guys!"

I chuckled in relief. "Love you too Smarti."

"Yeah, I guess you aren't so bad." Derek ruffled her hair with a wink, earning a sullen glare that was somewhat diminished by the fact that she was still hugging us.

"I'm glad you got her in the end, Smerek. I was starting to get worried." Marti stage whispered as she pulled away.
I glanced sideways at Derek for what must have been the fifth time since we started driving.

"Casey, either say something or quit with the creepy sideways glances, you're freaking me out." Derek said impatiently.

I frowned. "I'm just trying to work out when you're going to get mad at me for not telling them."

He sighed. "I'm not going to. I know you Casey, I didn't really expect you to." He ran his hand back through his hair, squeezing his eyes closed when we came to a red light. "Why would you want to tell your Mom and sister that you're dating your idiot step-brother who barely graduated high school and-"

"Derek, no!" I cut him off, horrified. "I'm not ashamed to be with you, I was just worried they would find it weird. I consider Marti and Edwin my siblings, Simon is both of our brother, I just didn't want this to affect my relationship with them, or with George. They're my family."

He turned to me with a puzzled frown. "So maybe one day, if things go ridiculously well and you manage to brainwash me, they'll be your in-laws as well as step-family, what difference did you think it would make?"

I shrugged a little self-consciously. After George and Edwin's non-reaction followed by the fairly positive reaction of the whole family afterwards I was finding it a little difficult to remember how I'd feared they'd react. "I don't know, that they'd act like we were doing something wrong or disgusting. I obviously don't consider you my brother but in a way you are family. It's a little... Weird. To be honest, if I hadn't seen Cher and Josh and how they've found a balance between being family and being lovers, I'd probably think it was a little too weird."

Derek nodded, pulling the car forward as the lights changed. "Are you sure it isn't?"

I sucked in a sharp breath. Maybe this was it, maybe this was Derek figuring out what I'd figured out long before and maybe it wasn't a question of whether it was too weird for me but whether it was too weird for him. "Derek, I..."

"I don't want to do this if it's going to be too weird for you; I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. With all that we've been through; hating each other, fighting, teasing, ignoring, everything, we've never been uncomfortable." He continued, his face pulled into a neutral expression and his tone slightly humorous but his eyes squinting slightly. Whenever I'd seen him do that he had claimed he had 'sun' or 'dust' in his eye.

I reached over to put my hand on his thigh, he flinched slightly at the contact but his lips quirked a little. "I'm not uncomfortable. I just... Didn't want our family to be."

He nodded again. "You do know there will be people who aren't okay with this, right?"

"Yeah, I know." Cher had told me quite a few stories about people calling her incestuous or a freak or some combination thereof, and her dad and Josh's mom were divorced, our parents weren't. "But the people who count are fine with it."

"Who are you and what did you do with Casey?" Derek asked, deadpan.
I laughed. "What, so I have to believe that you're completely okay with all of this and with possibly losing your awesome reputation, but I'm not allowed to disregard the opinions of a few a-holes?"

"Yeah, that's about it." Derek replied.

"So why can you suddenly become Mr I-Don't-Care-What-People-Think but I can't be the female counterpart?" I asked sulkily.

"Because too many people care what I think for me to worry what they'll think." Derek stated smugly. "You on, the other hand, have been fighting against klutzilla and keener labels since you were a little girl in pigtails."

"I actually didn't like pigtails, one always ends up just a fraction higher than the other." I mumbled.

He rolled his eyes. "Not the point." He sighed and checked his mirrors before swerving over to a small lay by and undoing his seatbelt. "Undo your seatbelt."

"Why?" I looked around, trying to see if there was something outside the car that had made him pull over. I undid my seatbelt anyway and looked at Derek for an answer. Derek had leaned in close and I shrieked a little in surprise at his sudden close proximity but it was muffled as Derek closed the distance to kiss me. Within seconds he was pulling at me, manoeuvering me into his lap and clutching me close. I pulled back a short distance, panting a little from the harsh movements.

