



Road Trip

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Matt Landers and Jacob Mercer have been ride or die best friends forever. But now, on the cusp of adulthood, it's all about to change. When summer is over, Jacob is going away to college and Matt will be stuck in Cape Charles, Virginia. Before that happens, they've got a plan for one more epic adventure—a road trip all the way across the country to California.

But if they want to borrow Jacob's dad's car, there are rules they have to follow. Keep your location tracking on. Check your tire pressure. Be back a week before school starts. Don't spend your college money. Check in every 24 hours. There's nothing in the rules about arguing over road trip playlists, eating too many gas station snacks, or sleeping in the back of the car. There's also nothing about confessing your secret gay crush, falling for your best friend, and learning how to protect the heart of someone you love.

Summer might be short, but the things Matt and Jacob are going to learn about themselves will last a lifetime.

Total Pages (Source): 19

CHAPTER

ONE

JACOB

Cape Charles, VA

Kennedy's party was wild .

Savannah got wasted and flashed everyone. Gage set fire to a tree in the backyard—I thought it was on accident, but I wasn't sure. My cousin Charlie, who was in town for the summer, kissed Tanner the baseball jock. Things were getting crazy fun and I would have liked to stay longer, but Matt, my best friend, got that pinched look around his mouth that told me he'd hit that point where he hated it, so I told Charlie we were leaving and we got out of there.

“Hey,” I said to Charlie as we drove back toward town from Kennedy's folks' place, “so just so you know, Tanner's okay. For a jock. I guess.”

Matt was riding shotgun, so I had to check out Charlie's expression in the rearview. He looked about one part thoughtful and three parts worried, which was very much his default, but at the mention of Tanner he glanced down at his phone, and the worry was replaced with a look of triumph that was reminiscent of my little brother that one time he'd caught a rare Pokemon in the middle of the camping section at Walmart—like he couldn't quite believe his luck, but he was gonna take the win anyway .

I was taking at least some of the credit for putting that smile on Charlie's face since I'd been the one to suggest that he give Tanner his number. Mind you, I'd also cockblocked him by dragging him out of there. "You think he'll call tonight?"

Charlie's face darkened in the rearview mirror and I knew he was blushing, but his mouth was curved up in a smile. "Maybe. And thanks. For prodding me to give him my number, I mean."

"No problem," I said. "I figured if I didn't say something, you two would still be standing there making heart eyes at each other and saying um by the time college started."

Charlie snorted out a laugh. "Maybe."

"I didn't even know Tanner was gay," Matt said, digging around in the glove compartment for some of the gum I usually kept there. He probably wanted to fix his breath before we got to his place. If his mom was home, she wouldn't like smelling alcohol on it.

"It's no big deal," I said, glancing at Charlie again.

"I never said it was a big deal." Matt rolled his eyes. "I just said I didn't know, was all. I was just surprised. You don't need to get all on my ass about it."

Matt was moody. That was how my mom had described him once, with a pause before she said it, like you knew she'd come up with something different first but then went for a more diplomatic option. And if moody was the diplomatic option, her first choice probably hadn't been great. She liked Matt a lot, don't get me wrong, but yeah, he wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine.

Matt was like a porcupine—prickly as hell on the surface, but if he let you get close,

you could see his vulnerable underside. I was grateful to be one of the few people who got to see the softer parts of him. I'd never tell him that, though. He'd get all defensive and those spines would go right back up.

"I wasn't getting on your ass about it," I said, unbothered by the sideways looks he was throwing me. I was immune to Matt's scowling. "Anyway, I say that if you like someone, you shouldn't be afraid to shoot your shot because who knows? Maybe they feel the same."

"In the movies maybe," Matt muttered under his breath.

See? Moody.

I eased my foot off the gas as we entered the outskirts of town, such as it was. Cape Charles wasn't exactly hopping, even on a Friday night.

"You wanna crash at my place?" I asked Matt, giving him an out in case he didn't want to go home. "Luke said something about a horror movie marathon."

My brother Luke was sixteen and had been steaming with jealousy that he hadn't been invited to Kennedy's party—as if she would have wanted sophomores there. Kennedy's party had been our senior class's last big blast before we all headed out in different directions into the world. This last summer in Cape Charles felt momentous, and even a little scary. Like, I didn't give two fucks about a whole lot of kids I'd gone to high school with, but now that we were about to get scattered on the wind? Suddenly I was going to miss them, and the feeling was an uneasy weight in my gut that wouldn't settle.

"Nah." Matt chewed his bottom lip and shoved the pack of gum into the pocket of his light hoodie. "Let me out here. I'll walk."

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah. Gotta clear my head.”

I pulled over and Matt got out. Charlie did too and claimed the front seat.

Matt knocked on the top of the car with his knuckles, then gave us a grin and a half wave and strode off into the darkness.

“He seemed much more hyped at the party,” Charlie said as we kept driving.

“That’s Matt for you,” I said. “He’s got a social battery that takes all day to charge up, he burns through it in about an hour of being the life of the party, and then it’s dead again. He’s the human version of a shitty laptop. ”

“I thought he was just a dick,” Charlie said with a grin that told me he didn’t mean it. Mostly.

“Eh.” I shrugged. “That too.”

It was still pretty early when we got home. Mom and Dad looked surprised to see us so soon, but Luke was happy we were back.

“Hey, dickbags,” he said. “Let’s watch a movie.”

We liked each other really, I promise.

We headed down into the basement with chips and sodas, and Luke demanded to know all the details of the party.

His jaw dropped. “You saw Savannah’s boobs? Holy shit . Tell me everything .”

“You little perv.” I snorted, and he looked to Charlie beseechingly.

“I’m gay,” Charlie said and shrugged. “They were nice, I guess. Symmetrical.”

“Jacob,” Luke whined.

“Dude, if you’ve seen one pair, you’ve seen them all,” I said. Boobs were overrated, honestly.

“I haven’t seen any ,” he muttered and threw me a death glare. “I don’t have a girlfriend like you do!”

I gave a guilty jolt.

Shit .

Layla.

“Hey!” she’d exclaimed when she saw me at the party and pushed herself up onto her toes to kiss me. “I’m gonna go say hi to Kennedy. Meet me back here?”

“Sure,” I’d said and then, like an asshole, I’d forgotten about her and left .

I winced as I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

Five messages and two missed calls.

“Shit,” I said. “Start the movie without me. I have to make a call.”

And I headed upstairs and all the way out into the backyard, where, if Layla actually picked up, I could apologize and grovel without having my brother and my cousin

laugh at me.

A shower of pebbles on my window woke me when it was still dark, because apparently Matt had never heard of texting. Like, I didn't even need to look out the window to know it was him. Who the hell else would throw pebbles at my window instead of picking up his fucking phone? He'd been doing this since we were kids.

I climbed out of bed, careful not to step on Charlie, who was sleeping on a mattress on my floor for the summer. I crept around him and opened my window.

"Matt?"

"Yeah."

I caught a glimpse of his pale face in the gloom before he melted back into the darkness under the dogwood tree.

I closed the window and tiptoed toward my door. Luckily, I knew my way through the house in the dark and which creaking steps to avoid as I went downstairs. I let myself out onto the back porch where Matt was waiting.

"You been home yet?" I asked.

"Yeah. Zeke's there, though." Matt wasn't the biggest fan of his mom's boyfriend, although that was more on account of how thin the walls in their trailer were than anything the guy had done. He showed me a crooked smile. "Wanna go to the beach?"

At three in the morning?

"Sure," I said, feeling a strange lightness catch me. Since graduation, I'd felt up and

down and all over the place, but sneaking out with Matt in the middle of the night was familiar. Just stupid and fun and something we'd done a hundred times before because it was Cape Charles and there was nothing to do except go to the beach, especially at three in the morning .

It wasn't like we were delinquents or anything. Okay, that was probably what the old folks who drove golf buggies through town thought if they ever saw us out after dark, but they thought that about anyone who was under twenty-five. Or older than twenty-five but with tattoos. Point was, we weren't up to any trouble when we snuck out. We just liked to sit on the beach. If either of us had one, we might have smoked a blunt, but mostly we just sat and talked shit, and sometimes we sat and didn't say anything at all, just breathed in the salt and listened to the waves washing back and forth for hours on end.

We walked the couple of blocks to the beach. The wind was coming in off Chesapeake Bay, ruffling the tussocky grasses on the fenced-off dunes and keeping the worst of the sand flies away. It also made Matt's dark hair dance wildly. He pulled his shoes off and we took the nearest access path through the dunes to the beachfront.

We sat and watched the ocean for a while, and then Matt said, "It was my birthday on Wednesday."

I punched him on the shoulder. "I know that. I was there."

He punched me back. "And after the summer you're off to Old Dominion while I'm going to community college in fucking Melfa ."

"Old Dominion isn't that far away," I said. "We'll still see each other all the time."

"Sure, man. Sure." Matt laughed, and the twist in my gut that had been bothering me

since graduation was back, and it was stronger than hell this time. But before I had time to protest, he turned his head to look at me, the bright moonlight catching on his suddenly wide grin. “We should go on a road trip.”

“What?”

“A road trip!” He knocked his shoulder against mine.

“A road trip to where?”

Matt’s grin grew. “To California , bro! Sun, sand, and surf, right?”

Like we didn’t have that here .

I dragged my heels through the sand. “Doesn’t your dad live in California?”

“Yup.” Matt looked away, fixing his gaze on the dark ocean. “And my mom won’t be able to do shit about me going to see him now I’m eighteen.”

Matt’s dad had left when he was like seven or eight or whatever, and ever since then Matt had been butting heads with his mom about never seeing him. I’d felt guilty whenever he bitched that she wouldn’t let him go live with his dad, hot disloyalty squirming in my gut even while I’d nodded along with him, because I hadn’t wanted him to leave. What about me? I’d wanted to yell at him, but I never did. I never had to because Matt’s mom was like that guy in a war movie who threw himself on the grenade so the other guy hunkering down in the foxhole didn’t get blown up.

Matt was very much the grenade in this scenario.

But he was right. When summer was over, I’d be going off to Old Dominion and he’d be staying home. A road trip might be our last chance to really hang out together,

properly, before college pulled us apart. He was right to laugh when I'd said we'd still see each other all the time too. We wouldn't. I knew we wouldn't. Was I really gonna drive home every weekend? Maybe at first, but I was gonna try to get a job, so I'd probably be working weekends. And there would be studying, and writing papers, and—that squirming sense of disloyalty was back—new friends to party with.

“Okay,” I said too quickly, just to push the word out before Matt could sense my guilt.

He turned his head to look at me. “Seriously?”

“Fuck, yeah,” I said, holding my hand out for a fist bump. “Of course, bro.”

Sand scraped my knuckles when he knocked his fist against mine, and I guessed that, shit, we were actually doing this.

“It's not that I think it's a bad idea,” Mom said later that day, unloading groceries onto the kitchen counter. “But, honey, Charlie came to spend the summer with you and Luke, and now you want to take off to—” She frowned at a can of tomatoes. “Where are you even going to?”

“To California,” I said. “That's where Matt's dad lives now.”

Mom pursed her lips together and let out a breath through her nose. “Jacob.”

The way she said my name was like she was laying the groundwork for a whole lot of gentle reproach.

“Charlie won't mind hanging with Luke,” I said. “Maybe it'll even civilize him a little. Luke, I mean, not Charlie.”

Mom snorted. "I knew who you meant."

"It's our last summer," I said. "Me and Matt. And we..."

"You what?" she asked, gaze sharpening.

I shrugged. "I just wanna spend some time with him, you know, before it's all different."

She sighed, but there wasn't as much disapproval in it as I'd been expecting, and she looked almost sympathetic. "You're going to Norfolk, Jacob, not Mars."

"Yeah, but Matt's not," I said. "C'mon, Mom, please."

I was eighteen already, but if I was going to do this, I actually wanted my parents' permission. It was another new and awkward thing, asking permission for stuff even though I was technically an adult now, when both me and my parents knew they couldn't really say no. Like, they didn't have the leverage anymore or something. Not that my parents had ever been hard asses or anything. Just, it was weird, was all. Just another thing that was changing and I hadn't figured out how to feel about it yet.

Mom tossed a bag of dry pasta at me, and I caught it against my chest and then put it in the pantry .

"Talk to your father when he gets home," she said, and she shook her head before smiling. "Because there is no way in hell your shitty car will make it all the way to California and back."

"Seriously? Thanks, Mom! You're the best!"

"I know," she said. "I know. Now unpack the rest of these groceries before I change

my mind.”

I took the weekend to negotiate with my parents, but on Sunday night I called Matt.

“Okay, the road trip is on,” I said, “and we can take my dad’s RAV4, but there are rules.”

“Rules?” he asked, his voice wary with suspicion.

“Yeah,” I said. “I have to keep my location tracking on.” I waited for him to snort at that, but he didn’t. “And I have to check the tire pressure before we leave here and before we head back.”

“How do you check the tire pressure?” His voice was suddenly echoey, as though he’d put me on speaker.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll fucking look it up on YouTube or something.” I stepped outside onto the back porch, pulling the door shut behind me and dimming the sound of Luke and Charlie talking shit as they loaded the dishwasher. “I have to be back a full week before I’m due at college.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not allowed to spend any of the money I saved for when I’m at college unless it’s an emergency,” I said.

“Okay.”

“And I have to check in at least once every twenty-four hours,” I said, saying the last of it in a rush because I figured Matt would make a big deal out of it. When he didn’t say anything, I said, “What?”

“What?” he asked right back.

“You’re just holding back some smart-ass comment, I can tell. ”

“I am not!” he protested.

“Then why didn’t you say anything?”

“Fuck off. I was writing it all down!”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. On the lame birthday card you got me.”

I would have protested, but yeah, it was pretty lame. I’d just gotten it at the grocery store. In my defense, his actual present—some Japanese pencils he wanted—more than made up for the shitty card.

“Well, okay then,” I said, finding myself off-balance because Matt wasn’t being a dick about my parents’ rules. He was probably just as happy as I was that we’d be taking the RAV4 and not my piece-of-crap car.

“This is gonna be so great,” he said. “When are we leaving? Are you picking me up, or will I meet you at your place? Are you packed yet? What are you taking?”

“Dude, I haven’t even started to think about packing.”

“We definitely need snacks,” he said, and I grinned to hear the excitement in his voice. “And drinks. And a good fucking playlist. It’s gonna be awesome!”

“Yeah,” I said, because he was right. “It’s gonna be a blast!”

“Was Layla cool when you told her?” he asked me, and oh...

You ever been on a roller coaster? You know that feeling, on that first drop, when you're hurtling downward at a million miles an hour, but somehow you left your stomach behind you?

Yeah.

I was feeling that right now.

Oh shit.

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CHAPTER

TWO

MATT

2728 miles to go

Cape Charles, VA

The morning of the road trip, I packed everything that would fit into my bags, tucked my sketchbook and pencils in my backpack, left a note for Mom, and then walked out of the Seaview Mobile Home Park without looking back. The name was a misnomer. You couldn't see the ocean from here. All you could see was a collection of shitty mobile homes that the park owner never fixed when he said he would. But I guess the Crap View Mobile Home Park just didn't have the potential to bring in those sweet tourist dollars. Mom tried to keep our place nice, and it was probably the least suckful double-wide in the place, but it was a mobile home park, so the bar was set pretty low.

We hadn't always lived here. We used to rent a place on Sunnyside Road in Cheriton that was nicer, but the landlord sold it and the new owner raised the rent, so for the past three years we'd been in the park instead. Three years ago was right about the time I stopped inviting friends home, except for Jacob. Like, I stopped inviting him too, but he just kept turning up anyway. I was more grateful for it than I wanted to admit.

The walk to Jacob's place in Cape Charles took about a half hour, but I was used to making it. I normally just jammed my earbuds in and wished myself out of this fucking town.

When I got to Jacob's place, I went around the back and climbed the porch stairs to the kitchen door, my shoulders sagging under the weight of my bags.

Mrs. Mercer was in the kitchen, wearing her robe over her pajamas. Her blonde hair was tied up in a messy bun, and she was cracking eggs into a bowl.

I knocked on the screen door.

"Jesus Christ!" She did a crazy ninja move with the wooden spoon and then glared at me. "Stop sneaking up on people, Matt! You scared the crap out of me."

I didn't point out that I'd knocked. Instead, I opened the screen door and stepped inside. "Sorry."

I'd spent more time in the Mercers' house in the last decade than I had in my own place probably. Even when Mom and I had lived in a half-decent place, I'd still preferred it here.

If this was a sitcom, I would have been the quirky but endearing neighbor's kid who had his own laugh track, was a fan favorite, and went on to star in his own wildly successful spin-off. But this was real life. I'd never been accused of being quirky or endearing, and I sure as hell wasn't anyone's favorite. I was just kind of...around. Sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Mercer looked at me like they were wondering what the hell I was doing here again and if I'd ever go home. But a few sideways looks were still better than sitting in an empty house or, worse, listening to Zeke butchering "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on the electric guitar. He had nine guitars and plans to start a band. Zeke also had zero talent, but he didn't let that deter him. Besides, Jacob ran

interference with his folks, so I didn't cross paths with them too often.

"Is Jacob in?" I asked, which was a dumb question because of course he was. I just wanted an excuse to get out of Mrs. Mercer's way.

Luke bounced into the kitchen. "Oh, you don't want to go up there, trust me. "

But I was already heading toward the stairs.

I was about halfway up them when I met Layla coming the other way, her pretty face screwed up into a scowl and murder in her eyes.

"—because this is our last summer too, Jacob!" she yelled, and her scowl contorted into something even angrier when she spotted me. "I bet this was all your idea, wasn't it!"

Layla had never truly liked me, even though she'd tried. She was like one of those prey animals in a wildlife documentary that froze when they sensed danger. Couldn't see it yet, couldn't even smell it, but they knew something was wrong. I saw it every time her smile faltered when her gaze fell on me or when she forced herself to laugh at a joke I told. Maybe she didn't know, not consciously, but it was there in her subconscious, setting off warning bells she'd never figured out how to hear: Careful. He wants what you have.

A part of her knew, even if Jacob didn't.

I shrugged.

"Fucking asshole ," she said, shouldering past me, and I didn't know if she meant Jacob or me. Probably both of us.

If I was as much of an asshole as she thought I was, I would have grinned at her or flipped her the bird or something, because hadn't I just won? Except of course I hadn't, and I didn't want to make it blatantly obvious to her that we were in a competition over Jacob. Jacob sure as fuck didn't have a clue, and there was no way in hell I'd ever tell him—and I didn't want Layla to figure it out and spill the beans for me. Jacob was all I had. He was all I'd ever had. It was bad enough that after the summer he'd be gone. The thought that he might look at me any differently in the meantime made me sick to my stomach.

Funny.

In all the years I'd known him, he'd never seen how desperate I was to stay his friend because friendship came so easily to him. Not me, though. Without Jacob as a buffer zone, I wouldn't have had any other friends at all .

Layla stormed down the stairs and right out the front door, slamming it shut behind her.

"Was that Layla?" Mrs. Mercer called from the kitchen. "I guess she's not staying for breakfast?"

Jacob's bedroom door was open. He was in his room, pacing back and forth, scowling just as hard as Layla had been.

I dropped my backpack and duffel on the floor with a dull thump, which caught his attention. His expression morphed immediately into relief, followed by guilt.

"Hey," he said and then cleared his throat and turned away. "I'm just about done packing. Dad and Charlie are in the garage. Dad's vacuuming the car or something because he does that before every trip, which is dumb, because wouldn't it make more sense to do it when we get back?" He dragged a hand through his hair, then

prodded my bags with one foot. “Holy shit, bro, how much did you pack?”

I shrugged. I’d packed everything, but he didn’t need to know that yet.

“Anyway, Mom won’t let us leave until we eat.”

“Cool.” I sat on the end of his bed between the piles of clothes that might have been meant to go in the duffel bag lying open on the floor or might have been dirty laundry. It was hard to tell.

“I’m pretty sure Layla just broke up with me,” Jacob said, still not looking at me.

I didn’t say anything. Just stared at his wall, at the bookshelf there. I saw books I’d never read but I recognized all the same because of all the nights I’d spent sleeping on the same mattress on the floor that Charlie was sleeping on now. Sometimes I’d lie awake in the middle of the night, listening to Jacob breathing, and reach out to run my fingers along the spines of the books. There was a little Lego rocket ship on the bottom shelf that had been there for years as well. We’d made two that day but lost mine somewhere on the beach. It was probably still there, buried under the sand, salt water filtering through the grains surrounding it whenever the tide swelled in again. It would probably be there forever.

