

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE PRINCESS DIARIES

MEG CABOT

TEEN

IDOL

At first I didn't think anything of it. You know, Luke taking his shirt off. Half the guys at the car wash had their shirts off.

So the guy took his shirt off? Big deal. I had way more important things to worry about, such as Clayton High's It Couple apparently breaking up before my very eyes, and possibly—I know not solely because of, but partially, maybe—because of me.

Still, Trina's sharp intake of breath stopped me in my tracks just as I was about to race off after Geri.

I don't know why it stopped me. But it did. I stopped right where I was, then turned around, slowly.

I looked at Trina. Her gaze was riveted on Luke. And not just on his truly impressive six-pack... the light smattering of fair hair that covered his chest before snaking down that six-pack and disappearing

into the waistband of his Levi's... his thoroughly impressive biceps.

Not that all of those things weren't worth staring at. Because they totally were.

No, it was the tattoo on Luke's arm, just beneath his right shoulder, that seemed to be holding Trina's attention.

The tattoo that said Angelique.

"Oh my Go—" Trina started to say. She didn't get to finish, however, because I slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Mmm, mmm," Trina said urgently into my palm. But I had her in a grip of iron.

"Shut up and come with me," I hissed in her ear, and started dragging her towards the doors to Chi-Chi's.

“Bull mmm,” Trina tried to say, but I wouldn’t let go of her.

“Girls,” Mr. Hall said, irritatedly, as we went by. “This isn’t time to play games. We have a lot of cars to wash.”

“Yeah, I know, we’ll be right out, Mr. Hail,” I assured him. “We just have to go to the ladies’ room.”

Then I pulled Trina into the Chi-Chi’s vestibule, and shoved her into the ladies’ room...

...where I finally released my hand from her mouth.

“Oh my God, Jenny!” she screamed. “That’s Luke Striker! The new guy is Luke Striker!” “Shhhh.” It was taking a little while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the restaurant after having been out in the bright sunlight for so long. Still, I didn’t need to

be able to see to tell that we weren't in the restroom alone. I could hear Geri sniffing in the last stall...

At least until she heard the words Luke Striker.

“I knew it!” Geri Lynn came bursting out of the stall like a bucking bronco from its pen. “I knew he looked familiar! Lucas is Luke Striker?”

“Listen,” I said, looking from one girl to the other. Trina's face was flushed with excitement and sun. Geri's was puffy from crying. But both wore expressions of eager interest. “Okay. Yes, Lucas is Luke Striker. He's here to research a part. And Dr. Lewis himself asked me to please keep Luke's real identity a secret, so you guys have to—”

But it was like talking to a couple of two year olds. Because instead of a rational conversation taking place, Trina and Geri turned towards each other and started jumping up and down, shrieking at the top of their lungs: “Luke Striker! Luke Striker! Luke

Striker!”

“Hey,” I said, really afraid half the people in the restaurant were going to come running in. “Cut it out. I told you, it’s supposed to be a secret—”

“Oh my God, I knew it was him,” Trina stopped jumping long enough to say. “I knew it the other day at lunch, when he said he was a vegetarian. Because you know I stopped eating meat when I read in Teen People that Luke has been a vegetarian since his days on Heaven Help Us.”

“I knew he was Luke Striker,” Geri said, “at last night’s Register meeting. You know, Jenny, when he started talking about a celebrity’s right to privacy? I swear when he said that, I was actually thinking to myself, ‘You know, he looks so much like Lancelot from Lancelot and Guenevere, I wonder if he IS Luke Striker.’”

“You guys!” I yelled, in my meanest voice, the one

I only use when I'm babysitting, and the kids start squirting ketchup at each other or whatever.

It did the trick, though. Both Trina and Geri stopped talking and looked at me.

“Listen to me,” I said, in a low, even voice. “Luke’s real identity is supposed to be a secret. Nobody is supposed to know the truth, understand?”

That’s how Luke wants it. He’s here because he’s researching a part. He can’t research a part if people don’t act normally around him. And if it gets out that he’s really Luke Striker, nobody is going to be acting normally around him, now, are they?”

Trina and Geri exchanged glances.

“I wholly respect that,” Trina said. “Luke has such deep appreciation for his craft that, as a fellow artist, I could never do anything that might in some way interfere with his creative goals. I won’t say a word to anyone.”

Not to be outdone, Geri made the Girl Scout sign with her fingers. “I’ll take it to the grave.”

For the first time since Luke had taken his shirt off—no, since Geri had started yelling at Scott—I felt myself relax a little.

“Okay,” I said. “Good. Then it’s agreed. Neither of you is going to say a word to anyone about Luke not really being—”

“Oh my God,” Trina said, smacking herself in the forehead. “Why did I tell Steve I’d go to the Spring Fling with him when I could have gone with Luke Striker?”

“In your dreams,” Geri said. “He’s taking me.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Did you two listen to a word I just said?”

“Yeah, sure,” Trina said. “Pinky swear to secrecy, yadda yadda yadda I can still dream about him, can’t I?”

