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Chapter 49: Toxic

Luke was ready to leave the parking lot.

He watched me have a private convo with his mul and awe Austin get jovialmad sage over everyone... this was just not how Luke liked to spend his time.

"Chums?" Austin o-ered.

"Ok," Luke had enough. "We're leaving, and you'll leave my girl alone."

My eyes opened wide. Christopher turned his head to look at me and I looked at him looking at me. I think I almost doubled over.

Chris pointed at me, "Does she know that she's your girl? Cos I don't think she does."

"Yeah, well we haven't had that discussion yet."

And we didn't.

With Austin and Chad around, there couldn't be any deep discussions. With me still reeling from the last incident - Jake's kiss, Luke's comments, the warp - I was not in a good space to articulate rational thoughts.

The ride in the car park was turned up. The crew smoking weed got rowdier.

"Millie," Luke said, facing me with an intensity that weakened my resolve. "We need to talk. I need to know if... you know what. mean. And. The. Vibe's gone. This isn't the time."

"What?" Austin asked, half a chuno sticking out of his mouth, "Was it something we said?"

Luke shoved past him, muttering something about personal space. He warped up that we didn't finish our conversation and it was reflected in his behavior.

So we parted ways. I knew a conversation with Luke was overdue, but I couldn't quite face it yet. It turns out, I wasn't ready to talk much.

Even at school, I felt cowardly. The last time Jake and I talked... we hadn't done much talking.

His lips touched mine and I had bolted out of there faster than the Road Runner escapes Coyote.

These emotions have gotten complicated. I don't know what word in the English language to use. What is the word that describes my feeling now? Fear but, part anger, part lust, part curiosity. And part excitement. Strangely, I was excited for what was to come.

Tomorrow will be better than today.

I took a deep breath and clutched my book against my chest.

Today, I had to face one Dawson brother. I waited for the bell to ring before I stepped into English 1A. I didn't want to come a second earlier and face small talk with my seat mate.

Jake was already in his seat.

He didn't look at me when I sat down next to him. He was writing poetry in his notepad again. Either poems or lyrics. His right hand moved across the paper, giving me a view of the tattoos that peeked out of his shirt sleeve.

The teacher was busy introducing today's theme. We had begun reading Taming of the Shrew and the class was more animated with this play than the last. I barely noticed.

Jake had ruptured my attention. I was enraptured by his movements, his smooth curvine handwriting, the way his body moved as he felt the emotion coursing through him. I could see the cathartic feeling that writing poetry had on him.

"Luke didn't like the idea of us," he said to me, "He freaked out when he found out."

I gulped in my throat. Jake must have sensed me staring this whole time. And, in some twisted topsy-turvy of conversation I did rebuke to discuss, he went straight for the jugular.

Jake lowered his pen onto his notepad and looked at me. "Do you still want to go out with me?"

Slowly, I nodded.

Yes, no, I don't know.

The note to this conversation were in his hands and I had no idea where he was planning to take this.

He scowled, almost unhappy with my response, "You won't let Luke dictate your life, will you?"

"Obviously not," I said, taken shock. I'm not sure where he was getting that impression, "I owe Luke for something, but those favors don't interfere with any other part of my life. I have, and always will, make my own decisions."

"Oh," he said, and picked up his pen. "That's good. I'm not trying to insult you by saying that. Luke tends to bring people into his orbit, and they become willing to give everything for him. It's amazing how his charisma can only people from their senses. His father and sister are the same."

The Dawson family seemed so glamorous and perfect when you first see them. The more I knew, the more this perfect image seemed like a facade.

I avoided looking down at the poem on his sheet. If he was this one in conversation, I could only imagine what he was writing.

"But this is about you," he smiled at me, "You are a breath of fresh air to everyone, and I want to shield you from ever changing that. My brother can be toxic."

He scraped his chair back and faced me properly. I glanced nervously at her teacher at the front of the class, if he saw us he surely would interrupt.