“I think she’s more upset than I am,” Jacob continued. “But hey, we were gonna break up after the summer anyway, so.” He shrugged and ended his words right there on that so, leaving the rest unsaid. Leaving me to try and guess.

“Yeah,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say.

Jacob kept moving around his room, keeping his back to me. Not pissed, because if he was pissed he was never shy about sharing it. Guilty for upsetting Layla, I guessed.

Jacob pulled his closet door open and stared inside it for a while. Then he closed the door and finally turned around. Leaning against the door, he met my gaze. He shrugged, mouth twisting into a helpless grimace and finally a rueful grin. “She was pissed , bro.”

“Yeah, I got that vibe when she almost shoved me down the stairs.”

He frowned and scrubbed a hand over his face. “It was a dick move, forgetting to tell her. I guess she still had stuff she wanted us to do together before summer’s over.”

“Yeah, but there’s no point in beating yourself up about it,” I said, which was a dick move too. I just didn’t want him to be in a shit mood when we started our trip. “She’ll get over it. Like, you’re not all that.”

He gave me a narrow look and then snorted and rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Thanks. Great pep talk, Matt.”

I flipped him the bird, which made him laugh, and I knew he’d be okay.

“ S o,” Luke said around a mouthful of pancake as the Mercers sat around the big table in the kitchen, “I guess Layla dumped your ass, huh? ”

“Fuck off,” Jacob said, but there was no heat in it.

“Language,” Mr. Mercer said, reaching for the maple syrup, but there was no heat in that either. He looked over at where I was leaning against the counter with a piece of toast in my hand. “Matt, sit your ass down. You’re making the place look untidy.” He’d been saying it for years, but I still didn’t like to sit down without being asked, just in case my standing invitation to sit—ha!—turned out to have an expiration date after all.

I sat between Jacob and Charlie, and Mrs. Mercer slid a plate toward me. I set my toast down on it and pulled the plate closer, and Jacob scooped some scrambled eggs on top for me. Breakfast at the Mercers was an actual meal, not just a couple of Pop-Tarts eaten in front of the TV.

“You think she’ll be on the rebound now?” Luke asked, and Jacob shot him a glare across the table.

“Luke!” Mrs. Mercer exclaimed.

“What? I’m only joking! She is super hot, though.”

Chair legs scraped against the floor as Jacob half stood. Luke flailed backward, laughing.

“Luke!” Mrs. Mercer exclaimed again, and then, “Jacob!”

Jacob sat back down, still scowling. “You’re such a dick!”

Sometimes I thought it would have been awesome to have a little brother, just so I wasn’t home alone so much. Other times, like this one, I was glad I didn’t.

The rest of breakfast went more smoothly, but I was itching to get out of here, to get on the road, to have a summer with just me and Jacob and leave everything else, and everyone else, behind. I never wanted to step foot in Cape Charles again. In California, I’d start over. Nobody who knew me here would even recognize me in California, like, I dunno, I’d start to shed my skin the moment Jacob and I got in the car, and by the time we got to the West Coast, it’d all be gone, revealing someone new underneath.

Someone who was going places.

Someone who looked forward, not back.

Someone whose chest wasn't crushed under the pressure of his loneliness every time he thought about his best friend going away to college without him.

Someone who was into guys and not afraid to admit it.

Someone who wasn't a pathetic loser.

"So," Mr. Mercer said. "It's a long way to California. I want you boys to stay safe. Drive to the road conditions, no speeding, and take lots of breaks. If you're tired, pull over for a nap."

"Dad, we've been on trips before," Jacob said.

"Not long ones," Mr. Mercer said. His brows tugged together, pinching the skin above his nose. "Just be aware of fatigue, okay? Take your time and don't push yourselves. That's all I'm saying."

Jacob and I both nodded seriously because Mr. Mercer was bringing that concentrated Dad energy to the table, and if we grinned or goofed off during this Serious Moment where he was imparting his wisdom, he'd probably make us sit through it all over again.

"And you check in every day," Mr. Mercer said.

We both nodded again.

"Just..." Mr. Mercer pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just be sensible, please."

The word held a whole lot of worry. Part of it made me bridle—like, what the fuck,

come on, he didn't have to say it like we were dumbass kids who were going to fuck up the second we were gone—but mostly it was just uncomfortable. Mr. Mercer wasn't my dad, but sometimes he talked like he was, as though he had three sons instead of two, and it made my stomach swoop in an uncomfortable way because I didn't know how I was supposed to react.

That was the story of my life to this point, actually. I'd never figured out how to act around other people, so pretty much everyone just thought I was an asshole. Which, okay, yeah, I was an asshole but it was honestly accidental. I didn't ever remember being at a crossroads and making the conscious choice that antisocial asshole was better than awkward weirdo , but somewhere along the way I'd committed to it, I guess, and now here I was .

“We will, Dad,” Jacob said, hitting exactly the right sincere tone to make the lines in his dad's expression soften just a bit. Then Jacob looked at me and smiled that wide, easy smile of his, the one he didn't even know was a total killer, and my stomach did a loop the loop. “We'll be fine, right, Matt?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice catching in my suddenly dry throat. “We'll be fine.”

I t was lucky I wasn't driving yet because Mr. Mercer would not approve of the way I didn't have my eyes on the road. As we backed out of the Mercers' driveway onto the street, I couldn't tear my gaze away from the grip Jacob had on the steering wheel. His fingers, his knuckles, the way the sunlight caught on the usually invisible hairs on his forearms and turned them gold.

“You know what would be funny?” he asked as he watched the backup camera's screen. “If I hit that trash can. Can you imagine the look on my dad's face?”

“Dude,” I said. “Don't hit the trash can. The trip would be off so fucking fast.”

He laughed, and I tried to laugh too and pretend I didn't feel an itch under my skin. Like, we were so close to getting out of Cape Charles. Why would he fucking jinx us by saying that dumb shit about the trash can? His parents were still right there, right by the driveway, watching us leave.

Luke and Charlie were there too. Charlie didn't look bothered, but Luke's nose was wrinkled the way it had been most of his life, whenever he thought that Jacob was leaving him out of something fun. Little brother syndrome or something. They got on well enough now, but a few years ago Jacob had spent a lot of time swatting Luke away like a buzzing insect.

"You ready for this?" Jacob asked me with a grin .

"Yeah," I said. " So ready. But I'm not kidding, dude. Watch where you're going."

"You sound like my dad ." But Jacob kept his eyes on the screen, and we backed the rest of the way out of the driveway without hitting the trash can. He pushed the button to put the window down. "See ya, Luke and Charlie! Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad! We'll call you when we need bail money in Vegas!"

Then, cackling like a fucking maniac, he waved, then put the car into Drive and we headed out of the street, out of the neighborhood, out of the town, and into the rest of our lives.

And from now on, I was going to be a whole new person.

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CHAPTER

THREE

JACOB

2703 miles to go

Norfolk, VA, to Boone, NC

F uck Norfolk traffic.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't that bad, but I was used to driving around Cape Charles, and there wasn't a lot going on back on the pointy end of the peninsula, traffic-wise or otherwise. Take the tunnel to Norfolk, though, and it was a different story. I was suddenly a hell of a lot more nervous at the prospect of driving across the entire country. Hell, even some of the interchanges in Norfolk looked like complicated Celtic knots on the map, and I was having flashbacks to every dashcam compilation I'd ever watched on YouTube and wondering if me and Matt were about to become unwilling collateral damage in one. Like, you indicate before you change lanes, you know? And you fucking look .

I either had to get real chill about driving real soon, or I'd leave indentations in the steering wheel from gripping it so hard. And have a meltdown before we even got out of the state.

"You're driving like someone's grandma," Matt said, flipping the visor on the

passenger side up and down. “On her way to church, with a three-tier cake on the back seat. ”

“Fuck off,” I said, keeping my eyes on the road.

“Bro,” he said, his voice tempered with rare amusement. “Did your dad’s talk really wig you out that much? You can, like, unclench a little , you know?”

“I’ll unclench when we get through this next goddamn interchange,” I bit out.

I thought Matt would laugh at me for finding the traffic pants-shittingly scary, and I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t up for the trip or anything. I totally was. The traffic was just a lot .

“You got this,” he said, and there was no sharp edge to his tone. No sarcasm. “The map says just stay in this lane and follow it around.”

I felt warm and stupid all at the same time. Warm because Matt had my back and stupid because it was dumb to be so nervous in the first place. It wasn’t as though this was my first time behind the wheel. Just, like everything else in my life right now, it felt like I was about to be on a really steep learning curve and I wasn’t sure I was ready. What if I couldn’t handle the pressure? And no, I didn’t mean the trip because at least for that I still had Matt right beside me. But when summer was over, what then? Like, what then for the rest of my life?

“Nice one, bro,” Matt told me as we made it through the interchange.

I let out a breath and tried not to hold the next one for quite as long.

“Hey,” he said. “I want your phone.”

“What? Why?”

“Because my Spotify has ads,” he said. He plucked my phone out of the center console. “I know you’ve got premium.”

I snorted and kept my eyes on the road, waiting for him to start playing something. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“How long does it take to pick a song?”

“I’m making a playlist.”

“You can put something on while you make a playlist. ”

“It’s got to be perfect. What sort of vibe are we going for?” he asked. “Kind of retro lo-fi beatnik Kerouac road trip—that one’s pretty hard to pull off in a RAV4, honestly—or more of an unhinged, psychedelic Hunter S. Thompson Fear and Loathing kind of road trip? Also hard to pull off in a RAV4.”

“Just put on a daily mix.”

“But which one? Daily Mix 1 is more indie rock, but Daily Mix 2 is leaning hard into hip-hop. And Daily Mix 3 is like that K-pop stuff you like.”

“Dude, Hyukoh is not K-pop. I’ve told you this like a hundred times—” I was cut off by his laughter and glanced over at him. “What?”

He pointed to my grip on the steering wheel, where my knuckles were no longer bright white. “I got you to unclench.” His laughter faded into a smug grin. “Daily

Mix 3 it is.”

Asshole.

The chill indie sounds of Hyukoh and Sunset Rollercoaster carried us the rest of the way out of Norfolk.

A few hours out of Norfolk, somewhere on US 58 on the west side of Emporia, we pulled into a gas station to grab coffee and more snacks and take a leak. The gas station looked the same as every single other one we’d passed: oil-stained ground, sun-bleached signs, and not much else going on at all. There was a flaking decal on the front doors to the store that told us we were at Goose Run Gas, but if there was a town nearby, we either hadn’t quite reached it yet or it was hidden by the curtain of trees that flanked the highway.

“Goose Run Gas,” Matt said, walking backward through the rattling automatic doors like he was checking I was coming with him. “Makes it sound like the manager is a goose. ”

“Place’d maybe be better if he was,” said a guy shoving bags of chips in the rack by the door, and Matt yelped and jumped about three feet in the air.

“Holy shit ,” he said, clutching his heart.

The guy was about our age, maybe a couple years older. He had a friendly, crooked grin and was wearing a flannel overshirt and a trucker cap. “Sorry, man. Didn’t mean to take you by surprise.”

Matt laughed and ducked his head. “Nah, it’s cool.”

“I’m getting drinks,” I said and headed for the wall of refrigerator doors at the back

of the place. We might have only been driving for three hours, but I'd been tense for way too much of it, so it felt good to get out of the car and stretch my muscles a little. I detoured to the bathroom first and then took my time choosing sodas, even though I knew exactly what to get—a Coke for me and a Mountain Dew for Matt. When you'd been best friends forever, you didn't have to ask.

There was a counter at the back too, with a display case of sad-looking cookies underneath it and a big coffee machine on top of it. Behind the counter there was a guy sitting on a stool. He glanced up from his phone as I got near him and then glanced down again.

"The machine's broken," he said.

"I was looking at the cookies."

"You can get them cheaper at Food Lion." He cracked his gum. "They're the same ones."

I guessed I wasn't getting the cookies then.

I grabbed a water each along with our sodas, then worked my way back through the aisles of junk food to the front counter.

"California," Matt was saying to the first guy, the friendly one. "We're in our road trip era."

They weren't standing by the chips anymore. They were in the candy aisle and Matt was picking out a few things. He wasn't really looking at the guy, but the guy was looking at him. Then the guy's gaze cut to me, and I looked away and pretended I was checking out the gross gas station hot dogs. I didn't know why I'd looked away. I wanted the guy to notice me; I had shit to pay for.

I stared at those hot dogs like they held all the secrets to the universe, and Matt laughed at something the guy said. It didn't sound like his usual laugh. It was lighter somehow. This wasn't the sharp-edged laughter of my sarcastic asshole best friend. This was a friendly laugh. Something about it landed wrong, but the gas station guy didn't seem to notice because he said something else to Matt in a voice too low for me to hear. I looked over at them again, suddenly paranoid they were talking about me or something, and this time Matt was looking at the guy and smiling and the guy was handing him a pack of Twizzlers and smiling back.

"Hey," I called, and the word came out louder than I thought it would. "Can I pay for these drinks here?"

The guy exchanged a look with Matt and then shrugged as he wandered over to the counter. "No problem."

Except there was a fucking problem; I just couldn't figure out exactly what it was, apart from Matt acting weird with this guy.

I paid for the drinks and went back outside, leaning on the car and waiting for Matt to join me.

"Dude," he said, a Twizzler hanging out of his mouth when he finally came back outside, "why are you being so weird?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. "You're the one being weird."

"Whatever." He opened his door and grabbed his sketchbook off the seat. Peeling the thick rubber band off, he opened it. Then he took something out of his back pocket and slid it between the pages.

"What's that?"

“A postcard,” he said, closing the book and snapping the rubber band back on.

“What the hell did you get a postcard of this dump for?”

“Uh...I’m chronicling our road trip, obviously,” he said and tucked the book into the compartment on the inside of the door. “Want a Twizzler?”

I shook my head and went around to my side of the car. By the time I got there, Matt was in his seat, pulling his belt across and clipping it closed. I held out his Mountain Dew. “I don’t know how you can drink this crap.”

He leaned over and snagged the bottle. “You just have no taste.”

“That must be why I’m hanging out with you.”

Matt flipped me the bird, and the familiar gesture settled my jangling nerves.

As I put the keys in the ignition, Matt suddenly said, “Hey, did you get coffee?”

“The machine was broken.”

“Aw, man. I like coffee.”

He didn’t. He liked whipped cream and sugar and caramel syrup pretending to be coffee.

“We’ll stop somewhere else,” I said. “We can stop whenever we want.”

This road trip wouldn’t be much of an adventure if all we did was drive across the country at record speed. And okay, maybe I didn’t want it to be over too soon. Who knew when I’d get to spend time with Matt like this, just the two of us, again? I’d

likely get another girlfriend once I started college, and Matt's odds of finding some girl who liked prickly assholes would increase once he was in a bigger setting. Hell, one of them would probably find his perpetual scowl charming and think he was their very own bad boy Heath Ledger lookalike from that movie we'd both watched with my mom about a hundred times.

Joke was on them, I thought wryly. Matt was never going to dance along the bleachers, and he couldn't sing for shit.

He proved that now by putting on Spotify and singing along—badly—to “Pink Pony Club.”

We stopped in Boone, North Carolina, not because there was anything to see in Boone but because I was tired of driving. My shoulders were tense, my neck ached, and even my ass was sore from sitting so long. We booked a room at a Quality Inn and both winced a little at the cost.

“See, there's no way to be footloose and fancy-free nowadays,” Matt bitched as we dug into a plate of nachos at some Mexican place near the university. “Like, if we wanted to go cheaper, we could book rooms in vacation rentals or whatever, but then you're on a schedule and who knows? Maybe there's a whole amazing list of shit to do in Boone and we want to spend a few days here!”

“Yeah, there's not,” I said, scrolling through my phone. “Oh, they have awesome ski slopes in the winter, though. I mean, I guess we could go hiking?”

Matt gave me a narrow-eyed look that needed no translation.

“Or not.” I put my phone face down on the table and dug into the nachos before Matt could shove them all in his face.

“Bro, I just had the best idea!”

“What?”

Matt leaned across the table, his ass making a high-pitched squeaking sound on the vinyl seat of the booth. “We could—shut up!”

I kept laughing into my soda.

“It was the seat!” He wiggled but couldn’t make the sound again, and I laughed harder. He gave me that narrow-eyed look again, which just made it funnier. “You’re such a dick. You know it was the seat.”

“Yeah, but it was still funny.”

“If you’re a little kid, maybe.”

“Fart noises are always funny,” I said. “Age has nothing to do with it. Tell me your great idea.”

“Okay, so instead of paying for a motel every night, we could go to Walmart and get a couple sleeping bags and a tent and stay at campsites instead. That would be so much cheaper, right?”

The way he said it, with an almost pleading tone, told me he knew I’d need convincing. And of course I would. I mean, I liked camping well enough, but usually it was something that was planned and usually by my dad, and there were a whole lot of people involved who knew exactly what to pack, where to go, and what food to bring.

“Stop channeling your mom,” Matt said, rolling his eyes.

“What? I’m not!”

Except suddenly I was. My dad too. There was no way they would approve of this half-baked idea. They didn’t approve of most of Matt’s and my half-baked ideas on principle alone. They were probably smart not to at least half the time, but the problem was that when it came to Matt’s camping idea, I had no idea if they’d be right to disapprove or not. I mean, camping was safe enough, right?

That seemed like the sort of thing someone would think right before they went camping and were murdered by hill folk.

“Okay, but it would save so much money,” Matt said. “And your parents are always on your ass about not wasting your money.”

That was true. I’d worked the last two summers at a boat rental place in Cape Charles, explaining to tourists how I couldn’t rent them a pontoon boat before they’d completed the Boater Safety Course, however much they assured me they knew boats. I’d saved some of that money, but Matt was right that my parents were always on my case to save more.

So, after we finished our nachos, we went to Walmart and got a cheap tent and some sleeping bags and other stuff. We got some more snacks for tomorrow’s drive too, and by the time we got back to the motel, I was ready to crash. I grabbed a shower first, and afterward I stared at the crack of light coming in through the curtains that didn’t quite close and listened to Matt humming in the bathroom. My eyes kept closing, and every time they did, I could still see the road stretching out in front of me and feel the thrum of the car’s engine in my bones as I drifted closer and closer to sleep. I’d probably dream about driving tonight.

And then, right on the edge of sleep, I heard Matt climbing under the covers of his bed and letting out a long, slow sigh.

“I’m really glad you’re here with me, Jacob,” he whispered, and I didn’t know if I’d dreamed it or not.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

MATT

2121 miles to go

Fall Creek Falls, TN

The guy on the phone said we were lucky they'd had a cancellation, and when we got to Fall Creek Falls, most of the sites were already occupied. There were campers and tents clustered around the amenities buildings and kids climbing all over the playground. We were a little farther along from all of that in what was called a primitive site. We could drive to it, but there wasn't any water or electricity. Since we were right near a bathhouse, it didn't matter much.

Our campsite was in a grassy area with a picnic table and a firepit. I didn't like how we were so close to other tents that people waved at us as we pulled up, and we could hear their conversations drifting over to us once we got out of the car. I would have preferred a site that wasn't near anyone else but not enough that I'd be willing to shit in the woods. So our neighbors were a compromise I was happy to make in exchange for that handy bathhouse.

"This is awesome." Jacob stretched, putting his hands on his ass and arching his back. I could hear his spine popping from where I was hauling our new tent out of the back of the car. "We should go for a walk."

“We should put the tent up.”

“The map says Cane Creek Cascades is only like half a mile. We’ll be back before it’s dark.” He threw me a puppy-eyed look. “Come on. We’ve been sitting on our asses all day.”

“I don’t want to get murdered in backwoods Tennessee,” I complained, but I was already following him.

Once we were on the trail, it didn’t take long for the trees to close in and the sounds of people’s voices to fade. We didn’t talk, but we slowed our footsteps so that we were almost dawdling, both of us drinking in the fresh air and the dappled sunlight and the clean, earthy smell of the woods. Insects buzzed and birds sang. It felt good to move after being stuck in the car for so long, so I didn’t complain too much about the walk.

I maybe complained a little, but I knew Jacob would know it was bullshit. It usually was when I opened my mouth, and Jacob had always been the only person who could tell the bullshit that was just bullshit for bullshit’s sake from the bullshit that was only there to hide what I really wanted to say.

When I was twelve and my mom had started working nights more often, there had been this weird guy who lived across the street from us, and I got it in my head that he was gonna kill me. I didn’t need a reason to think it, but it was probably a combination of too many killer-with-a-chainsaw movies and the fact he yelled at me once for skateboarding in his driveway. Mom always said I could put two and two together and get five. Anyhow, one night when Mom was working, I was making myself a sandwich when I heard a thump on the back porch.