“Well, I don’t have a Spring Fling date anymore,” Geri said, opening her purse and taking out her lipstick. “So my dreams are about to come true. I’m going to go out there and ask him right now.”

I stared at Geri in horror. “Ask who? Luke? To go to the Spring Fling? But ...but I thought you were going with Scott!”

“Not anymore, I’m not,” Geri said, expertly applying a layer of gloss.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I mean, I’d suspected, but to hear her just blurt it out like that... “You and Scott broke up? For real? Just now?”

“That’s right.” Apparently satisfied by what she saw in the mirror, Geri dropped her lipstick back in her

purse and turned to me.” And don’t try to talk me into taking him back, Jenny. I know you thought we were a great couple, but the truth is, it’s better this way for the both of us. I’m leaving for UCLA at the end of the summer, and he’s still got another year left here in Clayton, and...and it’s just easier this way.”

I could tell by the set of her jaw that Geri meant it.

Still, in spite of her warning me not to, I felt like I had to say something.

“But you guys have had fights before, and you’ve always worked it out. Maybe you should sleep on it, Geri. You might feel differently after you’ve had some time to think about it.”

“Not this time,” Geri Lynn said. She reached back into her bag and pulled out her datebook. The datebook. The one she’d shown me, the one with all the hearts in it. She opened it, and, taking out a

pen, put a big black X through today's date.

I couldn't help noticing that the number of hearts on the month At-a-Glance pages had diminished somewhat drastically over the past six or seven weeks. Like, to nothing. Either Geri had slacked off in recording their most intimate moments, or she and Scott hadn't had any in quite some time...

Her next statement cleared up the mystery.

“No,” Geri said, “this has been a long time coming, Jenny. I've felt as if Scott and I were drifting apart for some time now. We just don't have the same interests... the same goals. Can you believe he didn't even want to go the Spring Fling? He wanted to go to some anti-Spring Fling party Kwang is having—”

I knew all about Kwang's anti-Spring Fling party. I was planning on going to it myself.

“So you're just going to ask him?” Trina demanded.

Trust Trina to completely ignore the fact that Geri's—not to mention Scott's—heart might very well be broken. All she wanted to know was what Geri's plans for Luke Striker were. “Luke, I mean? You're just going to march up to him and ask him to the Spring Fling?”

“You better believe it,” Geri said, throwing back her shoulders. “Get outta the way.”

“Wait a minute,” Trina said. “Asking Luke Striker to the Spring Fling was my idea. I thought of it first!”

“But you already have a date, don't you?” Geri reminded her, sweetly.

Not for long,” Trina declared, and bolted for the bathroom door.

“WAIT!” Geri practically broke her neck pelting after Trina.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I mean; here were two people whom I'd basically always thought of as mature young women—two people whose keen intellect and independence I had always envied and respected—and they were practically at one another's throats. Over a BOY, of all things!

“You guys,” I yelled, running after them through the Chi-Chi's vestibule, and then out into the parking lot. “You guys, remember, you promised not to—” But I never got to remind Trina and Geri not to tell anyone about Luke's identity. Because by the time I caught up with them, they were standing on the outer fringes of this huge crowd that had gathered around Luke and the sedan he'd been washing.

Only now Luke was on top of the car's roof, shouting frantically into a cell phone while he tried to fend off the grasping hands of about seventy-five Troubadours, Chi-Chi's waitresses, random housewives who'd been on their way to the mall,

and even a few of the guys from the pickup trucks, all of whom were screaming, “Luke! Luke! LUKE!”

“Oh my God, you guys,” I yelled at Trina and Geri as I watched Luke struggle to avoid the groping hands all around him. “What’d you do?”

“It wasn’t us,” Geri said with a shrug. “We came out and they were already at it.”

“I guess I’m not the only person in Clayton who knows about Luke Striker’s *Angelique* tattoo,” Trina said, glumly.

Geri stamped her foot. “How am I going to ask him to the Spring Fling now? I can’t get anywhere near him!”

As if that were the worst of anyone’s problems! Poor Luke was about to be torn limb from limb, and all his most diehard fans could worry about was how they were going to ask him to the Spring

Fling?

I looked up at Luke. He didn't seem scared or anything—though I would have been, if I were in his shoes. He'd hung up the cell phone and was trying to speak rationally to the horde of screaming women around him.

“Listen,” he was saying. “You can all have autographs. Really. Just one at a time, okay?”

Nobody listened. Girls were thrusting pens and Chi-Chi's menus at him from all sides. The sopranos were the worst. Karen Sue Waiters wanted Luke to sign her chest, I guess because she couldn't find any paper.

But the altos weren't behaving any better. I even saw Bored Liz—only she didn't look so bored anymore—climb up over the hood of the car and fling her arms around Luke's legs. He nearly lost his balance and fell, but Liz didn't seem to care. She

was sobbing into his pant legs, crying, “Luke! Oh, Luke! I love you!”

It was way pathetic. I have to admit, I was totally embarrassed for my gender.