"I know no one will influence you and that's a good thing. You're strong. You're, I've seen that. I also don't want to force you into anything. You're a nice girl and I want to get to know you, but, there's really no pressure."

"You've been so nice to me," I said, and cut my words short before I got emotional. I took a moment to clear my throat, "There aren't many people who show me kindness. But you have. I'm grateful. I'm surprised too, but I'm not opposing that. I'm excited to go on a date with you."

The teacher interrupted us. "Miss Ripley and Mr Dawson"

Jake rolled his eyes and I sat up straight, turning to face the class. I tried to wipe the emotion from my face. I hadn't expected our conversation to get so... emotional.

"Miss Ripley and Mr Dawson, you seem engaged in conversation, I'm sure you're discussing the fascinating plot twists within Taming of the Shrew."

I started to believe our teacher was picking on us whenever he wanted entertainment. He clearly did not know the answer to his questions. He needs to give up and focus on students who have a chance.

"Are you going to ask us what the di- erence between comedy and tragedy is again?" Jake asked.

"No, I."

"Because I have the answer now," Jake smirked.

"But we've moved on."

"It's whether the boy gets the girl or not," Jake answered and then looked at me. "Does he get the girl?"

"I ah-" I stuttered.

"Mr Dawson, I'll ask the questions in this classroom. Alright, someone else will start a-s - Millie believes the play is a story of cheeky rather than love?"

We weren't listening. Jake and I were stuck in this classroom and that seemed like a cruel game.

"I'll ask you Thursday," he said, "For our date."

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I don't like playing games. This cat and mouse chase between Luke, Jake and me had to stop here. Now that I agreed to an actual day for the date with Jake, I needed to tell Luke. This was happening.

Jake and I were happening.

Ish. I mean, we were going to start with the nature. One date is not a big commitment, but it's a step in the right direction.

And my mess of a relationship with Luke is not haggard I should carry it with me.

If I didn't have to work at Lola Rae that a-ternoon, I would have gone to Luke and told him. But my job wasn't accept 'boy drama' as an excuse to skip work.

Real life isn't set up to make the best reality TV.

I arrived home late, and still had homework to finish up. I looked at the rack in our kitchen and sighed. It was already 10pm.

My mom was working an hair laptop. Her hair would hold up and the bad her prescription glasses on. It was her 'don't interrupt mama' look. As the only mo-ther at home, she's a pretty serious boss lady. We'd gotten into a dire financial situation a-ter my father abandoned us and she swore she would never let us go there again.

Flora emerged from our alcohol cabinet with martini. One for herself and one for mama.

"Millie, you're home," Flora noticed, "You no never home anyone. We've been wanting to talk to you since Lola Dawson carried you into the house bridal style."

"I have homework," I apologized, swinging my bag into the kitchen table. I like to work near Flora.

"Sure," she remained unusually sweet, "I think, over the years, we've stopped communicating and it's time we correct that."

I was surprised to hear those words come out of my sister's mouth. "Really?"

Suspicious timing.

"Yeah, you know you can come to me for anything," she said, "And like I can come to you, right?"

"Yeah," I grate-d.

"Maybe one of these days you could..." she started and then stopped, "Never mind. See you later."

**

The next day came and I wanted it to end. I didn't sleep much last night. I ended up working in the kitchen until 2AM. Math is always easy for me but English LA drains my soul.

I basically clicks "synonyms" for every word I type.

I parked my car at home and walked across the street. I took deep breaths with every step. This was the day I faced Luke. I wasn't ready for this.

I rang their doorbell and patiently waited. Sing.

A handsome older man opened the door. His black hair was beginning to gray and his chiseled features had the mature look of age. He had the charm of a man who could walk onto the set of Mad Menand fit in. This must be Mr Dawson. There was no mistaking it.

"It is Nalio Mr Dawson," I stuttered. He was an intimidating man. He created Luke, Jake and Charlotte a-er all.