Raccoon? Probably, but try telling my twelve-year-old brain that. So I did what every idiot in a horror movie does—I bolted out into the darkness. I grabbed my bike and

rode as fast as I could to Jacob's house, convinced every second of the way that I'd hear the splutter-rev-roar of a chainsaw starting up right behind me .

"Hey," I'd said when I hit Jacob's window with enough pebbles to wake him up. "What are you doing?"

I didn't tell him I was scared, so instead I tried to pass my whole midnight flight off as a casual visit. He saw right through me, with my wild, crazy hair, my heaving chest, and my sweaty fear. But he would have seen through me anyway, without any of that, because he always did.

"Um, nothing," he said as he very clearly blinked himself awake. "Do you want to come up?"

And that was Jacob in a nutshell. Last night when I'd fallen asleep listening to him breathe, it had hit me hard: I wouldn't have him in my life anymore after this summer. Not the way he'd always been there before. If I freaked the fuck out about chainsaw killers or bear attacks or flunking out of college, who was I going to go to? Who was going to sit beside me and pretend he couldn't see what a mess I was while I frantically got my shit together again?

It was part of the reason I was going to California. If Jacob was leaving Cape Charles, then what the hell was keeping me there? Jacob had cut me loose, whether he knew it or not, and I had to find my own way. No more running straight to his side whenever I was afraid.

Okay, so this whole fucking road trip was that, but after the summer I'd be going cold turkey, right? And it'd be fine. I'd be okay. I was going to be a new person in California.

"When we get back to camp, I should check in with Mom and Dad," Jacob said, the

sunlight turning his unbrushed hair into a wild golden halo. “You should check in with your mom.”

“I did already,” I lied. I’d said everything I needed to say to Mom in the note I’d left, and I’d blocked her number temporarily—just until I got to my dad’s and got settled. I’d call her when I had everything worked out, but I didn’t need to hear her tell me I was making a mistake, not when I knew this was for the best.

When Jacob craned his head to look at the sky, I took the opportunity to drink him in. I knew every inch of him, but I never got tired of looking. Because guys weren’t supposed to look, were they? Unless they were hiding something like me. I’d slept on the mattress beside Jacob’s bed more times than I could count since we were kids, listening to him breathing as he slept, but I wasn’t allowed to look at him. Not in a way that might give away how much I wanted him. Not in a way that might give away all my secrets.

Well, one secret.

But the risk of being found out could never stop me from looking. Once you knew you could fly, how could you pretend you didn’t want to reach the sun? And me and Icarus both knew it was gonna end badly, but to feel that warmth on your skin just before you fell?

Why wasn’t the point of that story whether Icarus thought it was worth it or not?

This summer already felt like flying too close to the sun, just me and Jacob and the way the light caught in his eyelashes. The way his skin glowed under that messy halo of his hair. The way my fingers twitched to reach out and trace the line of his jaw, his cheekbones, his mouth. Sometimes I wanted to touch him so much I could feel the ache of it down to my bones.

I jammed my hands in the pockets of my shorts because I wasn't ready to crash and burn. Not ready to turn our friendship into a crumpled mess of blood and bones and broken wings if it could soar for just a little longer and I could soak up some more of the warmth that was Jacob.

We continued on our way, and I tried not to feel Jacob's shoulder brushing mine when we moved closer together to let someone pass us coming the other way. Leaves and grit crunched under our shoes as we followed the trail.

At the end of the trail, a set of concrete steps led up over a hill. From the top of the hill, we could see down through the trees to a creek, but going down was rougher than climbing up, so I kept my attention fixed on where my feet were landing. At the bottom of the hill on the bank of the creek, we stepped onto a long wooden suspension bridge. We were the only ones on it—there was a family coming toward us from the other side of the bridge, but they were still a little way off—so I jumped to see how much I could shake the bridge, and Jacob grabbed ahold of the cable guardrail and threw me a dirty look.

“The sign says not to jump!”

“Bruh, it hardly moved!” I protested. “I won't do it again, promise.”

The creek swept underneath the bridge, white water marking where it hit the rocks before dropping over the cascades. At the bottom of the drop, the creek ran through a shallow gorge. Rock walls topped with trees rose up out of the water. I wished I'd brought my sketchbook with me.

Beside me, Jacob unpeeled his fingers from the cable and took his phone out to take some pictures of the view. I took a couple too.

The family passed behind us, kids wrapped in towels, hair dripping.

“Mommy, I’m coooooold!”

The mom was wrangling another kid, so the dad picked the complaining kid up and they kept going.

Jacob looked at the water while I turned my head to watch the dad carrying the kid. I couldn’t see much, just a pair of small bare feet sticking out from either side of the dad’s hips, but I felt a nudge of something in the back of my mind that was too faint to be a specific recollection. Sense memory, maybe, of being small and being carried.

Jacob’s shoulder knocked against mine, pulling me from my thoughts, and he said, “Come on.”

We crossed the bridge, walked up behind some building on the other side, then followed the sign down a series of wooden steps and walkways to the cascades.

It was beautiful.

The water spilled onto the rocks below, filling a series of rock pools and a swimming hole. There were a few people sitting in the rock pools and some kids standing right under the falls. It must have been busy in the heat of the day, but it was late afternoon and most people seemed to be packing up. The light was golden now, filtering down through the trees and landing in dappled coins on the surface of the water. Above the cascades, I could see the suspension bridge we’d crossed to get here.

Jacob was already taking his shirt off.

“Didn’t you hear that kid?” I asked him. “It’s cold .”

“Don’t care.” He flashed me a broad, easy grin that could make me do anything. “You coming in or are you chicken?”

“What are you, twelve ?”

He made a chicken noise, the asshole. Did the wings with his arms and everything.

“Fuck you,” I muttered and pulled my shirt off too.

We took off our shoes, shoved our phones in them, and then picked our way down over the slippery rocks and into the water.

Holy shit.

That kid hadn’t been wrong. It was freezing but neither of us was going to admit it. Hell, we went swimming in the ocean in winter sometimes. No Tennessee water hole was going to get the better of us, even if it was apparently fed straight from some polar ice cap. But it was okay once we got in deep enough to get our shoulders under the water—or maybe we’d just lost all the feeling in our limbs. It was hard to tell.

I shivered, then launched myself forward in a dog paddle in an effort to warm up. It wasn’t super deep, and while kicking around messily, I ended up splashing Jacob right in the face. It was an accident, mostly. He squawked and lunged after me, and the next thing I knew, he had me in an iron grip and was pulling me under the water.

He let go after a few seconds and I surged back to the surface, sputtering and hissing like a wet cat, and he grinned at me like he’d done something hilarious—which he kind of had, but I wasn’t going to admit it. His sunny smile made it impossible to stay mad, but it would have been a betrayal of our friendship if I hadn’t dived forward, grabbed him around the waist, and pulled him underwater. I wasn’t going to let him beat me just because he was bigger.

My palms skated over his cool skin and down his broad back as we grappled together, both of us wet and slippery and laughing, and fuck, I was going to miss this more

than I'd thought.

I let go before he did, like always, because what if I touched him for too long? It was habit at this point, listening to the automatic voice in the back of my head that said, Don't be too gay, Matt ! So I guessed that Icarus was in no danger of trying to fly just yet, huh?

We floated for a little while once we were done horsing around and then I got cold again, so I got out of the water and stood in the sun. Really wished about now that we'd brought towels, but thinking ahead wasn't either of our strong points. I thought about using Jacob's shirt for a towel, but his spidey senses must have picked up on my evil plan because he waded out of the water and hurried toward me.

I didn't look for too long at the way the sunlight gleamed on the planes of his wet body. I got real busy bending down to check my phone because my dick suddenly forgot how cold we were and was taking an interest too.

Jacob shook himself like a dog, and a halo of water exploded from his hair, catching the light. Then he crouched down beside me and squinted at his phone screen. He made a face.

"What?"

"It's from Layla. She says she hopes I'm having a nice time. Is that weird?"

"I don't know."

"Is she just being friendly, or is she trying to get back with me?"

I shrugged. "Would you get back with her?"

“We’re going to different colleges, so.” It wasn’t a no, though, was it? He wrinkled his nose. “I dunno. It’s like she’s being all extra nice in case I’m upset the way she broke up with me, so I feel kind of bad for not being actually, you know, upset at all.”

“You’re not upset?” I slid my wet feet back into my shoes, leaving the laces undone, and slung my shirt over my shoulder.

Jacob squinted at the sky for a moment and then shrugged. “Nah. Maybe I’m a sociopath.”

“You’re not a sociopath.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.” I started picking my way over the rocks toward the stairs that would take us back the way we’d come.

“But how do you know?” he asked, following me.

I knew because Jacob was the best friend a guy could have, and he always had been. Because he let me sleep in his room when I was too afraid to go home to an empty trailer. Because his mouth twisted up a little whenever I said something about an asshole neighbor in the mobile home park or a kid who was giving me shit at school. Because Jacob was full of empathy, and the only reason it didn’t translate into action when it came to me was because he knew I’d hate it. Because even worse than getting scared or getting bullied or just getting generally shit on in life would be the whole world finding out about it. I didn’t want anyone’s pity, because fuck that and fuck them. But Jacob knew, and so he protected me as best he could even while neither of us acknowledged it. Jacob cared so much about how I felt that he was whatever the opposite of a sociopath was.

But it wasn't like I could say any of that, so I said instead, "Because you cried like a baby that time we watched the video of the kitten climbing out of its cage into the one next to it."

"It wanted to be with its friend !" he said and swatted me on the ass with his shirt. "Besides, I was super fucking high."

I laughed and then, when we reached the stairs, I said, "Race you!" and got a head start.

He beat me to the top anyway.

CHAPTER

FIVE

JACOB

2121 miles to go

Fall Creek Falls, TN

Getting the tent up was pretty easy even if we had to read the instructions to find out where to slot in the bendy poles. Dinner was less of a success. Back in Boone we'd hit up a grocery store and grabbed a lot of stuff in cans, none of which was very appetizing when we could smell people doing actual grilling at nearby campsites. But it was cheap, which was the point. And wasn't that part of the fun of camping, pretending we were pioneers or some shit?

That was what I told myself as I ate my beans, anyway. And it was pretty chill, sitting round the campfire I'd made and watching Matt grin around his spoon and laugh at some dumb joke I'd made. He was the happiest I'd seen him in a while. I figured it was because he was excited to see his dad, but part of me liked to think that maybe I was the reason too.

We'd laid our wet shorts on the hood of the car to dry when we got back and Matt was wearing an oversized hoodie and old jeans that made him look almost fragile. He'd always been smaller than me, even though he was forever shoveling food in his mouth. Mom sometimes looked in the refrigerator after he'd gone and asked if his

legs were hollow. I'd built some muscle in the last few years, but Matt was as skinny as ever. I sometimes thought that was part of why I felt so protective of him. Like my big brother instincts were activated or something, because they sure as hell never had been with Luke. Then again Luke was built like a linebacker. He could look after himself just fine, plus he had a bunch of friends. Matt only had me.

Like, his mom worked a lot of hours and even when she was home, it was like she wasn't really there. Even before she'd been wrapped up in her new boyfriend, she'd been as antisocial as Matt in her own way. In all the years Matt and I had been friends, she'd probably only met my parents maybe three times. Matt always said his dad had been the fun one—right until he left.

Matt caught me watching him and his smile widened. "Wanna find some sticks?"

"What for?"

He reached into the grocery bag next to him and pulled out a bag of marshmallows and waved it at me. "Duh, we're camping. We need to set these on fire."

"Did we get graham crackers and chocolate?"

"Yeah, but you ate them on the way here, remember?"

"I didn't know they were for s'mores."

Matt gave me one of his narrow looks, the ones that looked more hostile than they really were. I mean, I hoped. "Bro, why would we buy graham crackers unless they were for s'mores? Who eats just graham crackers?"

"I like them."

“Weirdo,” Matt said and tossed the bag of marshmallows at me. “Go find some sticks.”

I went and found some sticks. When I got back to the campsite, Matt was sitting cross-legged by our little fire with his sketchpad on his knee. He flipped it closed as I approached and tucked his pencil up his sleeve. He liked to sketch when he got the chance, even though he hardly ever let me see what he’d drawn .

I sat down beside him and showed him the sticks I’d found.

He grabbed one and waved it through the fire a few times.

“What are you doing that for?”

“I’m sterilizing it. What if a raccoon pissed on it or something?”

“If a raccoon pissed on it, I don’t think that would help. Also, it would probably smell like raccoon piss.”

“What does that even smell like?”

“Well, not good probably!” I snatched the stick back and sniffed it. “It’s fine. It smells like a stick.”

Matt rolled his eyes and grabbed it back, holding it over the flames again—for too long, it turned out, because it caught fire. He yelped and dropped it and then took my stick. I probably deserved it for laughing so hard.

“Maybe toasted marshmallows are overrated,” he said a while later when his third attempt at toasting a marshmallow ended with it bursting into flames and most of it dropping into the fire. Again.

“You’re doing it wrong.”

Matt’s brow scrunched up the way it did when he knew I was right but he wasn’t going to admit it. “It’s holding a stick. How can I be doing it wrong?”

“You’re getting too close to the flames too fast. That’s why it’s melting.”

Matt’s expression did something complicated at that.

“You have to go slow and keep turning it,” I said, taking the stick off him and shoving two marshmallows on the end. I held them over the flames, far enough away that they didn’t catch fire, and slowly turned them. When the outside was a glossy golden brown and tiny bubbles appeared on the surface, I held the stick out to Matt. “Try these.”

He pulled the first marshmallow off, tossing it from hand to hand for a second before shoving it into his mouth, and then his eyes slipped closed. “That’s so goood .”

I hadn’t heard anyone make a sound like that outside of Pornhub, and no, I had no fucking idea why my brain had made that association while I was watching my best friend lick his sticky fingers, okay? It was super fucking uncomfortable.

I tried to laugh it off, but I made a creaking, wheezing sound instead.

Matt opened his eyes. “What?”

“What?”

He pulled the second marshmallow off and handed it to me, then stuck his hand in the bag of marshmallows and skewered another one with his stick. “Okay, I think I got it now.”

He held out the stick and turned it slowly, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth like it always did when he was concentrating. When nothing burst into flames, he shot me a triumphant grin.

I grabbed myself another stick and waved it through the flames. “Gotta sterilize it,” I said. He jabbed me in the ribs with his marshmallowy stick, so I guessed he didn’t care too much about germs after all.

“Why’d we wait so long to do something like this? Just the two of us?” I asked once we’d both stopped laughing, and Matt shot me a wry look. “What?”

“What?” He laughed. “Dude, you always had like homework, and your job, and your parents on your case, and girlfriends , and?—”

“I didn’t always have girlfriends.”

“You had Layla.”

I still felt a little bad about Layla. Like, it had always felt as though she was way more into being my girlfriend than I was into being her boyfriend. I liked her. I liked her a lot. I wouldn’t have gone out with her when she asked me otherwise. But she’d always complained that she wasn’t my top priority, which, to be fair to her, was true. I had been a pretty shit boyfriend probably. Even now we’d broken up, she was still checking in on me when I hadn’t even thought of her once until she’d texted .

And I still hadn’t texted back.

“Honestly?” I stared into the fire. “Layla deserved a better boyfriend than me. Anyone deserves a better boyfriend than me.”

“Oh, fuck off with your pity party,” Matt said. “Layla’s clingy and you’re chill, that’s

all. At least you got laid, right?”

“Don’t talk about her like that.”

“Like what? She is clingy.”

“No, like she’s just a thing I used to get laid. That’s not fair. I like Layla. I just wasn’t as into her as she was into me.”

Matt’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t mean it like that. Like, you wouldn’t do that to someone. Use them.”

“I mean...” I chewed on my bottom lip. “It sort of sounds like I did, though, right? I just said I knew she was into me more than I was into her.”

Matt stabbed me with his stick again. “You’re overthinking it. You don’t need to feel bad just because you didn’t want to put a ring on it. Why would you feel bad about getting laid? That’s what you do when you’re dating someone. And she was into it, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, guilt squirming low in my gut. Layla had been into it. In fact she’d been the one to start things the few times we’d actually had sex. I’d never pressured her. I’d liked making out, but every time we’d gone further I’d been so stressed about getting busted that I’d mostly just wanted to get it done before anyone caught me with my pants around my ankles. My parents were cool, so it would have been embarrassing to get caught but not the end of the world. But Layla’s parents had the Ten Commandments in cross-stitch in the bathroom and The Last Supper in their kitchen, so that would have been a whole other thing. That was maybe why I hadn’t enjoyed it that much, if I was honest. Sex was probably a lot more fun when you weren’t listening out for footsteps on the stairs and clenching your sphincter so tight you could crap diamonds.

“Anyway, I’m glad we’re doing this now,” Matt said, giving me a lopsided smile and pushing his dark hair back out of his eyes.

The fire crackled in the darkness, and the sounds of the other campers settling in drifted over the night air. We spent the next little while roasting the rest of the marshmallows, with Matt wondering aloud if s’mores would have been better, which was his not-so-subtle way of hinting I’d better not eat the graham crackers and chocolate beforehand next time.

A light breeze teased the back of my neck, providing some relief from the humidity, and I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, soaking up the cool air against my skin. When I opened my eyes again, Matt was watching me and then his gaze flicked down to where his pencil was moving rapidly against the page of his sketchpad.

“What are you drawing? Our stunning view of the bathhouse?”

He flipped the page shut. “Something like that.” He folded the book over, then wrapped the ever-present elastic band around it and shoved it into the pocket of his hoodie. “We should probably go shower.”

I raised an arm, sniffed my pit, and grimaced. He wasn’t wrong. We’d worked up a sweat getting the tent up, and I smelled of woodsmoke as well. The smoke I could live with. My own body odor, not so much. Plus our sleeping bags would be pretty gross in no time at all if we got in them dirty.

I kind of wished we could stay by the fire all night, eating marshmallows and basking in the glow of the flames, but if we were going to make it across the country and back before college started, we needed to sleep.

Besides, I was kind of looking forward to spending the night in the tent. It’d be fun.

The tent was not fun.

I'd be the first to admit that forward planning wasn't exactly our strong point and when we'd bought our camping supplies we'd been more concerned with the price tag than anything else. The tent was barely big enough for both of us to lie down in, and the yoga mats we'd bought for mattresses were basically useless, with every stone and branch and tree root poking into my back. I might as well have been lying directly in the dirt.

I rolled over for the fifth time trying to get comfortable, and my head brushed the wall of the tent, making that creepy, whispery noise that nylon does. Matt let out a frustrated huff and propped himself up on his elbows. "This yoga mat fucking sucks."

I sat up next to him, my sleeping bag pooling around my waist. "So does this tent."

"And it's hot ." I heard his sleeping bag rustling, then the rasp of a zipper as he opened the tent.

"What are you doing? A bear could come in!"

He flapped the door of the tent, and the breeze was so good. "We're surrounded by other campsites. Some of them have toddlers. Why would a bear eat us and not a tiny defenseless toddler?"

"Maybe they want more than a snack."

"Yeah, but eating the toddler will slow them down and we'll have time to run away."

There were so many holes in that logic I didn't know where to start, but the breeze really was nice, so I let it go and lay back down, leaving my sleeping bag unzipped. A twig poked at my hip and in desperation I climbed out of the bag and lay on top of it.

The extra half inch of padding made a real difference. “Hey,” I said, “if you lie on top of the sleeping bag, it sucks less.”

I heard Matt shuffle out of his bag. “Huh. It does.”

We lay there for a while, listening to the quiet thwap of the tent door flapping in the wind. Someone must have had a Bluetooth speaker, and the sound of Elvis crooning about wise men and falling in love floated across the campground.

“Hey,” I said. “You know what we should do?”

“What?”

“We should go to Graceland.”

“Dude, did Kerouac go to Graceland?”

“I don’t know. Did he?”

“Well, it probably wasn’t around then. But the point is he wouldn’t have gone to it even if it was.”

“Did Kerouac actually have fun on his road trip, or was he too busy being too cool for school?”

“Have you even read On The Road ?” Matt asked me.

“No. Have you?”

He didn’t answer, which was a dead giveaway, so I laughed. He punched me in the arm.

I rolled over and something sharp poked at my kidney. I wished I'd thought to buy two yoga mats. Next time we passed a Walmart I'd stop and grab another one, but that wouldn't help me tonight. I was just going to have to put up with a shitty night's sleep, between the lack of padding and Matt being jammed up right next to me. We might as well have been sharing a bed.

It was as I closed my eyes that I had a flash of genius. I sat up and grabbed our flashlight, turning it on and pointing it at Matt. "Hey."

The beam of light hit him full in the face. "What the fuck?" Matt squawked as he scrambled to sit up, somehow managing to glare while still squinting from the brightness. I quickly lowered the flashlight.