"Derek, we're on the road, people might drive past and see us."

He laughed a little and pulled me back in, speaking around the skin of my shoulder. "I thought we didn't care what other people thought?"

"I do if it gets us arrested for indecent exposure!" My fingers automatically tightened on his shoulder and in his hair as he slipped his fingers under my bra strap and kissed my skin right by my ear.

"Why Casey, I didn't realise we were going to be removing any clothing, but if you insist." His hand slid down to the buttons on my blouse.

"Der-ek! Stop it!"

He stopped and leaned back, hands held up either side on his smirking face.

I flushed. "I didn't mean stop all of it."

Derek moved his arms back to cross behind his head and relaxed into his seat. "How was I meant to know that? You want me to do some things but not others then you're gonna have to tell me which things I should be doing."

I glared at him but didn't climb back into my own seat. "No undressing and no below the belt stuff." I warned.

He raised an eyebrow. "And what's the stuff you do want me to do?"

I blushed darker. "Anything that doesn't involve losing clothes or touching stuff down there." I tried to maintain eye contact but couldn't help flicking my gaze away in embarrassment. I'd never really discussed what was and wasn't allowed during make out sessions before, I always just said stop when it went too far.

Derek leaned forward and kissed me again, hand sliding up beneath my blouse and gripping my
hips, mouth slipping back down to my shoulder. He smelled like the mint he'd eaten as we drove away from the restaurant, with the underlying musk from the aftershave he only ever wore on dates. I hadn't even noticed he was wearing it until then. My head was full from sensation and the preoccupation of watching for passing cars, and I pulled his mouth back up to mine. I could taste traces of mint and ice-cream in my mouth from the kiss and realised I'd opened my lips. Why had I done that? Why wasn't I grossed out? His tongue pressed lightly and fleetingly against my own, nothing like the forceful thrusting Truman used to try or the slobbery licking Max had favoured, just a soft, small pressure that came and went almost teasingly, leaving my own tongue following it automatically. The next small flick of his tongue against my own, I pressed back, surprised by how good it felt. Why did so many people insist on the disgusting drool fest I'd been subjected to so many times when it could be like this? My eyes stopped scanning the road and closed, my chest relaxing against Derek's and our breathing starting to sync. Derek started to lighten the kiss, adding less and less pressure and barely using his tongue at all. I pressed in; I'd only just discovered this kind of kissing and was enjoying it too much to stop so soon.

Derek broke the kiss with a grin. "Thought you didn't like tongue kissing?" He taunted.

"Shut up." I leant back in but he caught my face in his hands and kissed the tip of my nose, prompting a scowl and a glare from me.

"Sorry Princess, we gotta get back sometime you know." He straightened up and urged me back into my own seat, giving me a completely out of character peck on the lips before he strapped himself back in and pulled off again.

I crossed my arms and stared determinedly out of the passenger side window.

"Aw, Case, don't be like that. You know we had to stop sometime, and you were the one who didn't want to give passing cars a show." He was grinning ear to ear with a look of triumph on his face.

"What's with the smug look?" I asked after a few seconds of pointed silence.

"Hmm?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, he knew exactly what I meant. "You have the same look on your face that you get when one of your stupid pranks goes well."

"It's nothin'. Just I'm a master kisser." Derek said mock-casually.

I gave a snort of derision. "It wasn't so great on new years."

His head snapped around to look at me, eyes a little wide and panicked before his smirk returned with such force I felt like I had whiplash. "I'm not at my best when I'm drunk. I didn't even know you remembered, you never mentioned it."

"Of course I remember! Just because you and Vicki got stupidly drunk doesn't mean the rest of us got alcohol amnesia." My lip curled at the memory of him kissing her all those years ago. I wished I'd never seen that stupid video; now that was all I was going to be able to think about when her name came up.

"Hey! I wasn't that drunk!"