But the girls weren’t the only ones. Even some of the guys were acting like complete tools. I heard this one guy in a John Deere baseball cap say to his friend, “I’m gonna get me an autograph and sell it on Ebay!”

And Mr. Hall? Mr. Hall, a teacher who should have known better? He was the worst of all! He was screaming up at Luke, “Mr. Striker, Mr. Striker, would it be all right if I gave you the screenplay I’ve been working on? It’s a dramedy about a young man’s coming of age while working in the chorus of a major Broadway musical. I think you’d be perfect for the part!”

Only a couple of people in the parking lot were

hanging back, that I could see. One of them was Scott. He was leaning against his car, just watching, a pillar of sanity in a sea of total wackos.

I rushed over to him. I'd completely forgotten about the Geri Lynn thing. All I could think of was the fact that if somebody didn't do something, and soon, Luke was going to be torn in two, just like Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, only by his fans, not the British.

“Do you think we should call the police?” I asked Scott worriedly. “I mean, I don't want to call the cops on my friends, but—”

But the only alternative I could see was trying to help Luke myself—except that I didn't see how I could. I mean, the crowd around the car he was standing on was about ten people deep. No way was I going to be able to get to him

“Don't worry,” Scott said. “Already done.”

I blinked up at him. “Already—you called the police?”

He held up his cell phone. Even as he winked at me, off in the distance I could hear the wail of a police siren.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, feeling a huge wave of relief.

“So I take it he’s not really enrolled,” Scott said, putting his cell phone back in his pocket.

“What?” I’d been watching a Chi-Chi’s waitress lunge for the autograph Luke had just given her. “Oh, no. He’s just doing research for a part.”

“Do Lewis and those guys know?”

“Yeah. It was their idea.”

Scott shook his head. “They’ll probably refuse to comment. Too bad. Still, this’ll make a great story.”

The fact that Scott could think about the Register at a time like this made me think he wasn’t too concerned for Luke.

Or upset over the whole thing with Geri.

“Scott, I—”

I’m sorry about you and Geri Lynn. That’s what I’d been going to say.

Except that right then three different things happened. The first was that a Duane County squad car pulled into the parking lot, its siren blaring. The second was that a long black limo—the same one, I guess, that picked Luke up from school every day—appeared from behind the restaurant, almost as if it had been there all along.

And the third was that Geri Lynn came running up to us, her eyes shining.

“Can you believe this?” she wanted to know.

“I’m killing myself that nobody’s got a camera. Something finally happens in this hick town, and we’ve got no way to record it!”

“Listen, if I wrote Luke a letter, could you get it to him?” Trina asked me. “I mean, the two of you must be pretty tight, if he let you in on his secret and all.”

“Trina,” I said, shaking my head. The limo was starting to pull away. Good thing, too, because a number of girls had rushed up to it, and were plastering themselves against the tinted windows, trying to get one last look at their hero. “I barely know him. I mean, he was just here to observe—”

It was at that moment that the moon roof of the limo opened, and Luke’s head and shoulders

popped out from it. The girls around the limo screamed and leaped for him, as if they wanted to pull out fistfuls of his hair. Which, you know, is always a good way to ingratiate yourself to a guy. Not.

I thought Luke was going to throw out a few parting shots to the population of Clayton, Indiana. I thought he'd yell, "See ya, suckers!" or "Thanks for nothing, pinheads!"

But that's not what he did. Instead, he looked all around the parking lot, like he'd forgotten something. Then he saw me, and yelled, "Jenny!"

All heads turned in my direction.

"Jenny!" Luke yelled again. And this time he accompanied the shout with an arm gesture. "COME ON!"

I felt myself turn as red as the Chi-Chi's sign.

Luke wanted me to get into the limo with him. Luke Striker wanted me to ride off into the sunset—well, not quite, since it was only like one thirty in the afternoon—with him. In his limo.

“Oh my God,” I heard Trina breathe beside me. “Right. He barely knows you. That’s why he’s screaming your name. You, Jenny. He wants you.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “No, it’s not like that—”

Because it wasn’t. His words, his accusing tone, his blazing blue eyes that day outside the ladies room would be forever ingrained in my mind’s eye. No, it wasn’t like that at all.

“Jenny!” Luke was starting to sound frantic now.

“He wants you,” Trina said, again. “Why don’t you go?”

But how could I go? How could I go, with all those girls crowded around his limo, shooting me the evil eye? And more police cars careening down Clayton Mall Road (the policeman had obviously called for backup)?

“For God’s sake,” Trina said. “GO!”

Then she shoved me, hard, in the back. I probably would have fallen down if it hadn’t been for the nice police officer, who caught me by the arm, put me back on my feet, and asked me, “Are you Jenny?”

I gave a quick nod, and the next thing I knew, the officer, still holding onto my arm, had steered me through the shrieking throng around Luke’s limo, then yanked open the door to the backseat and thrust me inside

And slammed the door behind me.

Luke slithered down from the moonroof and hit the button to close it.

“Go,” he yelled at the chauffeur. “Go, go, go!”