"Sorry." I tugged at the edge of his yoga mat. "I have an idea. What if we stack the mats and put both sleeping bags on top? We might actually get some sleep."

Matt stared at me silently for a second and then gestured the length of my body. "There won't be room for both of us."

"Yes, there will. You're skinny as fuck and we'll lie on our sides. Can we at least try?" I put on my best public service announcement voice and intoned, "Driver fatigue is no joke," but I was only half kidding.

Matt rolled his eyes and huffed out a sigh. "I mean, I guess. But if it sucks I want my own mat back."

"Deal."

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CHAPTER

SIX

MATT

2121 miles to go

Fall Creek Falls, TN, to Memphis, TN

This sucked.

It sucked because my dick hated me, and I hated my dick right back. It was going to ruin everything, and it didn't even care. No, all that little fucker was interested in was the way Jacob was nestled up next to me. He radiated warmth and smelled of soap and skin, and being this close just made me want him more than I already did. So of course my dick decided that now was the ideal time to get hard.

Fuck that guy, seriously.

Jacob hadn't been wrong—two yoga mats were more comfy than one—but I still couldn't sleep, not with my dick throbbing in my shorts and my heart pounding in my chest as I prayed Jacob wouldn't discover the raging boner that was currently a hair's breadth from touching his ass.

I couldn't exactly shuffle away. I was balanced on the edge of the mat as it was. And there definitely wasn't room to roll onto my back. So I was stuck lying there in boner

limbo, hoping my hard-on would get the hint that nothing was happening, nothing was going to happen, and it might as well give up .

Sadly, my dick was as stubborn as me and showed no signs of flagging. I contemplated getting up and going to rub one out in the bathhouse, but I had no idea where my shoes were and I wasn't going to walk across the campground barefoot in the dark with a stiff dick. That just seemed like asking for trouble. Like, it would be just my luck that a dick-loving bear would appear—and I didn't mean the type from Grindr.

Jacob sighed in his sleep and moved his head, and the curls at the back of his head brushed my cheek. I stared at the blond strands for a long minute, wondering if he'd notice if I ran my fingers through them while he slept, and my dick chubbed up more at the thought.

Okay, no. Fuck this.

I huffed and rolled over so I was facing away from Jacob and lying halfway on the dirt, curled in on myself like a pill bug.

Jacob startled awake at the movement and a moment later a hand patted at my hip and down my thigh, searching. "What are you doing over there?"

"Can't sleep with your fucking hair in my face," I lied.

"Sorry." There was movement behind me, and Jacob draped an arm around me and dragged me back onto the mats, then left his hand resting near my stomach. "Better?"

No, it was not better. It was so much worse.

Now I had the entire length of Jacob pressed against my back, and it was just as

awesome as I'd always dreamed—except for the part where we weren't dating and this wasn't cuddling. It didn't mean a thing.

Try telling that to my dick, though. It was under the impression progress had been made and was standing at attention like a good little soldier reporting for duty. I closed my eyes and took several slow, deep breaths. I really was tired, what with walking and swimming and setting up camp. Maybe if I lay here long enough, my dick would take the hint, and then I could get some sleep.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Jacob said the next morning when I stumbled into the bathhouse, and seriously, fuck him. How was he so bright and cheerful when I'd spent most of the night trying to ignore a boner? Which had been a huge fail, by the way. He dropped his toothbrush back in the fancy toiletry bag his parents had gotten him for college and said, “Let's hit the road and get some breakfast! I'll pack up the tent. See you back at the car in five?”

What, so now I wasn't even allowed a nice long shower to tug one out?

Fuck him.

I grunted, clutching my towel in front of my dick, and shuffled toward one of the cubicles. Hell, maybe I'd jerk off after all and?—

An old man in shower shoes walked into the bathhouse, farted, and killed all thoughts of that.

I locked my cubicle door, undressed and turned the water on, and thought about drowning myself under the shower, but honestly, who had the energy for that on the zero amount of sleep I'd had? Not me. I spent a few minutes standing with my head tipped back under the water in an effort to feel more alive. It didn't help much, but I managed to get myself clean before the hot water ran out. As I toweled myself dry, I

tried to figure out how I was going to make it to California without humping Jacob's leg in my sleep. If the worst happened, maybe I could pass it off as an automatic response to having someone near me. Sleep humping—like sleepwalking, only hornier.

Hell, at one point last night I'd thought I'd felt Jacob's dick pressing against my ass—although that could have been wishful thinking. My point was it was a plausible cover story. I was going to come out to Jacob, but I wanted to do it on my own terms and not be incriminated by my misbehaving dick. The last thing I wanted was for him to be weirded out or think I'd been staring at him while he slept or something.

Not that I needed to stare. I knew every inch of that face. The curve of his smile, the freckles scattered over his nose after a lifetime of summers spent outside, that tiny scar above his left eyebrow that was a souvenir from when Luke threw a rock at him that time. I knew his face as well as I knew my own.

I ignored the unhappy ache in my stomach as I got dressed and told myself I was just hungry and it had nothing to do with the fact I was thinking about how much I was going to miss Jacob once I was living in California with Dad. My new life was going to be perfect. It was going to be everything I'd ever wished for. Nobody in California would know I was trailer trash. I'd soak up the sun and connect with my dad in a way we'd never had a chance to before, and I'd get to be a part of a family. The only person I'd miss from my old life was Jacob, and he was going to college anyway, so there was nothing keeping me in Cape Charles.

Still, that unhappy ache intensified when I got back to our site and Jacob flashed me a bright smile as he shoved the tent into the back of the RAV4. Who else would ever look at me like that? Like they were glad to see me and not just resigned to it?

Yeah, okay, I definitely had the hungry sads. I shoved my stuff into the back of the RAV4 and got in the car. "How far until breakfast?"

Jacob shrugged. “I guess as soon as we see somewhere that’s decent?” He rummaged in his bag and pulled out my favorite type of granola bar and tossed it to me. “Here. I know you get cranky when you’re hungry.”

And just that small action, and him knowing that about me, immediately had me feeling better. Although that could also have been the granola.

After we found a gas station that sold breakfast burritos, we hit the road. I settled into the passenger seat and I was so tired I didn’t even give Jacob shit about his playlist. He gave me a sideways glance like he wanted to ask what was wrong—Jacob always knew when something was wrong—but in the end he didn’t say anything.

I spent the first part of the drive staring out the window, the miles of endless flat plains sending me into a daze, and at some point the daze must have turned into actual sleep because the next thing I knew Sleep Token was blasting, I had a crick in my neck, and the sun was high in the sky. I blinked myself awake and Jacob grinned at me. “Aw, is someone a sleepy panda?”

“I slept like shit last night,” I said, my voice rough. I cleared my throat. “Someone was all up in my”—don’t say ass, don’t say ass— “space.”

Jacob looked sheepish. “Sorry.”

We drove for a while more before we spotted a sign for Walmart. Jacob took the exit ramp and we found it easily enough. Since we’d done such a shit job of planning so far and had paid with a sleepless night, we took the time to make a list before we grabbed a cart and got what we needed. More yoga mats. Bug spray. Extra deodorant because that tent was small. An extra towel each. Wet wipes. Coke and Mountain Dew. A pair of aviators that I bought for no other reason than they were two dollars on clearance—that, and they made Jacob laugh and call me Maverick. We also got

fruit and protein bars and jerky and other things that didn't need to be kept cool and that we could eat for breakfast. I added graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows. I threw an extra box of graham crackers in the cart and when Jacob shot me a sideways look, I shrugged. "Extra for you to snack on." Weirdo, I didn't add, but the grin he gave me told me he heard it anyway.

Once we'd loaded our stuff in the RAV4, Jacob held up the keys. "Wanna drive for a while?"

My heart rabbitted in my chest, a combination of nerves and excitement. I hadn't had my license for long and part of me was convinced that I'd either run us off the road or fuck up in other as yet unspecified ways, but I told that part of me to shut the fuck up. I nodded and grabbed the keys, grinning in spite of my nervousness. It wasn't like I could get lost driving in a straight line on the highway.

I jumped in the driver's door and took a minute to adjust the seat and the mirrors, conscious of Jacob watching me. "Shut up," I said. "I'm getting comfortable."

"I didn't say anything." And the thing was, he wouldn't. If I needed to sit here for half an hour fiddling with the seat settings, Jacob would let me and he wouldn't make it a big deal. He knew I got nervous over shit, but he always pretended he hadn't noticed.

I gave the seat one last tweak, checked my mirrors, slipped on my two-dollar shades, and eased out of the parking lot and onto the road that led back to the highway. Traffic was light and I made it onto I-40 without any problems, and it was pretty much smooth sailing after that. Okay, fine, there were a couple of lane changes where I cut it close and I heard Jacob's sharp intake of breath, but he never said anything, so neither did I. Near misses were still misses, right?

By the time we were an hour into the drive, I'd gotten the hang of driving on the

highway, and when Jacob pointed to a sign advertising Memphis barbecue that said Wanna Stop? I was almost sad that we were pulling over.

I did, though, because come on. This was barbecue. I took the off-ramp and followed the signs to BBQ Shack. The restaurant itself was small and well-weathered and there was a line that reached out the door, but I didn't care because it smelled amazing. Jacob grinned at me and I grinned back as it struck me that we were really doing this, traveling across the country and stopping at roadside diners like we were Guy Fieri, if Guy Fieri was two kids from Virginia in a trench coat.

The line moved pretty quickly, and when we got to the front, we ordered two pulled pork sandwiches with fries and drinks. Then we took our tray outside and claimed a spot at one of the wooden picnic tables that were set up under the shade of an oak tree. My stomach growled as I unwrapped my sandwich and I took a bite, groaning at the combination of tender pork, rich barbecue sauce, and tangy coleslaw. Sauce dripped down my chin and I flicked my tongue out to catch it.

"This is fucking amazing," I said around another mouthful of sandwich.

"Mmmm." Jacob took a bite and moaned, and when I glanced over he had his head tipped back and his eyes closed like he was having some sort of religious experience—or possibly a sexual one. I grabbed my soda and sucked on the straw, my throat suddenly dry.

The last thing I needed right now was to imagine what Jacob looked like having sex. It would be all too easy for that to turn into imagining him having sex with me . Which was never happening, because Jacob was straight. It didn't stop me wanting it, though. Wanting him . And like, it wasn't just because of how he looked and sounded when he was eating a pulled pork sandwich. It was because I loved him. I'd loved him from the moment we first became friends, and nothing had ever changed that. Nothing could . But it would never be the right sort of love because he was straight

and I wasn't a girl. That was just the way it was. Wishing my sad gay little heart out wouldn't change a thing. Jacob would still be straight and the sky would still be blue.

"You okay?" he asked me, wiping sauce off his chin with his hand. "You're being extra weird today."

"No, I'm not," I said, which was probably a defensive enough response that he could just add it to the list of weirdness charges he was building against me. I set my sandwich aside, wiped my hands on a napkin, and grabbed the BBQ Shack menu and a sharpie from my pocket. I started sketching a cartoon of a squirrel that was hanging around the tables, just so I wouldn't have to look Jacob in the eye.

"You are." He pointed a barbecue-sauce-covered finger at the squirrel and then at me. "You're more squirrely than Sandy Cheeks."

"A SpongeBob reference, really? We're not ten. This is juvenile."

"No, this is Patrick." And then he howled with laughter.

Like, fuck him. Not only was I in love with my straight best friend, but I couldn't even be pissed at him for it because the asshole was hilarious. I flicked a piece of pulled pork at him. It landed on the table between us and he ate it anyway, because he was gross.

"Seriously, though," he said as we finished our sandwiches. "Are you okay? You're not having second thoughts about this trip, are you?"

"What? No! Jesus, we just graduated, man. It's our last summer, and we already wasted most of it doing what we do every summer. We're supposed to do something amazing to celebrate finishing high school, and staying in Cape Charles sure as hell wasn't it."

“Eh, bumming around and going swimming every day is fun,” he said. “It’s not epic, but it’s nice. Oh! And we could have laughed at Charlie’s lame dating moves. I wonder if Tanner’s called him yet.”

“He seemed pretty excited to get his number.”

“You think Charlie’s messed it up yet? He’s shy as hell and he has zero game. He has even less game than you.”

“I have game,” I said. I didn’t, but I must have had something because that guy at the gas station back in Goose Run had given me a postcard with his number on it and said to call him if I was ever back in town. “I have?—”

And then I snapped my mouth shut because that wasn’t something I wanted to share with Jacob.

“You have what?” Jacob asked, showing me his familiar teasing smile. He teased and he trash-talked and easily gave as good as he got, but he was never mean about it. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body .

And all of a sudden, I wondered what was stopping me from telling him. I’d figured out I was gay when I was twelve, but it hadn’t been the right time then. I hadn’t been ready. And the older I got, the bigger the secret got in my mind, you know? But this was our last summer, and he was my best friend. Didn’t he deserve to know this thing about me before the rest of the world found out first? And, more importantly, didn’t I deserve to be who I was when I was around him?

I opened my mouth to tell him the most terrifying secret I’d ever had, and his phone blasted out “At The Risk of Feeling Dumb.”

He rolled his eyes and took the call. “Hey, Mom. What’s—” His eyes got bigger and

bigger and his jaw dropped, and then he said, “Okay.” He held the phone out to me.
“It’s Mom. She wants to talk to you, and she sounds mad .”

Oh shit.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

JACOB

1809 miles to go

Memphis, TN

I knew Matt was in deep shit when Mom said, “I need to speak to Matthew,” because she never used his full name like. Ever.

The way he went pale when I held out the phone confirmed it. He took it gingerly, like it was a land mine that was seconds from exploding, and honestly, given the frosty tone my mom had used, he was right to be afraid. Mom had a hell of a long fuse, but when she was done with your shit, you heard about it—and I had a feeling Matt was about to hear all about it.

I gathered up the wrappers from our lunch and carried them over to the trash can so it didn’t look like I was eavesdropping—not that Matt was getting to say much anyway. He was biting his bottom lip and glancing at me, and he looked about a second away from shitting himself. I went and sat back down just in time to hear, “No, Jacob didn’t know, I swear.” A pause. “Yes, ma’am. I understand. I will.”

I could hear Mom’s voice again, and as she spoke Matt’s expression went from cowed to pissed in the blink of an eye. “I said I’ll call her, not that I’m coming back.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Mercer, but if it took her this long to notice I was gone, do you really think she's going to miss me?"

What?

Matt listened again for a minute and said, "I will," before handing the phone to me with a grimace. "She wants to talk to you."

Gut churning, I said, "Mom?"

"Tell me you didn't know what Matt was planning," she said, and I swear I could hear the hand on her hip.

"I still don't know what Matt's planning," I said. "I thought we were going to visit his dad." I glanced over, but Matt's head was bent over his drawing as he pretended to be absorbed in finishing his sketch of the squirrel.

He'd always been a shitty liar. Although it looked like maybe he'd gotten better at it over the years because the next thing Mom said was, "So you didn't know he plans on staying in California? Or that he didn't even tell his mother he was leaving?"

"What? No, he's been calling her," I said—right before I realized I only had Matt's word for that, and it turned out Matt's word wasn't worth shit.

My mom sighed. "Jacob, honey, he left a note while she was staying at her boyfriend's for the weekend saying he's going to live with his father, and he's not taking her calls. So she came over to see if we knew anything."

"I—Mom, I swear I didn't know."

The churning in my gut intensified as I tried to process what she was telling me. Matt

had left without telling his mom and he was planning on living with his dad, and he'd kept it secret from me. What the fuck was I meant to do with all of that?

Matt was moody and a little weird and his dad leaving had messed him up in a lot of ways, but I'd always thought I could trust him. Finding out I was wrong cut deep. It was almost like all the years we'd had each other's backs counted for nothing. Confusion, hurt, and rejection welled up in me as I took in the fact that Matt had been planning to ditch me in California after using me as a cross-country Uber service, and he hadn't even cared enough about our friendship to tell me. Hell, hurt didn't begin to cover it.

"Jacob?" my mom said in a tone that let me know it wasn't the first time she'd spoken.

I knew she probably had a whole laundry list of instructions for how to uncluster this particular fuck—Mom was good at that—but I couldn't talk to her right now. "Sorry, Mom. I—I gotta go." My voice cracked.

Her tone went soft. "Call me later, Jakey."

She hadn't called me that since I was five. So this was probably the wrong time to remind her that I was eighteen, right? That we were both eighteen and, like, legally we could do whatever we wanted. Honestly, it wouldn't have made a difference to my mom. This shit wouldn't fly if we were thirty-five either.

"Okay." I ended the call and dropped the phone on the table and looked over at Matt.

His gaze was wary and his mouth was pressed in a thin line. I could almost see the bullshit excuses and arguments vibrating under his skin, waiting to get free, and the furrow in his brow was deeper than the Grand Canyon.

I won't lie, I kind of wanted to storm off and drive out of there and leave him behind, but two things were stopping me. One, this was Matt , and I knew that he was probably freaking out right now. And two, that lying little bastard still had my car keys.

"You're moving to California?" I asked him. "For good?"

He gave me a narrow-eyed, angry look, like somehow I was the one who'd screwed up here. He sneered. "Like, why wouldn't I? You think I'm gonna stick around and go to community college in Melfa instead?"

"But it's on the other side of the country," I said. From home. From me . There was already so much changing this summer, all our friends—well, my friends, since Matt barely liked anyone—scattering on the wind. Matt wasn't supposed to leave. He couldn't leave. Except here he was already leaving, hundreds of miles from Cape Charles because I'd fucking driven him, and I was only just finding out about it.

"Yeah," he drawled. "Gold star to Jacob for geography."

"Now you're just being an asshole," I said as the betrayal twisted inside me, transforming into anger. "Not that that's anything new."

"If that's how you feel, at least you won't miss me," he said, his eyes narrowing even further, "and Mom sure as hell won't. Did you know today's the first time she's been home since we left? She's been staying at Zeke's." He rolled his eyes. "So it's not like she'll care that I'm gone." He stuck his chin out the way he did when he was nervous or frightened but trying to hide it.

"You didn't answer her calls, though," I said, not willing to let go of my anger yet. Matt had fucked up, and he didn't get a free pass just because we'd been friends forever.

“I blocked her number,” he muttered.

The couple at the next table glanced over curiously, and I decided that if Matt and I were going to have the straight guy equivalent of a lovers’ tiff, I wasn’t doing it at the BBQ Shack.

I stood and stalked over to the car, hands shoved in my pockets, and Matt followed. He thrust the keys at me silently, and I unlocked the doors and we climbed in. I stared at the console for around thirty seconds before the heat got stifling, and I started the engine and turned the AC to high. The cold air blasted against my heated skin, and it still wasn’t as chilly as the sudden distance between us. We sat there for a minute and Matt cleared his throat. “Jacob?—”

“Save it,” I snapped and slammed the car into Drive so hard that we lurched forward out of the parking spot. It was some passive aggressive bullshit, and I knew it was, but I couldn’t help it. I was pissed. Matt was meant to be my anchor while everything else in my life was adrift, and anchors didn’t move. That was the point of them.

We drove without speaking. When the silence got too loud I flipped on the radio, and since we were in Tennessee we landed on Classic Country FM. And let me tell you, hearing Patsy Cline falling to pieces did zero for my mood.

I could see Matt just itching to put on a playlist, but he must have realized that his best friend Spotify privileges had been revoked because he didn’t even make a sound as I flipped between a few more local radio channels. Of course, everything was coming up country. I got a small glow of satisfaction from knowing just how much he was hating it, so I turned it up.

How’s that feel, huh?

He clenched his hands around his stupid sketchbook, rolling the rubber band that held

it closed back and forth under his thumb. Hard. But he still didn't say anything, so I knew I was winning.

Funny how that didn't make me feel any less shit.

Matt was leaving me. It wasn't even that he'd lied, although I was plenty pissed about that. It was that he didn't think enough of me to bother letting me know so I could get used to the idea of life without him. Like, we'd just pull up at his dad's and he'd be, Well, nice knowing you , or some shit. Peace out .

Okay, so Matt would never say Peace out to anyone, but that kind of vibe.

Suddenly his giant duffel made so much more sense.

"So," I said, just to break the silence once we were a few more miles down the highway, and Matt flinched, "when were you going to tell me? Today? Tomorrow? Five minutes after we pulled up in your dad's driveway?"

He mumbled something.

"What?" I asked over the song.

He glared at me. "You're going away to college anyway."

"And coming home on weekends!"

"Bullshit," he said, jutting his chin out. He plucked the rubber band so loudly that he could have been playing a twanging guitar as backup for Patsy. "Like, maybe for the first few weeks, but then you wouldn't. "

"Why wouldn't I?" I demanded, putting my foot on the gas to get around a slow-

moving RV.