"So why'd you french kiss me?" I shot back, still annoyed by the old memory playing in my head. Derek's jaw clenched and he swallowed. "So maybe I was a little drunk."
"Nice memory for our first kiss, wasn't it." I deadpanned, bitterness seeping into my tone.

"Casey..." Derek pulled into the parking lot outside my dorm. "What's this about?"

"What's what about?" I asked snarkily.

"This! This sudden change from wanting to make out on the highway for the rest of the evening to sulking!" Derek let his head drop to the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry if remembering how you made out with my cousin spoiled my mood." I knew I was being more than a little unreasonable, it wasn't Derek's fault my brain decided to remind me of that little fact at this particular moment in time and it was years before I even considered him anything other than an irritating, inconvenient house-mate. It didn't stop the vindictive voice in my head chanting that he'd wanted Vicki, Truman had wanted Vicki, Vicki got to everyone I liked before they'd even looked twice at me since I first started liking boys.

"What are even talking about right now?" Derek hadn't lifted his head and his words were a little muffled.

"Vicki! Icky Vicki! My cousin, the one who you made out with, the one who kissed Truman." I squeezed my arms tight around my chest, curling in on myself a little.

"What about her? What does she have to do with anything?" He raised his head now, his voice becoming more and more annoyed with each word.

"She got you first, okay!" I snapped. "Along with Truman and every boy I liked when we lived in Toronto."

"So?" Derek still didn't get it. "You said people used to mistake you for twins. The only reason she got everybody first is she's a world class slut who doesn't think twice about approaching guys."

"Don't call her that." As much as I loathed her, I despised the word slut and all it represented. And I don't mean sleeping around.

"What? A slut? Why?" Derek clearly just wanted me out of the car, but he wasn't going to tell me to get out. Not yet anyway.

"Because it's a horrible, misogynistic word that no woman deserves!" I glared at him.

"But I'm allowed to be called a man-slut?" Derek asked.

I looked away. "That's different. It was a joke and-"

"And what? It's okay because I'm a guy?" Derek interrupted. "Casey, either be against people sleeping around or not, but don't decide that it's fine for girls but guys should be shamed. I know you think you're being feminist but you're just being a hypocrite. You can't have it both ways! Either both me and Vicki are sluts or no one is. Being man hating doesn't equal being feminist."

I was gobsmacked. Never had something coming out of Derek's mouth; especially in response to something I'd said; made so much sense and made me feel so stupid. "There's a difference between using it as a joke and using it as an insult."

"How about as a description? She sleeps around, has done since before she was legal. So did I. Why is it wrong to call us sluts? All you're doing by saying the word is bad is saying that the behaviour it describes is bad. So long as no one is hurt then everyone should be able to do
whatever the hell they want in their own bedrooms and relationships! Neither Vicki nor I has had unprotected sex, ever caught or passed on an STD or STI, caused or had an unwanted pregnancy or did something the other person didn't want. Why should we feel ashamed of ourselves?" Derek continued his rant, face becoming focused and blazing. It was hot. A little too hot. I must have missed about half of what he was saying because I was too busy ogling him. I suddenly felt a little more sympathy for those boys who had clearly ignored everything I was saying in favour of asking for a make out session. His face softened without looking at me. "Her kissing Truman was wrong, that hurt you. Me asking Lucy out when I was still with Kendra was wrong too." He breathed in and turned to me to say something else but paused when he saw my expression. "Case?"

"Hmm?" I asked, still a little focused on his mouth.

He looked puzzled. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. Just a bit... Tired after facing the whole family and everything. It was kinda stressful." I answered, a bit of heat rising to my cheeks at the thought of him figuring out why I was staring. "I should go inside. Get some rest."

"Okay, you want me to walk you in?"

I shook my head, "I'm good." I then realised that I was fine, all my anger and hurt about Vicki had gone as I'd been distracted. A mean part of me wondered if that was why he'd done it. It wasn't exactly like Derek to take a moral standpoint, and definitely unlike him to rant about slut shaming, but it was like him to deceive me in order to get his own way. My eyes narrowed but I decided to let it slide for now. I'd scrutinize him more later, when if it was a lie he'd have likely forgotten it.