Literally, the three most beautiful people I've ever met.

"Are we expecting you?" he asked.

I was so-ming seeing Luke's blue eyes on a stranger.

Focus.

"My name is Millie Ripley, I live next door. Is Luke at home?"

"He's not," he said, "Do you want me to leave a message?"

"No, that's fine. I'll find him. Would you have any idea where he is?"

"Luke is busy right now but I'll tell him you sweep by. Goodbye." he said with a tone of finality and shut the door on me.

"Sorry to disturb you!" I hastily called out, before the door closed on my face.

I stood alone on the Dawson family's doorstep for a minute or two. The sun was beginning to set, and I didn't want to give up on this.

I had an idea.

I ran across the street, back to my car and drove towards the Surfside Shack.

Jake had once told me that it was a hangout spot for the basketball team. I just knew I took this route, I had been on a mountaine with my arms wrapped around him.

I focused on the words I was planning to tell Luke. My car picked up speed until the ocean were hit for sweet than I expected. The wind speed with the ocean was a popular spot, even though the nights were getting colder now.

I hurried inside and saw a lot of people from school hanging by the bar. Too may people were ordering the same spend spritz and the bright orange drink practically lit up the bar.

"Austin!" I shouted.

I spotted him about to walk out the back door to watch the sunset on the beach. He was with two girls I didn't recognize.

"Hel- ay you joined the party!" he called out, pulling me into a big hug, "Where's Luke?"

It's funny how he expects Luke and me to always be together now.

"That's who I came here looking for," I said, defeated. If he was asking me, he didn't know.

"Oh, dude" he bumped his head against his drink, "He's practicing at the school."

"Lit up. "What? Basketball this late?"

"You know Luke, he's crazy like that," Austin stared his wards, leaning against one of the girls. "Don't tell him I'm drinking gin. He thinks it depresses me."

"I won't!" I jumped and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you!"

I turned away to leave when he called my name.

"Oh and Millie, one more thing. Whatever you do, go easy on him tonight."

**

It was dark when I arrived back at school. I used to stay here late all the time when it is part of the mattiters. My so-lution was lonely and I spent every Wednesday night on math equations and making out.

It's funny day for a reason.

He would be here now. The Wathletes were one of the most dedicated student organizations at our school – they stayed until midnight every Wednesday.

And today was... Wednesday.

I shoved the painful memories out of my mind so I shoved the school doors open. I stepped into the dimly lit hallway. School was creepy at night. But lockers were a-ce of mind with not a soul in sight.

It took me a minutes to figure out where the basketball courts were. I'm not sporty. I barely know we had courts.

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Ten minutes later, and I was standing outside the basketball courts. I heard the sound of sneakers against hardwood and the swoosh of the hoop.

He was alone.

And my heart so-ared.

We haven't been honest about our feelings. I can't forget how we almost kissed in the lake or at Austin's party.

I can't forget the moments we shared. I have how we argued about my shower singing... to how we clung onto each other in the face of a bear.

From how he shows up at my workplace... to how he calls me on all these ridiculous favors.

From hot to cold.

From sensitive to strong.

Luke has shown me so many sides. And I've cried, passed out, choked and sweated in front of him. He saw my morning bed hair, my p- y-yama a-r-ray. I've been myself around him.

My imperfect self.

What was I doing here? What did I want from him?

I took a deep breath and walked inside. "Luke!"

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A/N: How this is not a drift, and it's not a joke. The next chapter is CHAPTER 50... so you know it's gonna be big.

You can expect a bigger, Amd I'm sorry for the -ill. Sangre but I didn't want to split up the next chapter at all.

This chapter needed to explore the confusion that Millie is in. Both Luke and Jake have been looking for her and it's ill. Hard to handle. She's trying to be sensitive to their emotions but now she has to start taking care of her own.

Thank you for your support, your votes and your comments. I can't wait to show you the next chaaaapter!!!