“Because you’d have a fucking life , that’s why!” He looked away so quickly I was surprised I didn’t hear his neck crack. “Pull over. I need to piss.”

I took the exit to the rest area, rolling my eyes. “Hurry up or we’ll end up behind Grampa Jed’s RV again.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Matt grumbled.

He was halfway across the parking lot when I called out, “Hey.”

He hesitated, listening.

“You’re planning on coming back, right?”

It was a low blow, and Matt jerked like he’d been shot. Then he flipped me off and stormed into the restroom. I got an uncomfortable squirming in my gut. It wasn’t in my nature to be mean, so when I said something shitty, it sat all kinds of wrong. Especially with Matt, because he wasn’t really an asshole. He acted like he was a bunch of the time, but mostly that was just his hurt and insecurity wearing a bad wig.

This one time when we were nine, he crashed his bike and skinned both his knees so bad that it shredded his jeans. I would have burst into tears, but Matt? He picked up his bike, kicked it, and called it a motherfucker. It was the first time I’d heard a kid say that word. I hadn’t known kids were able to swear. Like, biologically. I thought it was something that only kicked in when you turned into a teenager, like wisdom teeth and body odor.

Matt had laughed his ass off when I’d told him years later. Not many people could make Matt laugh, but I could. But instead of making him laugh and making the most

of our time together, what was I doing now? I was acting ugly, just because I'd had my feelings hurt.

Fuck.

I slumped in my seat. We still had a few days left of this road trip, and it was up to us whether they were good days or whether they were shit days. And I'd have plenty of shit days after Matt was gone. I didn't need to start with a negative balance. Even if I was mad at him, I needed to get over myself. Matt was finally getting to live with his dad, and as his best friend, I should be glad for him, not sulking because he hadn't told me his plans.

The silence was broken by a loud thwap as the elastic band holding Matt's sketchbook together snapped, sending loose papers skittering across his seat.

I hoped it wasn't a metaphor for our friendship.

Great. Another thing for him to be pissed at me about, even though I hadn't even touched it. I peered out the window and saw him approaching, hands shoved in his pockets and a glower on his face. I reached over and began to stack the bits of paper, napkins, leaves, and whatever fucking else he'd stashed in his book together.

He wrenched his door open. "What are you doing?"

"It broke," I said. "I wasn't looking at anything. I?—"

Except suddenly I was looking at something. It was the blank back of a postcard. It must have been the postcard he'd bought at that gas station at Goose Run because he was chronicling our road trip or whatever. Like calling it chronicling was somehow cooler than saying scrapbooking, which was what this basically was.

And there was just something about the look on Matt's face—shocked, maybe even scared—that made me turn the postcard over and look at the front. It was a big white cartoon goose giving a thumbs-up—a wings-up?—and across the top it said, “Goose Run—a honking good spot!” but that wasn't what caught my attention. It was the scrawl underneath.

434-555-7890. DANNY. XXX

There was a smudged, oily thumbprint next to it, as if his name wasn't enough of a signature.

What the fuck?

Matt snatched the card from me, his cheeks flushed. “Don't touch my stuff! ”

I thought about the way the guy had been super friendly and the way Matt had laughed at his jokes, and I knew he hadn't bought the card. “But...you're straight?”

Matt didn't say anything for a few seconds, busy stuffing the loose papers back into his sketchbook. He was concentrating on the task like he was disarming a bomb or something, his jaw clenched and his face red.

“Matt?” I asked, and he didn't look up. My stomach swooped and my voice shook when I said, “Matty?”

His head snapped up. “What if I wasn't?”

“What?”

“What if I wasn't straight?”

It took a second for what he was saying to sink in, and my first thought was that I absolutely could not afford to fuck this up. “So what if you weren’t?” I said, my heart racing for reasons I couldn’t explain. I met his gaze and held it. “I wouldn’t care.”

Matt’s shoulders, which had been hunched up around his ears, eased down a scant half inch. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Relief flitted over his face, there and gone again. I gestured at the postcard. “Are you gonna call the guy?”

Matt still didn’t meet my gaze. He just shook his head. “What’s the point?”

Right. Because he wasn’t coming home with me. He was staying in California.

That hurt.

The gay thing hurt too, and not because Matt was gay but because he hadn’t told me. And I didn’t want to make it about me, because it wasn’t, but I was allowed to feel hurt, wasn’t I? Matt knew all my secrets. So why hadn’t he trusted me enough to share his with me?

I knew coming out was different. I knew it had nothing to do with me.

I hated how it still hurt.

I hated how selfish that hurt made me feel .

“So, um, I guess you’ve got game after all,” I said. It was supposed to be a joke, but my tone was too cautious. I wasn’t sure if he’d think it was funny.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and his gaze met mine briefly before he dropped it again. “Don’t make it weird.”

“ You’re weird,” I said automatically, then blanched. “Shit. Fuck. I?—”

Matt snorted. “It’s fine. Are we going, or should I pitch the tent here while I wait for you to get your shit together?”

He got in the car and looked at me expectantly, making a hurry up gesture like he wasn’t the reason we’d stopped in the first place. Well, joke was on him.

“Nah,” I said. “I need to take a leak now. And while I’m in there, you better call your mom or you’ll have my mom on your ass, and you don’t want that, trust me.”

Matt pulled a face but he dragged his phone out of his pocket, and as I walked away I heard, “Hey, Mom? Yeah. It’s me.”

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

MATT

1809 miles to go

Memphis, TN, to Amarillo, TX

I hadn't known how much keeping secrets from Jacob had been weighing me down until I wasn't keeping them anymore. But the next day, now that I wasn't in a constant state of high alert, watching everything I said and did so I didn't give myself away, I found myself enjoying the trip. Or maybe that was because I knew these were the last days Jacob and I would spend together, and I was determined to wring every ounce of enjoyment from them I could.

I know. Shockingly positive for a miserable little asshole like me, right?

But it turned out that my mom had actually been worried about me—I knew this because she'd told me so repeatedly, at volume, when I'd called her—and despite the fact she was mad as all hell, hearing she cared enough to worry had untwisted some of the knots I'd tied myself up in. I'd convinced myself that she'd forgotten I existed, too busy with her shiny new boyfriend, but that was just my naturally suspicious nature kicking in. My mom always said I could find the cloud to every silver lining, and she wasn't wrong .

I wasn't going back, though, no matter what Mom said about California being a bad idea. Zeke and I were never going to be best buds, and I was sick of feeling like an intruder in my own home. Besides, my dad had always said I could live with him when I was older, so this was the best solution all round.

Jacob and I had talked when we'd stopped at Memphis. I'd asked if he'd be wigged out sharing a tent with me now he knew I was gay. He'd glared at me and told me to fuck off with that bullshit. So I guessed we were all right on that front. The other stuff? We were getting there. I knew he was still mad that I hadn't told him I was moving, and I didn't blame him. But I'd had my reasons. Jacob couldn't keep a secret to save his life, so really I'd done him a favor by not telling him, a fact I pointed out. We both knew he would have felt obliged to spill his guts to his parents and it would have been a whole mess, and then we wouldn't be having this epic road trip right now. Lucky for me, Jacob also couldn't hold a grudge to save his life. Not when it was me anyway.

After Memphis, we blew through Arkansas and most of Oklahoma in two days of driving, stopping mostly for meals and to stretch our legs. We saved money by camping, this time at the side of the road instead of at an actual campground, and showered the next day at a rest stop. It was what Kerouac would have done, if beatniks had camped. Or showered.

I still wanted Jacob, and I still wanted him to want me. That hadn't changed. But there'd been a shift in the air between us. Like, Jacob and I had always been physical. We punched each other's arms and wrestled and grabbed each other all the time. And I'd kinda thought that maybe Jacob would back off now he knew I was gay. But if anything, he was even more touchy-feely. I wasn't sure if he was trying to convince me or himself that my sexuality didn't matter, but after another night of what felt like having his hands on me every time I turned around, I wasn't sure I could take much more. It was the worst kind of torture. Or maybe the best. I couldn't decide. I soaked up every touch like the touch of the sun's rays because I was shameless and a little

desperate and it was so close to what I wanted. But it would never be anything more. Jacob was straight.

I guessed I was holding on to one more big secret after all—namely that I loved him and always had and probably always would. And what was the point in telling him?

Once this trip was over, we'd be over too.

"People are gonna ask us what we saw on this road trip, and the answer is just gas stations and rest stops," Jacob said as we stretched our legs somewhere in the flat nothingness between Clinton and Elk City.

I leaned against the car and watched a woman walk a little dog around on the dry grass by the parking lot. "What else should we see?"

"I don't know," he said. "Things. Places. More than the highway." He raised an eyebrow. "Things you can chronicle."

"Maybe I'm chronicling the interstate network," I said. "On-ramps and off-ramps and fast food places. You drive for days and everything looks the fucking same, and the only way you can tell you're moving at all is that at some point all the Hardee's turn into Carl's Jr! It's one of Dante's circles of hell probably, but I don't know which one."

"Is that another book you haven't read?" he asked me, one corner of his mouth lifting up in a grin.

"Yup. Like, I try to be all edgy and disaffected and full of existential angst, but it turns out there's a lot of assigned reading. So I decided it's easier to just be a dick instead."

His grin grew. “Well, you’re doing it right.” He looked at the lady with the dog. “We should have brought a dog on this trip. We could have killed it on Insta.”

“We have very different ideas of what a road trip is for,” I said, although who was I kidding? I’d follow an Insta of Jacob and a puppy in a heartbeat.

“Yeah, and your way is depressing.” He knocked his shoulder against mine, his grin faltering for a moment as his words skirted too close to the truth: that every hour brought us closer to California and to the end of our last summer together. And at the rate we were driving, it would be over far too soon.

Don’t get me wrong. I was excited for San Diego, and I couldn’t wait to see the look on my dad’s face when I turned up. He’d always said in the birthday cards he sent that it was a shame we lived so far apart. But starting a new chapter in my life meant closing the door on the old one, and I wasn’t quite ready for that to happen yet. So I said, “Well, we have time. Maybe we can go and see some shit. Like, I dunno, the Grand Canyon?”

Jacob’s face lit up. “Yes! We can take an extra day there. It’ll be awesome!”

I grinned back at him and he slung an arm around my shoulders affectionately. I leaned into the touch like the sad, greedy little gremlin I was and quietly celebrated adding an extra day to our trip.

We made it to Amarillo, Texas, just after lunchtime. It was hot, dry, and, as far as I could tell, built mostly out of concrete, right angles, and exhaust fumes. If there were nicer parts, I-40 kept us away from them.

“Do you want to see the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame?” Jacob asked me as we passed a sign for it. He wasn’t stupid enough to ask twice. “There must be something we can do here.”

“We can do lunch.”

“Well, obviously. I meant apart from lunch.”

“How the fuck does a horse even have a hall of fame?” I asked.

Jacob drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “That seems like the sort of question we could answer if we actually went.”

“Do you...do you really want to stop at the horse hall of fame?” I asked.

He looked wistful for just long enough for me to worry that he really did want to go before he broke and laughed. “Fuck, no. But let’s find something to do. ”

I pulled out my phone and looked up “things to do in Amarillo.”

“Hey! There’s a zoo!” I’d never been to a zoo. It was one of those things my dad had always promised we’d do, but in the end he’d never found the time.

Jacob gave me a serving of side-eye. “So, horses are a no go but a zoo is a yes?”

I rolled my eyes. “The horse place doesn’t have actual horses, dumbass.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “The zoo sounds fun. Let’s do that after lunch.”

We found a taco place that looked good and smelled even better and had our lunch. Then we pulled up directions to the zoo on the GPS and drove out there. We paid our admission, and when we went inside, it was honestly way cooler than I’d thought it would be. It was made better by Jacob keeping one hand on my hip and guiding me around the clusters of parents with strollers and the groups of little kids oohing and aahing over the animals. His palm was warm, pressing against the sliver of bare skin

where my shirt had ridden up and making me shiver. I kept waiting for him to notice and pull his hand away, but he seemed completely absorbed by the map he was clutching in his other hand.

We checked out the birds first, then the amphibians—which didn't take long since there were only two—with Jacob's hand resting on my hip the whole time. When he finally did move his hand, it was a relief and a disappointment all at once.

The ghost of his touch had faded by the time we reached the bears, and as we watched them wandering around their enclosure, I said, "At least we're not camping in bear country."

Jacob's brow furrowed. "I mean, I don't think we are."

"Nah, there'd be signs."

The furrow deepened. "Like, bear shit? What does that even look like?"

I bumped my shoulder against his. "No, but they have actual signs that say Watch Out for Bears. Right? "

"Dunno." He grinned and bumped me back, and we went to find the spider monkeys.

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking at the animals, and I made sure to take plenty of photos. I even sent one to Mom, hoping it wouldn't make her lose her shit all over again. I got that she was pissed I hadn't told her I was leaving, but it had also taken her days to notice because she was so busy with work and now with Zeke. And I wasn't being some pissy teenager who didn't like Mom's boyfriend. Zeke was fine, but his lease ran out soon and Mom had as good as said he was moving in. Not wanting to live together in an already cramped double-wide with very thin walls wasn't the same as not liking the guy. Though if he could learn to have a

conversation that wasn't about his collection of nine guitars and his plans to start a band, that'd be great. The point was we'd all be much happier if I was in California with Dad.

Mom didn't respond to my text, and I wondered if she was at work or if she was ignoring me.

"You okay?" Jacob asked me. "You wanna go see the cats again?"

"The bobcats?"

"No, the regular ones."

A cat on a leash had met us when we'd arrived. Like, just a house cat. That was weird, right? But I liked weird, and Jacob liked cats, so we went back to see the cats again. Jacob crouched down and petted the cat and it purred loudly at him. He was wearing a big dumb grin, like the cat was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen, and with the way the sunlight was bouncing off his messy blond hair, it almost looked like he had a halo.

I snapped a photo, then slipped my phone in my pocket and crouched down to pet the cat. It hissed at me, its back arching, and Jacob laughed. I flipped him the bird, only noticing the toddler watching me when he waved his middle finger enthusiastically in my direction. Shit. I pretended I hadn't seen him and stood and stretched, hoping that if we got out of there, his mom wouldn't come for me. "We should go. We need to find somewhere to camp."

Jacob straightened as well, but the way the corners of his mouth were curled up told me he'd seen what the kid had done and he was gonna give me shit about it later. I didn't mind. I'd pretend I was offended, sure, but in reality there weren't many more days left for Jacob to tease me, and I'd tuck it away in my memory bank along with

all the other times, just like I'd tucked the drawing I'd done of him when we were sitting around the campfire away for safekeeping in the back of my sketchbook. It was one of the best drawings I'd done, but I'd been too honest. I might as well have drawn cartoon hearts all around it and practiced signing Matthew Mercer in cursive with how obvious my feelings for Jacob were. Which was why it was now in the back of the sketchbook, face down and out of sight.

We looked around Amarillo for a while longer, taking in the sights, before we drove west and took a bunch of back roads until we found a place we could camp for the night where we wouldn't run into anyone and they wouldn't run into us. We got there just before dark and set up. We were getting pretty good at pitching our tent, and we finished up just as the last of the daylight melted into colored streaks across the sky.

Jacob settled on a log by the firepit and lit the campfire. Then he heated our canned franks and beans in the cheap shitty saucepan we'd grabbed at Walmart. He tipped it onto our tin plates and we ate in comfortable silence. The flames danced and crackled as we ate, and the firelight lit up the planes of Jacob's face, his teeth gleaming as he grinned at me.

I grinned back. Yeah, this was pretty great.

After we'd eaten I found some sticks and we made s'mores. I only set two marshmallows on fire this time, which was a new record for me. There was a full moon, and it gave everything a magical glow. We joked around and shot the shit like we always had, and it felt like things between us were getting back to normal. When I caught Jacob smothering a yawn, I nudged him with my elbow. "Let's go to bed."

He opened his mouth, probably to argue, but when the yawn escaped, he gave me a sheepish look. "I guess."

I got it. I wanted to stay awake too, knowing we only had a few nights left. But it had

been a long day, and I was fighting off sleep myself. I stood and stretched, and we made sure to put the fire out properly before we took turns in the tent changing into our sleep shorts. We settled in on our mats, and it wasn't long before Jacob's breathing had turned deep and even. I lay there listening to him for a while and resisted the urge to reach out and trace the soft curve of his belly with my palm.

I might be weird, but I drew the line at creeper-level weird.

I rolled away from Jacob's sleeping form and closed my eyes, and when I slept I had weird dreams where I was flipping off a bear while protecting Jacob with my pointy marshmallow stick.

I woke with a start and sat bolt upright, unsure why my heart was beating out of my chest. Jacob jerked awake as well. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Hear what?"

A loud crash came from just outside, followed by a rustling sound and what sounded like an animal snuffling around the door of the tent.

Oh shit.

Jacob turned to me, eyes wide. "Is it a bear?"

Shit. Had we ever found out if Texas was bear country? I couldn't remember. My stomach twisted with fear. "Stay still," I said in hushed tones. "They can sense movement."

Jacob blinked. "That's the T-Rex in Jurassic Park."

The snuffling noises grew louder, followed by the sound of claws scrabbling in the

dirt. Cold fear coursed through my veins. I tensed, ready to do something, although I wasn't sure what. Run? Fight? Curl up in a ball and cry? The snuffling got louder, and then there was a series of...squeaks? What the fuck?

I wasn't any kind of wildlife expert, but I was one hundred percent certain bears didn't sound like cartoon aliens. Well, ninety-nine percent anyway. I leaned over and grabbed the flashlight, and with a bravery that I absolutely didn't feel, said, "I'm gonna go see what it is."

"No, wait!" Jacob gripped my arm and for a second I thought he was gonna volunteer to go instead, but he just said, "I'll come with you."

I thought he expected me to argue, but I thrust the flashlight at him and said, "Okay. You hold the flashlight."

He took it from me and shuffled over to the tent opening. Once I was next to him, he grasped the zipper. "Ready?"

To be eaten by a bear? Fuck no.

"Course. What are you waiting for?"

Jacob swallowed loudly, and then he yanked the zipper up and shoved the flashlight outside, sweeping the beam of light from side to side.

A pair of yellow eyes glowed in the darkness about ten feet away from us, and Jacob let out a squeak of his own. Because it wasn't a bear sitting outside our tent. It was so much worse than that.

It was a fucking skunk .

We both froze, staring. “What do we do?” Jacob whispered.

The skunk shuffled toward us, squeaking and clicking, and panic set in. “We fucking run !”

I grabbed the car keys from where they were sitting on top of Jacob’s backpack, scrambled out of the tent, and took off for the RAV4 at a sprint that would have made Usain Bolt proud. My heart pounded against my rib cage as I pressed frantically at the unlock button on the key fob, then yanked the back door open and threw myself inside. I lay there panting, and a second later Jacob piled in next to me, grabbing the door and yanking it shut as he sprawled half on top of me. We stared at each other for a second, our chests heaving, before he said, “What do we do now?”

I considered it. There was no way I was going back to the tent and risking getting sprayed. And I didn’t want to get out of the car in case the skunk was pissed and lurking outside, looking for revenge. Really, there was only one thing to do. I shoved the keys at Jacob. “Obviously, we get the fuck out of Dodge.”

Jacob stared at me for a heartbeat, then the corners of his mouth twitched up and he said, “This isn’t Dodge, dumbass. It’s Amarillo.”

It was probably the adrenaline, but that dumb joke was suddenly the funniest thing I’d ever heard. I lost my shit laughing, shoving him in the chest, and he laughed right along with me. I mean, the whole thing was pretty fucking funny when you thought about it. We were trapped by a skunk, wearing our sleep shorts in a RAV4 in the middle of the night. Still, at least we had the keys.

“We should move, though,” I said once I’d stopped laughing. “Like, drive away so he thinks we’re gone. Then he might leave too.”

Jacob eyed the passenger door dubiously. “What if he’s right there in front of the tire

or something? I don't want to run over him."

"He's not right there," I said, just before there was a flurry of squeaking and chittering from directly under the window.

Jacob bit his lip. "If we drive away, someone might steal all our stuff. You think we could distract the skunk then grab the tent?"

It was my turn to throw him a doubtful look. But I wasn't willing to risk opening the doors. "You remember what happened to Michael, right?"

This kid we went to school with had gotten sprayed one time and he'd smelled rank for weeks. Six years later, his nickname was still Skunk. Anyway, point was, I wasn't going to spend my last days with Jacob smelling like ass. And he had a good point about someone stealing our shit. I couldn't afford to replace everything, and neither could he. "Okay," I said finally. "We sleep here." I eyed the back seat doubtfully. Then I leaned forward and started to shimmy through the gap between the seats, twisting and squirming as I made my way to the front passenger seat.