For now I had to give Emily the phone call I'd promised her the day I told her I was telling Derek. I cringed at the memory of all the missed calls. Still, she'd bought that I wanted to wait until my family knew. The thought crossed my mind that I should probably call Cher too. Good thing it was a Saturday and my room-mate was at her parents', I was in for a long night of phone conversations.
Chapter Notes

Here it is, the last chapter! It's not really a worthy end to my Harry Potter length fanfic, but I couldn't really come up with a suitably dramatic end, so you guys can have a disgustingly fluffy one instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Two

"No, I do not owe you my purple court shoes for putting the idea into my head. I'd have figured it out eventually." I asserted confidently, then at Cher's preparatory indrawn breath at the other end of the line I continued, "And if I didn't then Derek would have."

Emily chuckled. "I doubt it. Derek's had a crush on you for how many years and he only started to think the feeling was mutual when klutzilla reared her ugly head, which only happened because you knew you liked him."

I'd never seen the point in conference calls before Cher and Emily met. Now I didn't know what I'd do without them. "Love, Emily, he has been in love with me for how many years." I corrected smugly. Derek probably wouldn't approve of me letting them in on this detail, but I couldn't care less. We didn't get to be dating by worrying about pissing each other off. "And klutzilla had nothing to do with this."

"I bet he thinks klutzilla is adorable," Emily gushed, "And all these years the only reason he hated it was because it showed you liked someone else."

I snorted. "Derek still thinks I'm as ridiculous and nerdy as he ever did, it's just now he also thinks I have a great butt."

"Casey, he always thought you had a great butt. He'd have had to be blind not to." Emily countered.

"I wish I had your butt, it's so firm and toned. Mine's just skinny." Cher lamented.

"Then do some actual exercise!" I advised, even though I disagreed. Cher had a marvelous butt.

"Twenty minutes a week of doing squats in front of the TV isn't going to work as well as a lifetime of dance training."

"Hey! I exercise!" I could practically hear her accompanying pout over the phone.

"Sex is the best kind of exercise." Emily agreed to an unspoken statement.

I laughed. "I thought that was swimming?"

"That's second best." Emily informed us sagely.

"So what do you get your booty-licious backside from, Emily?" Cher asked, "Swimming or sex?"

"Swimming, definitely swimming." Emily sighed. "I haven't got through batteries this fast since I
played with furbies."

Cher and I gave giggles that would, to an untrained ear, sound like they belonged to a couple twelve year olds.

"Oh, grow up! I'm an independent twenty-first century woman who has needs and isn't afraid to satisfy them herself if no one else is there to do it for me." Emily proclaimed proudly.

"Bravo." I said. "But seriously, not as much has changed with me and Derek as you'd think. Yesterday I ended up with smudges of cheesecake down my dress because we got into a food fight over which Shrek film is the best."

"The first one." They chorused.

"Right." I agreed. "And just because I insinuated that Derek only preferred the third because of Snow White singing the Immigrant Song he flicked his cheesecake at me!"

Half-past three and I hung up and went to bed, my mind making idle chatter in the background of my thoughts until I eventually drifted off.

I awoke with a start and a slight shriek, throwing the covers away from me as I looked straight at the thing that had woken me up. Derek. I glared.

"Wow Spacey, and I thought you were a morning person!" He said brightly, grinning at my puffy face, birds nest hair and death glare.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, the low, threatening tone I used slightly undermined by the drowsiness that hadn't left me yet.

"Just thought I'd come see my girlfriend before the family gets here." Derek's expression was completely innocent. It was alarming to say the least.

"They aren't coming until twelve." I pointed out, reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table.

"Yeah, and it's eleven now." He informed me.