"What are you doing?" Jacob asked in a strangled tone, just as I found myself wedged halfway over the center console.

I glanced back to find that my ass was about an inch from his face. The waistband of my sleep shorts had rucked down far enough that the top of my ass was visible, and Jacob was staring wide-eyed like he couldn't believe I was pulling this shit.

Awesome.

I heaved myself forward and half climbed, half fell into the front seat, cheeks burning. "I figured I'd sleep in the front so we had more space, is all."

“Oh,” Jacob said quietly. “Right.”

I hitched my shorts up, settled in, and reclined the passenger seat...and found myself staring into the light of the full moon. It did not hit my eye like a big pizza pie. It hit my eye like the interrogation lamps they shone in the prisoner’s face in one of those old spy movies. My pale skin glowed, making me look like some sort of alien.

Fuck. There was no way I could sleep like this. I let out a groan.

“What?”

“Moon’s too bright. And my shades are in the tent.”

Jacob let out a sigh. “Get back here then. We can both fit.”

I contemplated staying where I was for the sake of my sanity, but in the end I caved. If I had to choose between the sweet torture of Jacob’s skin against mine and the literal torture of sleep deprivation, I was going to go with the one that at least felt good.

“Fine.” I clambered into the back seat. “But I get to be the little spoon.” That way there was no chance of me waking up humping Jacob’s leg.

“Sure,” he said. He shoved at some of the crap that was on the back seat, sending it tumbling into the footwell. “See? Plenty of room. And at least there are no skunks.”

Plenty turned out to be a stretch. When we lay down, we were smooshed up against each other with Jacob’s head resting on my shoulder and my ass squarely against his dick. We both pretended not to notice. I closed my eyes and took slow, deep breaths, relaxing into Jacob’s hold where he’d slung a casual arm around my waist.

This could work. As long as nobody rolled over or popped a boner, we'd be fine.

CHAPTER

NINE

JACOB

1056 miles to go

Amarillo, TX, to Albuquerque, NM

When I woke up, I was humping Matt's ass.

I didn't even realize what was happening at first. I just knew there was a body in front of me and what I was doing felt really good. It was only when I shuddered as my hips rocked forward, chasing contact, that I woke up enough for it to hit me that my dick was super hard—and I was humping Matt's ass .

I froze, my heart pounding, and let out a long, shaky breath.

Fuck.

I was a confused mess of horny and terrified. I didn't know what was happening, but I didn't want it to stop. And sure, maybe I could blame that on instinct—sleep-humping was a thing, right?—but if that was the case, why wasn't my dick going soft now that I was awake? And why did it feel so good holding Matt in my arms, so right? Why did I like being pressed up against him, burying my nose into the curve of his neck and inhaling his scent? Layla had been all soft curves and sweet perfumes,

florals that were pleasant and inoffensive but unremarkable. Matt, though? Matt smelled like woodsmoke and sweat and day-old deodorant and underneath all that a hint of ocean salt, like Cape Charles was soaked into his very skin—and I was here for it.

What the fuck was that about?

As I lay there having a minor existential crisis, Matt made a sleepy, snuffly sound and exhaled loudly. I tensed but then he went lax and still, blissfully unaware of my dick pressing against his ass.

If Matt didn't know what I'd done, maybe I could just pretend this had never happened. No harm, no foul, right? I inched backward as much as I could—which wasn't very far, given how tight space was in the back seat—but at least I wasn't actively attacking my best friend with my dick.

Wait. Was it an attack if neither of us was aware of what I'd been doing and I'd stopped almost right away? Did it even count?

If a dick got hard in a forest and there was nobody to see it, was it still morning wood?

Wow, I was full of deep questions today.

I was still mulling over what it meant that I'd gotten hard for my best friend—and why I wasn't more weirded out by that—when Matt ground his ass back onto me, pressing against my still-hard dick. My hips flexed forward before I could stop myself, and Matt let out a low groan.

We both froze, but I could feel Matt's heart pounding where I still had my arm draped over him, and from the way his breathing picked up, he was definitely awake.

Shit. There was no way not to address this, right?

Wrong.

I'd forgotten that Matt was a champion at ignoring shit. He yawned, sat up, squinted at the sunlight that was streaming through the windshield, and said, "I'm gonna take a leak." And then he opened the car door and got out, leaving me quietly grateful he hadn't chosen to be an asshole about it. And sure, that might have been because I was his ride to California, but I preferred to think it was just Matt doing me a solid.

I waited a minute or two for my boner to go down, then followed Matt out of the car and went and peed in the bushes. By the time I was done, Matt was emerging from our tent in a pair of shorts and an old tee that was stretched around the neckline and showed off his collarbones.

Not that I was looking at Matt's collarbones.

"I don't see that fucking skunk anywhere," he said by way of greeting. It wasn't the outraged hey, what the fuck was that, man? that I'd half been expecting—this was Matt we were talking about—and the tightness in my chest eased a little.

I took a couple of slow breaths before I answered him. "Yeah, they're nocturnal." Then I ducked into the tent and got dressed.

When I came out, Matt was sitting on the log next to the firepit, still yawning. "Hey," he said, "so, here's the thing."

My mouth went dry. Shame and guilt washed over me. This was it. Matt was going to call me out on my shit. My stomach dropped at the specter of the awkward conversation we were about to have and the thought of more awkward silence as we drove all the way to San Diego, but I managed to croak out, "Yeah?"

He dragged the toe of his sneaker through the dirt. “I know we’re meant to be saving money, but fuck that. I need a break from camping. Can we stay somewhere with a bed and a shower tonight? Please?”

Relief flooded through me. “Yeah,” I said, almost too eagerly.

Matt raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you saying I stink?”

“No,” I said, face heating at the memory of Matt’s woodsmoke and ocean scent. He smelled fucking amazing. I wasn’t going to tell him that, though. Instead I said, “I’m the one who stinks.” I raised an arm to sniff my pits in demonstration and immediately regretted it. I was ripe with the acrid stench of fear sweat from our skunk encounter, underpinned with regular old sweat.

Matt snorted. “I wasn’t gonna say anything, but yeah. You’re not exactly a walking Yankee Candle.”

“Fuck you,” I said. As soon as the words were out, I wanted to swallow them back down. Could I still say that now? Or would Matt think I was hitting on him—or worse, making fun of him? I really didn’t care if Matt was gay, and I didn’t want him to think it made a difference or to regret telling me. But he didn’t take offense. He just shot me that crooked grin of his, and I breathed a little easier. We were gonna be fine.

We packed up our shit and once the RAV4 was loaded, we drove until we found a roadside diner that claimed to make “the best pancakes in Texas”—which seemed like a hell of a flex, but we stopped there for breakfast anyway. I’d already thrown a granola bar and a package of jerky at Matt to stop him gnawing his own arm off, but I knew I’d have to feed him properly if I didn’t want to spend the rest of the morning dealing with him being cranky as fuck.

We ordered pancakes and coffee, and our server seemed unable to look away from Matt, giving him her widest smile and calling him “hun” in a way that had my hackles rising and something dark and possessive twisting inside me like a knife—which, what the fuck?

Matt was oblivious until she left and I said, “See? You’ve got game.”

His brow creased in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s into you.”

Matt scrunched up his nose. “You’re full of shit. Nobody’s into me.”

“That gas station guy was,” I said, more sharply than I’d intended—and there it was again, a stab of something I didn’t want to look at too closely.

Matt raised an eyebrow. “Danny’s a nice guy. Funny. And what was I meant to do the first time a cute guy offered me his number? Say no?”

Yes , I wanted to say.

But I didn’t. Because Matt hadn’t said a word when I’d started dating Layla. Although really, dating Layla hadn’t made much of a difference where me and Matt were concerned, had it? We were ride or die, like best friends were supposed to be .

Except we were riding to California together, but I’d be coming back alone.

The server came back with our pancakes and I had to admit they were impressive. Matt attacked his breakfast like he hadn’t eaten in an age, and when he let out a particularly filthy moan around his pancake, my dick twitched unexpectedly. My breath caught, and a mouthful of coffee went down the wrong way. I choked and

sputtered and before I could blink Matt was beside me, slapping my back and telling me to breathe, like I'd simply forgotten and wasn't gasping for air like a landed fish. I managed to drag in one breath and then another, and Matt stopped slapping me and rested his hand on the center of my back, his brow furrowed and his mouth a tight line, the way it got when he was really worried. "Bruh, you okay?"

I wiped the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. "Fine," I said, my voice rasping. "Went down wrong, that's all."

Matt's hand rested on my back for a few more seconds before he stood and moved back to his side of the table. "Don't die, okay?" he said. "I don't wanna have to call your mom. She's terrifying."

I gave him a watery smile. "I'll try not to. And my mom likes you."

The look he gave me told me he wasn't convinced, but I didn't push the point. It didn't matter anyway. It wasn't like Matt would be seeing my mom anytime soon. He'd be living his new life with his dad, and he wouldn't need me, or my family.

I picked at my pancakes, my appetite disappearing as I thought about a life without Matt in it. Sure, we would have been apart anyway, what with me going to college, but this felt different. Permanent. This was a whole country between us, not just Chesapeake Bay, and I wasn't a fan. At least almost choking had settled my dick down—although why the hell was my dick suddenly interested in Matt anyway?

Something wet and cold hit me in the middle of my forehead, making me jerk and pulling me out of my thoughts. I lifted my gaze and a blueberry slid down my face and landed on my plate. Matt grinned at me, another blueberry poised on his fork, ready to launch.

I narrowed my eyes at him and picked up my own fork and loaded it, but then I

thought better of it. We were in public, and Mom had raised me better than that. I put my fork down and said, “What was that for?”

Matt shrugged. “You looked all sad and shit. Thought it would cheer you up.”

He was such an asshole. “How the fuck is that meant to cheer me up?”

He shrugged again and then, in typical Matt fashion, pulled out his phone and changed the subject, thumb flying over the screen. “So, you wanna stop in Albuquerque tonight?” He flipped the screen around to face me so I could see the list of budget motels he’d pulled up.

“Sure. Just pick somewhere that doesn’t mention bedbugs in the reviews.”

Matt snorted and took the phone back, spending the rest of breakfast scrolling through reviews and reading out bad ones for the cheaper places. Some of them were funny as hell, but there was no way we were staying at those places. Eventually, we settled on a place where the reviews didn’t suck and the price didn’t make me break out in a cold sweat. I was just glad we’d found somewhere half-decent, what with it being summer break. Matt wasn’t the only one looking forward to a decent night’s sleep.

We ducked into the diner restroom to freshen up, picked up a Coke and a Mountain Dew, and then we were ready to hit the road. When we reached the RAV4, I offered Matt the keys and his eyes lit up with excitement.

“Sweet. Driver picks the music,” he said with a wide grin. When Matt smiled, he lost that narrow-eyed, suspicious look he showed the rest of the world, and I loved the way it made his whole face transform. Matt smiling would always be one of my favorite sights.

I lifted my phone and snapped a pic of him grinning so I'd be able to look at it and think of him after he was gone.

“What are you doing?”

“Chronicling,” I said, deadpan. “In case you're ever famous. ‘Place where Matt Landers smiled once, aged eighteen.’ They'll probably put up a plaque or some shit.” I spun around so I was next to him, threw an arm over one shoulder, and took a selfie.

When I looked at the picture, my heart squeezed. Matt's hair was a mess, there were dark rings under his eyes, and his shirt had a maple syrup stain from breakfast. I wasn't much better—the main difference was that my stain was from a blueberry. Objectively, we looked like shit. But we were both beaming, and it was obvious we were having the time of our lives. A lump formed in my throat at the way Matt was leaning into my touch, like he wanted to be there. I had other photos with similar poses to this, but they were all with Layla. They were couples photos.

I stared at the screen, transfixed.

Matt peered over my shoulder. “I like it. Send it to me?”

I sent the pic through, then gave it one last look and shoved my phone into my pocket. There were plenty of other pictures of us—hell, Matt had been front and center at every birthday party I'd had since I was six—but there was something special about this one. It was unscripted and messy, just like our friendship, and it was kind of perfect.

Except this time next week, that picture would still be on my phone but Matt would be gone. My eyes prickled and I blinked rapidly. Matt glanced over and his worry lines appeared. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice catching. And then, because I never could lie to Matt, I said, “I’m just—I’m really gonna miss you.”

Matt’s throat clicked as he swallowed. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “But I’ll bet my dad will fly me out if I ask him.”

I nodded. “Maybe.” Except we both knew it wouldn’t be the same. But I wasn’t gonna drag Matt down, not when he was so excited to be spending time with his dad. And who knew? Matt’s dad had already agreed to let Matt come and live with him, so maybe he’d become more responsible in the ten years since he’d left. The adulting bar had been set pretty low when he’d disappeared when Matt was eight, but hey, the only way was up, right?

We got back on I-40 and Matt settled in for the drive, a lot more relaxed and confident than he had been the first time he drove, his long fingers tapping on the steering wheel in time to “Party in the USA” as he sang along—badly.

“I thought it was ‘driver picks the music,’ not ‘driver murders the music,’” I muttered.

“Shut up. I’m awesome,” Matt said, laughing. He stopped singing, though, and settled in to drive.

Traffic was light, and before I knew it we were halfway to Albuquerque. I was tense for the first part of the drive, part of me still waiting for Matt to bring up the fact I’d used him as a human humping post. But either he’d still been half-asleep and hadn’t noticed or he was pretending it hadn’t happened because he never said a word about it. Which was fine by me. More than fine. Excellent, even.

We made a pit stop a couple of hours in, and as we took off again, Matt wondered aloud if Tanner and Charlie had gone on a date yet, how Kennedy’s parent had

reacted to finding out a tree had got set on fire during her party, and what kind of shit Luke was getting into without us.

We drove for a while longer, talking trash and making dumb jokes. My phone buzzed with a text from Mom asking why I hadn't checked in the night before.

Shit. I texted her back and told her we were fine and we'd just fallen asleep early. I also sent her some of the zoo photos as proof of life. I didn't mention that we hadn't called because we were being held hostage by a skunk. I wasn't stupid. If I gave my mom that kind of ammunition, I'd be hearing about it for years.

The miles rolled by, and while Matt watched the road, I watched him. He'd pushed his hair back from his face in a dark, messy cloud, and my fingers itched with the inexplicable need to smooth it down and tidy up the stray curls that stood out in stark contrast against his pale skin.

I suddenly understood why that guy in Goose Run had given Matt his number, because Matt was beautiful.

Wait, what?

I jolted in my seat and Matt shot me a narrow glance.

"What? I wasn't anywhere near that semi!" he said just as a truck roared past us, making the RAV4 rock with how close it was.

"I didn't say anything."

Matt scowled, his shoulders creeping up to his ears. "Not with your mouth, but your face is saying plenty. You're staring at me like you're waiting for me to fuck up."

That wasn't why I was staring, but there was no easy way to say I'd just figured out Matt was hot without it coming off as creepy. Girls could get away with shit like telling their friends they were beautiful, but it didn't work like that for guys. Matt would laugh his ass off—or possibly shove me out of the moving vehicle. It could go either way with him. So instead of complimenting him like I so desperately wanted to do, I said, "I'm not staring. I'm zoning out because I'm tired as fuck."

Matt let out a long breath and some of the tension left his frame. "Sorry. Me too. Tired, I mean. I slept like shit." The corners of his mouth curved up and he said, "That was pretty funny, though. Trapped in our car by a skunk."

I grinned back at him. "Thank fuck it wasn't a bear or they would have peeled the doors open like we were a can of tuna."

"We're just lucky it didn't turn into a slasher movie."

"What?" I blinked. That was a hell of a U-turn, even for Matt.

"Think about it," he said as he switched lanes and we passed a sign telling us we were eighty miles from Albuquerque. "Alone in the woods, two city slickers without a clue?—"

"I don't think we count as city?—"

"—hearing a weird noise," Matt continued, raising his voice and ignoring me. "But instead of staying in the tent, what do they do? They grab a flashlight and go to investigate like the idiots they are. Only it's not a skunk. It's hook-hand-car man!" He waved a hand wildly. "Boom! Dead! Classic slasher fic."

I stared at him, then burst out laughing. "You're so fucking weird!"

“That’s why you like me,” he said with a grin, and just like that the pieces fell into place and I had one hell of a personal revelation.

I did like Matt. A lot.

Enough that even when I’d had a girlfriend, Matt had still come first. Enough that if he threw stones at my window, I’d always answer. Enough that I’d agreed to drive across the country with him. Enough that when I found out Matt was gay because a guy had given Matt his number, my first reaction had been jealousy.

I liked him enough that I’d humped his ass in my sleep.

Maybe...maybe I didn’t just like Matt as a friend.

Maybe I liked him. As in, I was attracted to him.

And I had no idea what the hell to do with new knowledge like that.

Our motel in Albuquerque was two stars, but they must have paid someone off to hold onto that second one. Okay, so I didn’t actually know the difference between one star and two stars, but you’d think the stray turd floating in the toilet should have brought the ranking down. I asked Matt if he was going to chronicle the floater and he told me to fuck off. Still, it flushed right down, and our room wasn’t a tent in the woods, so I guessed I couldn’t get too picky. And it sure had a lot more space than the back seat of a RAV4. Sleeping with our legs straight? That was probably what got a place a two-star rating.

Matt sat on the side of the bed and gave an experimental bounce, and nothing squeaked or rattled, which I took as a win. We were sharing a queen, which was what happened when you didn’t book in advance during the height of summer. It was fine. It was still more space than we’d had since the first night in a motel.

“I’m having a shower,” Matt said, ducking into the bathroom before I had time to say anything. I didn’t mind. It meant I had time to think about what I’d just discovered without Matt being right there next to me.

Or, you know, to intentionally not think about it.

I sent Mom a check-in text, then looked at Maps to see where the closest store was in case we needed middle-of-the-night snacks. Then I looked up laundromats because my bag was starting to smell like the one I’d used for gym class senior year. I pulled everything out and sniffed it, which proved to be a seriously bad idea. I didn’t know what I thought jamming my dirty clothes up to my face would achieve, but I was sure as hell never doing it again. I dumped all the laundry in one pile and kept a single slightly less offensive tee and pair of cargo shorts aside to change into. Underwear was overrated.

I heard the shower turn off and grabbed my toiletries bag, more ready than I’d ever been to stand under a stream of hot water and get clean. An image of Matt naked flashed through my mind and it was so dumb. Not the image, but the way these thoughts were crippling me. Like, I’d seen Matt naked before. Probably a bunch more times than I could remember since we’d known each other forever. But now that suddenly meant something. And not because he was gay but because I—well, I didn’t fucking know what I was, but there was something going on in my brain, and in my pants, that hadn’t been happening before.

This one time in class, our history teacher gave us a pop quiz and Layla just about hyperventilated because we’d spent the night before making out instead of studying. “Aren’t you freaking out?” she’d asked me when we’d handed our papers back.

“What’s the point? We don’t know our results yet.”

This felt a little bit like that. I didn’t know yet if I’d passed or failed whatever test the

universe had given me, but there was no point freaking out about it yet, right? Or maybe at all. Maybe I could just keep this to myself until we got to San Diego. Matt didn't need to know.

Which was why I couldn't explain what the fuck happened next.

“Oh shit,” Matt said as he stepped outside the bathroom, his towel slipping down to reveal the curve of his ass. “Sorry, dude. I'm not like—this isn't.” He grabbed at the fabric and made the same disgusted noise he did when he accidentally tasted mushrooms—Matt hated mushrooms—and then rolled his eyes. “I'm not making a move, or coming onto you, or flashing my ass on purpose. Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'm suddenly going to be weird and forget you're straight.”

All I had to do was keep my mouth shut. But I couldn't. Instead, my gaze fixed on his, I opened my mouth and said, “But what if I wasn't?”

Matt's jaw dropped, and so did his towel.

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CHAPTER

TEN

MATT

770 miles to go

Albuquerque, NM

What the fuck?

Had Jacob just said what I thought he'd said? As I stood there naked, color bloomed in Jacob's cheeks but he didn't look away.

"What?" I asked.

Smooth, Matt.

He drew a shaky breath. "What if I wasn't? Completely straight, I mean."

"Yeah, I got that part," I said, my heart pounding fast. "So what if you weren't?"

"So..." His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "So are you just gonna stand there with your dick out, or are you gonna put some clothes on?"

Right .

Just because he wasn't straight didn't mean he wanted to look at my dick.

I picked the towel up. "Like, I feel that when it comes to people in this room being blindsided, my dick is less surprising than what just came out of your mouth."

"Fair," he said.

How the fuck did he sound so chill about any of this? That was Jacob all over, though. He liked to think things through. He wasn't a snappy, reactive shithead like I was. It was probably why he had a bunch of friends and I only had one. And that one was probably a fluke. Also, I might not have him in ten minutes depending on what the hell was going on here and exactly how badly I responded to it.

I needed to calm the fuck down and think before I did anything.

But this was Jacob, and I was pretty sure he wasn't telling me for the hell of it, so he must feel something, right?

"You could try using your words," Jacob suggested.

Right.

"Right," I said. "Because when I came out to you, you said the right things."

"Did I?"

You always do, asshole.

"It was okay, I guess." I swallowed. "So, I can do that."

A corner of his mouth twitched, telling me that we were back in familiar territory

where I was fucking up and he was highly amused by that. “Okay then.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Um. So you’re not straight? Cool. Great. Good for you.”

He tilted his head slightly. “For a second there I thought you might actually pull it off, but even when you say supportive things, because they’re coming from you they sound really sarcastic.”

“I know!”

“But I know you actually did mean them, so thanks.” He wrinkled his nose. “For the record, I don’t know if I’m coming out or just questioning. Can they be the same thing?”

“Like I’m a fucking expert?”

“Fair point.” He let out a long breath. “Anyway, we should find a laundromat. ”

“What?”

He gestured to the pile of clothes on the floor. “I have to do laundry. Do you?”

“No, hold on. We’re not just going from ‘I might not be straight’ to ‘I have to do laundry.’”

“Why not? I’m not sure it counts as coming out if I didn’t even know I was in. I’m still processing it. And I can process and do laundry at the same time.”

“Why now, though?” I asked. It didn’t make sense for Jacob to drop that bombshell without a good reason. That was the sort of shit I pulled, not him.

He ducked his head and the tips of his ears went pink, and he mumbled something that sounded like, “I like you.”

Wait. Back the fuck up.

I stepped closer. “What was that?” My heart pounded in my chest, and I prayed I’d heard right. Otherwise this might break me.

He lifted his gaze and said, “I like you. Like that.”

And maybe this was where I should have borrowed a leaf from Jacob’s book and actually stopped and thought about my actions before taking them, but fuck that. The sun was so close, if only I could fly a little higher, I might be able to touch it.

So I stepped forward and kissed him.

“Dude,” Jacob said, his breath warm against my mouth. “No wonder you’re single.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you fucking stink.”

He laughed silently, his body shaking, holding me by the hips to stop me from pulling away. “I’m just saying, that was a terrible kiss.”

It might not even have been a kiss, just a kind of a wet smear of our mouths. “Yeah, well, the only other person who’s kissed me is my mom.”

“Ew! You made it weird, dude!” But Jacob was still laughing as he said it. His expression softened. “Was that really your first kiss?”

I shrugged. “This may come as a shock to you, but I’m kind of an asshole. People aren’t lining up to make out with me.”

His mouth twisted like he felt sorry for me or something, and the hand on my hip squeezed me briefly before he pasted a smile on his face and said, “Well, I’m a great kisser. I can teach you.”

“After you shower. You stink,” I said again, jutting my chin out. Maybe I was giving him a chance to back down. Maybe I was giving myself a chance to do the same. I didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“It’s not that bad,” Jacob said, lifting one arm. Then he slammed it back down, his face twisted up. “Okay, yeah, gross. I’m definitely gonna shower. And then I’ll show you how to kiss and make it good.”

“Yeah?” I’d meant for that to come out as a challenge, but instead it came out all breathy and hopeful.

“Yeah,” he said. He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine, soft and slow. It was the barest of kisses, but when he pulled back, he exhaled slowly and licked his lips. His eyes were half-closed, his expression dazed, and I knew then that he had no intention of backing out.

I shoved at his chest. “Go shower.”

He blinked. “Yeah. I should—” He gestured toward the bathroom and ducked inside. The door shut with a soft click, leaving me free to freak the fuck out.

What the hell was going on here? Usually when I started spiraling, it was Jacob who talked me down. But when Jacob was the reason ? Who was I supposed to rely on now? Me ? Because I knew me, and that guy was fucking useless.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t even know why I was freaking out. I mean, this was a dream come true, right? Everything my little gay heart had ever wanted. Jacob

was—well, he wasn't straight—and he was into me. I should be doing cartwheels around the room. Obviously I wasn't gonna, because no way was I touching the carpet in a two-star motel, but the principle was the same. So why wasn't I?

Was it because I didn't want to ruin our friendship? But then hadn't I already done that when I'd decided to move to California? So why not do this? Why not touch the sun?

The water shut off in the bathroom, and I told myself to get it together. Jacob wanted this. I wanted this. And this was probably the last chance we'd get to explore our feelings. I sat on the edge of the bed with the towel wrapped around my waist and leaned back, doing my best to look relaxed and casual. Oh, you wanna kiss and maybe touch dicks? Sure thing. No big.

The bathroom door eased open.

"Did you put your dirty clothes with mine?" Jacob asked, hitching up his threadbare sleep pants as he stepped back into the room.

That was what he was thinking about in there? The laundry?

"Uh," I said, because I was smooth like that. To be fair, Jacob was shirtless, his skin still damp, and it kind of made all my brain cells shut down. And I could look. I didn't have to sneak glances because Jacob knew I liked him that way.

Sure, I might not have said it out loud, but I'd kissed him. And it had been terrible, but he hadn't pushed me away or anything. He'd done the opposite and offered to show me how to kiss properly.

Jacob Mercer was into me, or at least into whatever the hell was going on with us right now.

“I don’t care about the laundry,” I said, suddenly bold. “Get over here.”

Jacob bit his bottom lip as he sat next to me on the bed, and it hit me that he didn’t care about the laundry either. He was just nervous and trying not to show it. We were each as bad as the other, and somehow knowing that had me breathing more easily.

I reached out and pushed his damp blond hair away from his face. He leaned into the touch, and the heat of his skin against my palm sent a thrill running through me. “So, kissing,” I said.

Jacob nodded and moved closer, our thighs pressing together and our faces barely an inch apart. We must have sat like this a million times playing video games together, but the air around us had never felt so still and heavy. Jacob exhaled and closed the gap between us. His lips were soft against mine and he tasted of mint, and even though we were barely kissing, I was already addicted.

“Okay.” The word left his mouth on a breath and touched mine. “So.”

I blinked at him.

“So we’re gonna get cricks in our necks,” he said, and yeah, I could see that. He stood up and then climbed onto the bed, sitting there cross-legged. The mattress bounced a little as he settled. “Come here.”

“I’m wearing a towel,” I said like an idiot.

Jacob’s brow creased. “So put some pants on or put a pillow in your lap. I’m not gonna look if you don’t want me to.” Did that mean he’d look if I did want him to? “I already saw it anyway.”

That didn’t make things any clearer, and if I was going to spend all my time second-

guessing everything Jacob said, we'd never get anywhere. So I squared my shoulders and said, "You can look if you want."

Jacob's cheeks flushed pink. "I—yeah."

Wow. Using your words really did work. Who knew?

I climbed up onto the bed and sat mirroring him, my knees almost touching his. The towel gaped and Jacob's gaze dropped, but apart from showing some thigh, I was still decent. I didn't know whether I was relieved by that or not. Like, I'd pretty much dared us to take this further, and I would have gone with it, but also? I hadn't even figured out kissing yet. I probably wasn't ready for anything else. So Horny Matt was disappointed but Realistic Matt was relieved. That guy was no fun, but he probably had my back.

It was Realistic Matt who said, "So I really wanna kiss you some more, but is that all we're doing?"

Jacob's gaze lingered on the gap in my towel and his throat bobbed. "I, uh. We could start with kissing and see what happens? And we can stop if one of us says so?"

I gave a jerky nod, and then, because Jacob looked about as serious as a heart attack, I said, "Gimme some of that good lip action," and puckered up like a cartoon character.

For a moment he froze and then, just when I was worried he thought that was seriously my kissing face, he threw back his head and laughed. Then he leaned forward and kissed me again, only this wasn't a careful, chaste peck. This was packed with intent, his lips soft as they pressed against mine, and holy shit, he was good at this.

I found myself wrapping a hand around the back of his neck to hold him in place.

Forever , my stupid brain thought. But since that was impossible, then for now at least. The pressure of his lips against mine was firm but gentle, and when he pushed his tongue against the seam of my mouth, I opened. Bubbles swelled and burst in my bloodstream when our tongues touched, and my skin prickled and felt suddenly two sizes too small. I shivered as Jacob put his hand against my cheek and I leaned into his touch. His thumb stroked my cheekbone, and everything about this moment just felt right, the way that maybe nothing ever really had before in my entire life. My eyes got hot, and I squeezed them shut.

Jacob drew back enough to end the kiss, but his hand was still cupping my cheek and his breath ghosted against my jaw. “Matty?”

I opened my eyes. “Yeah?”

His expression was serious again, both anxious and soft. “Was that okay?”

“Yeah,” I whispered .

The corner of his mouth quirked in what was almost a cocky smile, and then he kissed me again.

The second time? Even better. I didn’t understand how something that could steal my breath could make me feel so alive at the same time.

“This was a better idea than laundry,” I said when we broke for air.

“Fuck the laundry,” he said and leaned in and kissed me, slow and deep. I was aware of Jacob’s bare skin against mine and I ran a hand down his back, greedy for more of him. He shivered under my touch, and when my hand met the waistband of his sleep pants and my palm rested against the small of his back, his breathing hitched.

Yeah, fuck the laundry.

I dropped my free hand to my thigh, pressing down on the edge of the towel to keep it in place because I was getting hard and, despite what we'd said before we started kissing, I didn't really want to deal with any Whac-A-Mole action right now. Or at least I didn't want Jacob watching me while I did. And I didn't want him to think he had to watch me. I dunno. Baby steps or something.

Jacob went still and then he said, "Did you want to stop?"

"No!" I looked down at my lap and so did he. I only had a second to feel totally mortified before I saw that he was hard as well, and his thin sleep pants were doing even less to contain him than my towel was me. "Holy shit."

He was wide-eyed and red-faced. "Yeah."

I'd done that.

Screw baby steps.

I'd come into this worried because I didn't know what I was doing and because Jacob was more experienced, but none of that really mattered. Not when we were both on the exact same page here. And who cared how far he'd gone with girls? We were both virgins when it came to dicks, right? "Do you wanna get naked?"

Jacob was still blushing, but he nodded like a bobblehead and rolled over and shimmied out of his sleep pants in about four seconds.

And wow. There it was. My best friend's dick. And it was hard. It was also maybe bigger than mine. Not longer, I didn't think, but bigger around. Of course it was, because Jacob was hotter than me, got better grades than me—not smarter necessarily

but, you know, he actually turned his assignments in, which apparently did wonders for your grades—was good at sports, and actually had more than one friend. Of course the universe had completed the package, pun totally intended, by giving him a bigger dick.

“Why are you glaring at me?” he asked.

“I’m not glaring.”

“Dude, you’re glaring at my dick .”

“I’m not!” I lied. “Get back over here.”

“You’re such an asshole,” he said a second before his lips found mine and his hands found the towel that was wrapped around my hips. His fingers slid under the fabric, loosening it, and the towel fell open. “Lie down.”

For a second we made an awkward study of too many knees and elbows, and then the mattress was underneath me and Jacob was lowering himself on top of me.

“Give me your hand,” he said and, shaking, I did. Then I almost pulled it away again when he licked it because, come on, that was such a gross thing to do. What was next? A wet willy? Except then he licked his hand too, and I understood what he was doing.

When he tugged our hands down to our dicks, I almost forgot to breathe.

It was like holding hands in the dirtiest way imaginable. Hot, wet, slippery hands. With dicks, and just when I was getting used to it, Jacob started thrusting, pushing us into a rhythm so we were rocking against each other. I let my head fall back, our fingers entwined, our dicks rubbing together in the hot channel created by our hands.

Jacob leaned down and licked my pulse point and then sucked, hard, and that was all it took .

I came so hard I heard colors and saw music. Gasping for breath, I blinked up at the ceiling while Jacob came all over me. Then he kissed my throat again, and I tugged at the damp hair at the nape of his neck just because I wanted to feel him.

I'd touched the sun and I hadn't crashed and burned.

Instead, for now I was floating, and Jacob was right here with me.

Wouldn't it be nice if tonight could last forever?

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

JACOB

770 miles to go

Albuquerque, NM

O ur laundry tumbled around in the machine as I sat on a hard plastic chair and watched it. Matt was still back at the motel, and he'd been snoring when I left. I'd sent him a text letting him know I'd taken our laundry to the nearest laundromat, but the way he'd been crashed out when I left, I wouldn't have been surprised if he still hadn't moved by the time I got back.

Last night was weird in that it didn't feel too weird at all. Like all it had taken to shift my perspective had been tilting my head a little to the side, not turning my whole world upside down. Matt was my best friend and I loved him: old news. Matt was my best friend and I loved him and we'd made out and messed around: not so much breaking news as it was just an update on an old story. My feelings for Matt hadn't changed. How could they? But then I thought of my family and my friends and the girls I'd dated, and I didn't feel so sure that the world hadn't flipped the moment Matt and I had kissed.

I watched our tangled clothes go around and around and around, and my thoughts did the same.

I didn't regret last night. It hadn't just felt good—it had felt right too. But I was scared. I was scared of losing Matt, which was already old news as far as this roller coaster ride was concerned, but thanks to last night the ride now came with a couple of added emotional loop the loops. I was scared of how my family and friends might look at me differently. I was scared of how to figure it all out on my own, because in a few more days Matt would be in California and I'd be driving back to Cape Charles with an empty passenger seat. Like, what did life even look like when Matt wasn't riding shotgun with me? And now same question but also I might be bi.

Something thumped in one of the machines—thump, thump, thump—and then the machine shuddered to a stop and started to beep out an alarm. Kind of a metaphor for this whole situation.

The woman in charge of the laundromat came to check the machine and to yell at the guy who'd put his shoes in the load, and I took the opportunity to slip outside onto the street. It was a sunny, cloudless day. It was still early but already bright enough that the sun seemed to bleach all the color out of the world. I moved to the storefront next to the laundromat and saw it was a salon that wasn't open yet. Standing in the shade of the faded awning, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. At first I thought about texting Matt to see if he was awake yet, but then it occurred to me there was someone I could call for advice after all.

Matt always said I was slow on the uptake but I got there in the end.

I guessed that was true about more than one thing.

I called Charlie.

“Hey,” he said when he answered. “What's going on?” In the background Luke asked who it was. “It's Jacob. Jacob?”

“Is he okay?” Luke yelled. “Did they crash the car? Holy shit, they didn’t crash the car, did they?”

“Let me listen!” Charlie said. “Are you okay, Jacob?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just wanted to talk or something, I guess. Maybe ask you some stuff. Can you get rid of Luke?”

“He’s fine,” Charlie told Luke. “It’s about college. Hold on, Jacob. I’ll go outside where I can hear you without this doofus interrupting. Oof.” I wasn’t certain what the oof meant, but knowing Luke I would have put my money on a pillow to the face. Then I didn’t hear anything much at all except some muffled sounds, and Charlie said, “I’m outside.”

“It’s not about college,” I said, watching an old man on a wheelie walker shuffle his way slowly down the sidewalk.

“Okay,” Charlie said. “What’s going on?”

Charlie was a year older than me and the smartest guy I knew, and he was gay. I didn’t remember him ever coming out. Just, he’d always known, which meant the rest of the family had always known as well. When we were kids, Charlie had told me that when he grew up he was going to marry Spider-Man. I didn’t remember anyone saying anything negative about it. I mostly remembered being excited that I’d get to meet the Avengers at the wedding.

“Me and Matt hooked up,” I blurted out. “Last night.”

“You and Matt?” Charlie asked and then said, “What?”

“We hooked up,” I said. “A couple of days ago he came out to me, and then last night

we fooled around some.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie asked. “Because I’m a member of the gayest fraternity at Lassiter, and sometimes the lines get a little blurred between ‘vaguely homoerotic displays of masculinity and questionable couch wrestling’ and ‘their tongues were down each other’s throats.’”

“The tongues and the throats,” I said. “And also, frotting.”

Charlie was silent.

“That means?—”

“I know what it means, Jacob! Holy shit !”

He sounded almost angry, and Charlie never got angry. “Charlie, are you okay?”

“I cannot believe you two right now!” he exclaimed. “You’ve been gay for half a minute and you’ve already got more action than I have in my whole life!”

“Uh... ”

“Oh my god. Don’t be gay, Jacob. All men are bastards.”

I blinked at the sun-soaked street. “What?”

He sighed heavily into his phone. “Sorry. I don’t mean that. Well, I mean the part about all men being bastards. But of course you can be gay.”

“I think I’m bi, actually.”

“I’m very happy for you,” Charlie said, but he didn’t sound very happy. “And thank you for trusting me enough to tell me.”

“Are you okay, Charlie?”

He made a frustrated noise. “The guy from the party? The one I made out with?”

“Tanner.”

“He ghosted me.”

“Tanner did?” I didn’t know the guy really well, even though our high school was only small. He’d always seemed like a decent guy, and I’d never suspected he was gay. Maybe he was a closeted dickhead as well.

“Yeah.” Charlie snorted. “Well, he never called me. Does that even count as ghosting? It’s just— ugh .”

He sounded so disappointed that I wished I was there to cheer him up. “Maybe something happened. Like he was in a horrific accident or something.”

“That would be awful!”

“But at least he wouldn’t have ghosted you. Maybe he’s in a hospital bed with two broken legs and a feeding tube and all he can do is mime sending a text and what he’s trying to say is ‘I need my phone!’ but the nurses think he’s asking for pain relief. Or maybe he’s a literal ghost!”

“There is something very wrong with the way your brain works.”

“I was trying to make you feel better.”

“Idiot,” he said, but he sounded as though he was trying not to laugh. “Okay, so you and Matt. Wait. Aunt Kate said Matt was staying in California.”

“Yeah. ”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry, Jacob.”

“All men are bastards, right?” I tried to make it sound like a joke, but it didn’t come out that way.

Charlie sighed. “You like him, right? This wasn’t just you experimenting?”

“He’s my best friend,” I said. “I love him. But maybe not the right way? I don’t know. And anyway it doesn’t matter. He’s staying in California and I’m going to ODU.”

Charlie sighed again. “If only there was a way to get from here to there. Like, a magical metal sky tube that carries you across the country in exchange for shiny pennies. Or some sort of device that lets you speak to a person even though they’re far away. Or a screen where you can see the other person, or?”

“Okay, I get it,” I said. “But what if he doesn’t want any of that? What if I’ve fucked up our friendship and he can’t wait to be rid of me?”

“Why are you asking me this instead of Matt?”

“I left him asleep. I’m doing laundry.”

“Why are you—you know what? It doesn’t matter. The question is, did you make a move on him or did he make a move on you?”

“He kissed me after I told him I might not be straight. And then we did other stuff.”

“So if the first thing he did when he found out you weren't straight was kiss you, maybe he loves you too.”

Huh. That Matt might feel the same way about me as I felt about him hadn't even occurred to me. See? Slow on the uptake. Exhilaration surged through me, followed by a crashing wave of despair. Even if what Charlie said was true, we were still going to be living at opposite ends of the country.

Why the fuck was I only just figuring this out now, when it was too late?

“Jacob?” Charlie said quietly.

“Yeah.”

“Talk to Matt. See if he feels the same. And if he does, you'll figure it out. I mean, Matt's stubborn as heck from what I've seen. He's not going to let something as dumb as distance stop him getting what he wants. He literally just found a way to cross the country to be with his dad. So he'll find a way back to see you too.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said slowly, my brain already ticking over. “And there are probably cheap flights. I can go visit sometimes. People do that, right? Long-distance date?”

“Oh yeah,” Charlie said. “All the time. And it wouldn't be forever.”

“They never work, though, right? Long-distance relationships?”

“The ones that are meant to will,” Charlie said. “You and Matt have been best friends forever. You think something like a couple thousand miles can come between you?”

I let out a faint laugh. “I guess not. But it sure feels like all this new stuff might.”

“But it might not,” Charlie said. “And the only way you’ll know is to try, if that’s what you want to do. I don’t have the answers for you, Jacob. But I think that maybe you and Matt can come up with them together.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe. Thanks, Charlie.”

And I went back inside the laundromat to see if our clothes were done yet.

Matt was still sleeping when I got back to the motel, but he snorted and snuffled awake like a puppy when I dumped the bag of laundry on the bed. He blinked and glared, but then he spotted the paper bag I was carrying and his expression turned hopeful. “Is that breakfast?”