I choked a little on my water, grabbing his arm and twisting it so I could see the time on his watch, comparing it to the one displayed on my alarm clock. He was right. "Why didn't you wake me sooner?!" I demanded, ignoring the fact that if he had he probably wouldn't be alive and talking to me still.

"But you look so adorable when you're asleep!"

I rolled my eyes, waiting for him to get to the insulting part.

"Dribbling gently on the pillow, snoring loud enough to scare off small children, face all smooshed up into the pillow..." He went on. "You're like the original sleeping beauty."

I got up to dig out my things ready to take a shower, hitting him on the back of the head on the way past.

"Hey!" He grabbed my wrist. "Where do you think you're going after I came all this way to see you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Shower."
"Want me to come with you?" He leered.

"Ew!" I made a disgusted face. "As if I'd ever have sex in a public shower room!"

Derek chuckled. "You saying you would in a private one?"

I shrugged. "I'm a neat freak. To me, clean is sexy." I winked as I left the room.

"I'll bear that in mind!" Derek called after me, after a small moment of shock.

I giggled and made my way to the showers.

We spent the rest of the day at the park with our family; by the time I'd come out of the shower we'd only had time for a quick make-out session before they'd arrived and Derek sulked for the next half an hour because he hadn't got his hands up my shirt. I made it worse by telling him how cute he was when he pouted.

It wasn't too long before he was chasing Marti around the playground though, ignoring the disapproving parents that watched them clamber over equipment meant for children younger than Marti, let alone Derek. Wasn't like anyone else was playing on them anyway, and they'd given up the swing to an overweight kid who's Mom wouldn't let her play with the other kids because of her asthma.

Lizzie and I laughed as Derek tripped over pothole and only just managed to right himself before he fell on a five year old who was running back and forth seemingly chasing his imaginary friend.

Edwin got up and joined them after finishing his candy bar, grabbing Lizzie's arm to pull her with him and gesturing me up.

I stumbled somewhat reluctantly to my feet, still feeling my late night and the grogginess of lying in later than usual, but grinned anyway as I joined my boyfriend and our siblings in the chase until I was too tired to realistically keep up. Instead I went over to the picnic blanket and took Simon off to the baby swings. He was barely big enough to stay in them, but he liked being a part of things and I hadn't spent much time with him over the weekend. I sometimes felt a little like I was missing out on him by being all the way out in Kingston.

I grinned at Derek as he ran past us yelling to Simon to throw up on me, and turned back to my baby brother. "Don't you ever listen to anything that loony tells you, okay?" I warned Simon. I pushed him a little longer, but it was clear he was enjoying watching the others more than my efforts, and they were gradually dropping off until it was just Derek running to catch up with them back at the picnic blanket.

Once we were all assembled, Mom pulled out sandwiches and chips from her bag (that changing bag was like a Tardis; she somehow had room in there for all of Simon's nappies and clothes and everything, plus an entire picnic) and the carnage began.

I looked around at my family. Edwin and Lizzie were arguing over bacon again as she tried pointlessly to convince him that he shouldn't be eating an animal that was smarter than a three year old human while he mockingly rebutted with her old argument that we shouldn't measure the value of life by intelligence. Mom was lying across the blanket, head on George's lap with Simon cradled against her side, George's left hand resting on her hip as he ate his sandwich.

And then there was Derek, who had already managed to scarf down his sandwich and was now looking longingly at my cupcake. I broke half off and handed it to him.
He leaned forward to press a grateful kiss to my lips. "I love you." He said, quietly enough that only I could hear.

I smiled. "Love you too." I replied at a normal volume, drawing a few glances from the family.

"Geeze, Case, let the whole world know why don't you." Derek teased, a little embarrassed.

I grinned and pulled him in, planting a big, sloppy kiss on his cheek that made him grimace and wipe his face disgustedly. "I plan to."

And I did. Whether the world wanted to hear it or not.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your support, whether silent or written. It's been great. Goodbye.
*hugs you all roughly and walks off trying not to cry*

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