“It’s closer to lunch at this point,” I said and tossed the bag at him .

He caught it against his chest and opened it. “Breakfast burrito! Sweet!” He sat up in bed, the blankets pooling around his waist, and tore open the wrapper, taking a huge bite and letting out a moan that sent my mind places that had nothing to do with burritos. He grinned at me, one of his rare, unguarded smiles that I was pretty sure nobody else got to see but me, and the knot of tension in my chest unfurled.

I sat next to him on the bed, pulling the bag over and grabbing my own burrito. It was really fucking good, and we ate in happy silence for a few minutes. When we were done, Matt turned and gestured at me. “Bro, you’ve got sauce on your face.”

“Where?” I dabbed at my cheek with a napkin.

Matt paused for a second, holding my gaze and tilting his head as though he was thinking hard. Then the little fucker leaned over and licked my cheek. “Got it.”

I let out a startled laugh and shoved at him. “Gross!”

He shrugged. “It’s no worse than kissing, and you didn’t mind that.”

And there it was. The dick-shaped elephant in the room.

It looked like we were talking about this now. “Yeah. About that.”

“Hold on, I gotta take a leak.” Matt scrambled off the bed and headed for the bathroom. I barely had time to wonder if he was avoiding me before he was back, sitting cross-legged and facing me, wearing the familiar crease in his brow that he got when he was overthinking something.

“So,” I said.

“So,” Matt echoed, and his throat clicked as he swallowed. “Last night. Are you gonna tell me it was a one-off or...”

My own brow scrunched in confusion. “Why would I say that?”

Matt shrugged. “I mean, it probably wasn’t very good. I came in like, ten seconds.”

“Are you kidding?” I shoved his shoulder. “I came in about nine. ”

His brow unfurrowed. “So, it was okay?”

“Matty, I’ve never come harder in my life. It was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“But you dated Layla, and I might be gay but I’m not blind. She’s objectively hot.”

And he was right. Layla was hot. But Layla had never made my blood fizz or my

insides twist with want like Matt did. I guessed maybe I'd been gayner than I thought for longer than I'd thought. "It...it was never like that with Layla," I said. "Seriously, last night was..." I raised my hands and spread my fingers, mimicking an explosion. "It was fucking amazing, okay?"

"Yeah, it was."

We both sat in silence while we digested that. Neither of us was freaking out, which had to be a good sign, right? Finally, Matt caught my gaze. "So," he said, "what happens now?"

I wanted to tell him that I already had a saved tab on my phone with budget airfares. I wanted to tell him I loved him, and if he could just wait until I graduated, I'd go wherever he wanted. But I didn't tell him any of those things because that seemed like a lot to ask on the strength of some kissing, a dirty grind, and a single shared orgasm. So I settled for, "I don't want last night to be a one-off."

Matt's entire body sagged with something like relief. "Me either." He reached out and grasped my hand. "I say we fool around as much as we can, while we can." He hesitated. "Maybe we can figure something out once we get to San Diego?"

My heart thumped in my chest as I took in what he was saying. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said. "It'll probably be all jerking off over FaceTime because I'm broke as fuck and I don't know if my dad will be willing to fly me back east to see my boyfriend, but yeah."

Boyfriend . Holy shit.

I liked how that sounded and how it made me feel even more.

“I have Google Flights open on my phone right now,” I blurted out, and so much for not telling him. “There are some pretty cheap ones.”

He snorted. “Sure, if you’re willing to go via, I dunno, Alaska . Five layovers, twenty hours in the air, and a hundred sitting around a bunch of shitty airports.” He glared at me as though I’d personally invented modern air travel and then shrugged his narrow shoulders. “I mean, I’d do it, I guess. Even Alaska.”

“Well, it’s probably a good thing since it’d save you from jerking off over FaceTime and all.”

“Joke’s on you,” Matt said. “I can jerk off over FaceTime and come visit you in Virginia.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do that then.” Because we were boyfriends . “Now hurry up and get dressed. We’ve got to hit the road.”

“What’s the rush?”

“We want to make the Grand Canyon by sunset, right?”

Matt’s face split with a grin. “Hell yes! Let’s go!”

CHAPTER

TWELVE

MATT

558 miles to go

Grand Canyon, AZ

There were some places on the planet that just took your breath away, and this was one of them. It was big. There weren't really words for how big it was—it was like my first memory of looking up into the night sky and catching just the smallest glimpse of something infinite. I sat cross-legged on a rock, my sketchbook on my knee, wishing I had words for the vast array of colors the fading sunlight painted the canyon. Jacob stood at the fence, forearms resting on the rail, his eyes wide as he took it all in.

Below us, hawks wheeled.

A chill breeze ruffled Jacob's hair, sending tendrils dancing across his cheek, and I was torn between watching him and watching the changing light as it flowed across the canyon, making the colors and striations in the rocks come alive. The sight was dazzling—both the canyon and Jacob. His cheeks and the tip of his nose were pink with the cold, which meant mine must have been red. I didn't care. I could have sat here all night soaking in the sights and smells, even though I'd be a popsicle by morning.

I opened my sketchbook, but after a few seconds I closed it again. There were plenty of pictures of the canyon and none of them did it justice, so my pencil drawings sure as shit weren't going to capture the majesty of the place. Why not be in the moment with Jacob instead?

He shivered as the breeze ruffled his hair again, and he shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. He flashed me a grin. "Holy shit, it's cold! My balls have crawled so far up into my body that I think they might be in my nasal cavity by now! It's supposed to be summer !"

So much for the moment.

But he wasn't wrong. My balls weren't in my nasal cavity, but those bad boys were definitely tucked up tight somewhere around my rib cage. But still I didn't move, unable to look away from the vastness in front of us. "Hey, does this count as our first date? Because if it does, we're killing it as boyfriends."

Jacob laughed, the sound echoing off the surrounding rocks. "Holy shit. It is. And we are." He beamed at me and I grinned back.

I still couldn't quite believe last night was real, but here we were. We'd fooled around, and it had been everything I'd ever dreamed about, and now Jacob was talking about flights and visits, and I knew if he said he wanted to be boyfriends, he meant it.

I just had to get through the next few days without fucking it all up.

The next gust of wind had more of a bite to it and the light was starting to fade, so I reluctantly levered myself to my feet, stuffing my hands into the pocket of my hoodie and shivering. Jacob threw an arm over my shoulders, and it warmed me in more ways than one.

We made our way down the path, and I knew Jacob would probably tease me for staying well back from the low stone wall that was all that was standing between me and plummeting to my death, but I didn't care. There was a book in the gift shop that listed all the ways people had died in the canyon, and I didn't want to be the reason they released a new edition.

He kept his arm around me as we walked, and we didn't rush. It felt like we both wanted to make the most of every moment together before we hit San Diego in two days and had to say goodbye. And even though we'd just said we were dating, the insecure part of me couldn't help wondering what would happen when Jacob got his newly bisexual ass to college and found out he was hot. Like, I was pretty sure he already knew he was hot, but now he was going to be at a college full of other hot college guys who might feel the need to share that information with him.

"Hey," Jacob said, pulling me closer. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking. Do you think we can stay one more night at a hotel before we get to my dad's?" I wasn't sure how to say I didn't want to let him go when we'd only just gotten together without sounding like a complete loser, but it turned out I didn't need to because we were on the same page.

"Yeah, I'd like that," Jacob said, and he sounded almost...shy?

I tilted my head back to look up at him. His cheeks were flushed, and I didn't think it was from all the walking we'd done. "Why are you blushing?"

Jacob steered me over to a nearby bench seat and we sat down. "I mean, we're camping tonight, so we can't really fool around without everyone else hearing. But I was thinking tomorrow night in Yuma, if we got a room, I could try and last longer than ten seconds next time."

That sounded pretty great to me too, but since it was me, I didn't say that. Instead I said, "Bro, I'm gonna go out on a limb and say if you came in under ten seconds when you were with Layla, no wonder she dumped your ass."

"Fuck you," he said, his mouth twitching up in a smile. "We were gonna break up anyway. She just got in early. Anyhow, she didn't dump me because of that ."

No, she'd dumped him because she'd seen the truth before either of us had figured it out. She'd dumped him because he was careless with her feelings when he never was with mine. Because he hung out with me without having to be asked. Because he let her calls go to voicemail but always took mine. She'd dumped him because she'd known she deserved better—a boyfriend who was as into her as she was into him. If I was a better person, I'd feel guilty about how I'd never stepped back and given them space to be a couple, but I didn't because I wasn't. Jacob had always been mine, even when I hadn't been his.

"Your face is doing that thing again," he said.

I narrowed my eyes.

"There it is again."

I elbowed him and we both laughed.

"This place is amazing," he said, gaze drifting to the canyon again. "I'm really glad we came here."

"Me too."

He reached out and took my hand and laced our fingers together. We both looked down at our hands.

“Does that feel weird?” he asked.

I snorted. “A bit.”

Which was stupid, because Jacob and I hadn’t had a single boundary in our lives. Personal space? I didn’t know her. But now it was different because every touch might mean something, might lead somewhere. Now it was different because he hadn’t just grabbed me by the hand to drag me somewhere, or away from somewhere before my mouth could get me in trouble; now he was holding my hand because that was what boyfriends did.

“It feels a bit weird because it’s new,” I said. “I like it, though.”

He squeezed my hand and smiled. “Me too.”

We sat together and watched the sunset for a while longer.

It was freezing in the tent, but it was okay because now when Jacob spooned me I didn’t have to lie there tense and unmoving, praying he wouldn’t find out I had a boner. Now I could relax and let myself enjoy the heat of Jacob’s body against mine as we huddled together under our sleeping bags. One night at a hotel had turned me soft, though, because I didn’t remember the tent being this uncomfortable before. Still, this was the last night we’d be sleeping rough.

I wondered if Jacob would use the tent on the way back, and my heart ached a little when I thought of him sitting alone around a campfire for one. I pushed the thought away. He’d probably stay at hotels rather than camping solo.

Either that or he’d make friends at every campsite he stopped at because everyone loved Jacob. I couldn’t even be mad about it. He was like a cute dog or something.

“Are you cold?” he murmured, nuzzling behind my ear.

I was, and that brought me out in goose bumps all over. “Don’t start shit we can’t finish in a sleeping bag, asshole.”

“I wasn’t starting anything!”

“Well, good,” I said. “I’m trying to sleep.”

I liked it, though. I liked that he was being this physical, and I wondered if he’d been like this with Layla too. I wasn’t enough of an idiot to ask that question, though. But I couldn’t remember them being close like that. I’d thought at the time they were keeping it respectable for Jacob’s parents—Layla’s too probably, since they were kind of churchy—but my ego liked the idea that he was different now because he was with me .

“You’re so cranky.” He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my track pants. “And I’m the only person who knows it’s all a lie.”

“No, you’re just the only idiot who can’t take a hint.” I liked the way his silent laughter shook both of us.

I was going to miss him when I was living in California.

We fell asleep like that and didn’t move until morning, when the sounds of the other campers waking up for the day filtered through the thin walls of the tent, way earlier than I would have liked.

We packed the car in silence—I was always a zombie in the mornings and Jacob got that—then grabbed sandwiches and coffee from the market and went back to the Rim Trail. I slowly blinked awake in the sunlight sitting beside Jacob as we ate our

breakfast.

We watched the light paint the canyon a hundred different shifting colors.

I thought about last night and how much I'd miss Jacob when I was living in California. For just a second, I wondered if I could go back to Cape Charles after all, but then I thought of what that would look like and my next swallow of coffee went down sour.

Living in the double-wide with Mom and Zeke.

Community college in Melfa.

Seeing the exact same faces everywhere I went—except the one I wanted to see.

I'd been desperate to get out of Cape Charles for years now, and it wasn't like Jacob would be there most of the time anyhow. I'd barely see him when college started, once he had classes and new friends and a job, so why not barely see him when I wasn't also being a loser in Cape Charles?

I'd miss him, but that was true whether I was in Cape Charles or San Diego.

Jacob had said we could do the long-distance thing, so I just had to believe him, right? He was usually right about stuff, even though I'd never admit it out loud.

He scrunched up his sandwich bag and shoved it in his pocket. "Ocean or mountain?"

"What?"

"You know those online quiz questions. Personality tests or whatever, where you pick your ideal vacation place or place to buy a house or whatever. Would you pick ocean

or mountain?”

“Ocean,” I said.

“Even now?” he asked, nodding at the canyon .

“It’s a stupid question,” I said. “It’s not really mountains, is it?”

“Okay, ocean or canyon?”

It was a harder question this time but not by much. I shoved the rest of my sandwich in my mouth, chewed on it for a bit, and said, “Still ocean.”

Some of my earliest memories were of beaches. This trip was the farthest I’d ever been away from the coast. The air didn’t taste like salt here.

“Yeah, same.” He gave me a smile. “I bet the beaches in California are incredible.”

“Yeah, I bet.” My stomach twisted.

“What are you going to do there?” he asked me. “Like, have you looked into college or anything?”

“I’m going to get a job,” I said. “Save some money for a year, then figure out what I’m going to do.”

“You’ll do great,” he said. “I’ll come visit and I’ll be jealous of how great you’re doing.”

If anyone else had said that, I would have thought they were being sarcastic, but this was Jacob. I fiddled with my sandwich wrapper. “Yeah.”

And it would be great. I'd get to spend time with my dad and his family, and I'd find a job, and I'd be out and proud. And being Matt from the East Coast would automatically make me edgy and interesting, right? Wouldn't it be cooler to be Jacob's long-distance boyfriend from California instead of his loser boyfriend back home who'd never even made it out of town?

When I looked up, Jacob was staring down into the canyon. "Look at that," he said, his voice hushed. He was closer to the edge than I was comfortable with, but I fought the urge to grab the back of his hoodie and drag him to safety and instead inched forward to join him and see what had him so impressed. When I glanced down, I saw what he was looking at. Below us, the Colorado River was nothing more than a tiny ribbon of blue, dwarfed by the vastness of its surroundings as it snaked through the landscape of vivid red rocks. It was an incredible sight—but no more incredible than the fact that somehow, against all odds, me and Jacob were a thing.

I reached out and grabbed Jacob's hand and squeezed it.

"I'm glad we did this," I said, and I wasn't just talking about the canyon. The warm smile he gave me in return told me he'd heard what I wasn't saying.

We walked along the trail for a while, taking our time. As we came up on a flat rocky outcrop, the people in front of us slowed to a stop and a small crowd formed. I craned my neck to see what was going on. There was a guy on one knee, and the girl he was with had her hands clasped in front of her face. Even from here I could see her eyes shining as he pulled a ring box out of his back pocket.

"Aww," Jacob said, resting one hand on my shoulder. "That's so sweet!"

The girl in question let out a squeal and clapped her hands together, and everyone watching applauded as the guy slid the ring onto her finger while another guy took a video, and it was objectively romantic as fuck—but it wasn't my thing. "Ten out of

ten to that guy for effort,” I said, “but if anyone ever proposed to me in public on the edge of a cliff, that would be like, a thousand red flags.”

“I know. You don’t like heights, and you don’t like being the center of attention,” Jacob said with a grin. “But she obviously loved it.”

The bride-to-be was beaming as a bunch of strangers congratulated her, so Jacob was probably right. We joined in, shaking the guy’s hand, and the way he looked at his new fiancée—like he couldn’t believe his luck—made my insides melt because I was pretty sure I’d seen the same expression on Jacob’s face when he looked at me.

Like he really did think I was all that.

The whole thing put a smile on my face for the rest of the morning .

We hung around the park for a while longer. Jacob took some pics of me feeding a squirrel, and I did a sketch of him sitting on a low rock wall with a bunch of lines depicting the layers of the canyon in the background. The sun’s rays bounced off his blond hair, highlights dancing, and he grinned widely as he leaned back on his hands with his legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles, posing. And since I didn’t have to hide my attraction anymore I took my time, making sure to capture the planes of his face, the golden hair dusting his forearms, and his gorgeous smile.

When Jacob came over and checked the finished product, he let out a low whistle. “This is really good.”

I hummed doubtfully. “I didn’t get your nose quite right.”

He bumped his shoulder against mine. “Just take the compliment, asshole.”

“Fine. Thanks.”

He laughed. “Wow, that sounded like it was actually painful.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t about to tell him that no matter how good the artist, a portrait could never capture the light in his eyes or the way he made me feel, because even to me that sounded super fucking sappy—and I was the one thinking it. “We should get going,” I said, rolling up my sketchbook and shoving it in my pocket.

After one last long look at the canyon—because seriously, when were we ever going to be here again?—we left the park and drove toward I-8, toward Yuma and whatever our last night together held.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

JACOB

172 miles to go

Yuma, AZ

Matt's knee bounced distractingly and he tapped his fingers against his thigh. He was clearly nervous and I was too. I was still coming to terms with the fact that Matt had apparently been crushing on me forever and somehow I hadn't noticed. I'd genuinely thought what we had was just a really intense friendship. Now that I knew better, I wondered how I'd been so blind—although thinking I was straight definitely had something to do with that.

I steered us toward the Travelodge I'd found in Yuma. It was a solid three stars this time, so we were almost guaranteed no bedbugs or police raids, which was why I'd picked this place over the cheaper alternatives. I wanted my last night with Matt to be special, and if that meant I had to make my budget stretch a little further when I started college, it was worth it.

Matt was worth it.

Yuma was flat and dry and the color of cement dust. White stucco walls and red tiled roofs lined the streets, and palm trees and purple bougainvillea added to the

occasional bursts of color. There were hazy mountains on the horizon that looked like they could have been days away.

“We’re going to that taco place for dinner,” Matt said, craning his head as we passed. “We’re so close to Mexico. The food here is gonna be amazing.”

We pulled into the hotel. The blast of air conditioning as we stepped inside the lobby was a relief even after the short walk from outside.

“Maybe the Mexican place delivers,” I said, and Matt raised his eyebrows. “Dude, it’s hot out there! I think they built this town on the surface of the sun!”

“We’ll go to dinner,” Matt said and held up a finger. “We’ll walk, because it’s seriously just in the next block. Then we can come back here and jump in the pool. It’ll be great.”

“Since when are you the optimist here?”

“Since I got myself a cute boyfriend,” he said with a grin that hit me like a gut punch.

Like a positive gut punch?

“Fine,” I found myself saying. “We’re walking to dinner.” I never had been able to say no to Matt.

“Sweet!” He shot me that grin again.

We checked in, and when we got to our room the first thing I did was drop the temperature on the AC as low as I could get it. Matt stood near the door taking in the room. It wasn’t anything fancy—it had one big bed with matching bedside tables and lamps, a tiny desk with a chair, and a flat-screen TV attached to the wall, all in

varying shades of beige—but it was a lot nicer than our room in Albuquerque had been, and it was miles ahead of a two-man tent and a yoga mat. I dropped my bag in a corner of the room, kicked off my sneakers, and flopped backward onto the bed, arms spread wide as I soaked up the cool air. The bed dipped a second later as Matt threw himself down next to me, waving his arms about and making a snow angel in the plush comforter.

“What?” he asked when I turned my head to look at him.

“You’re an idiot,” I said, because I knew he didn’t want to hear the truth. I’m going to miss you. How am I supposed to do this without you? I love you .

When I was nine and Luke and I broke a window and lied and said we didn’t know what happened, Dad sat us both down and said he wasn’t angry, he just wanted us to tell the truth. Luke stuck with the whole spontaneous explosion thing for a while, but I caved first and told Dad all about Inside Baseball. And Dad hadn’t been lying. He wasn’t angry. He thanked me for telling the truth and told us that baseball was an outdoor game only.

Telling the truth was supposed to make things better, except there was nothing that either Matt or I could admit to out loud that would make this better, and we both knew it. Driving back to Cape Charles alone was going to hurt like a bitch, no matter what. Tomorrow was going to be one of the hardest days of my life, so I was determined to make tonight one of the best.

I rolled over toward Matt and reached out, catching him around the waist and pulling him closer. When our faces were barely an inch apart, I leaned in and kissed him.

He exhaled, his lips parting for mine, and his hand grasped my hip as we kissed slow and soft, like he thought I’d try and get away. Matt’s trust issues ran deep, but in this case he didn’t have to worry. I wasn’t going anywhere.

The AC hummed in the background, chilling the room, but it was Matt's tongue brushing against mine that made me shiver. Kissing Matt was far more intense than anything I'd experienced before, and I craved more in a way I never had with Layla. But for right now, I was happy just doing this, exploring Matt's mouth, getting to know the shape of his kisses and the taste of him. As for anything else? We had all night.

Matt and I floated in the pool, staring up at the night sky. There was something about night swimming. I missed the push and pull of the ocean, but the pool had something it didn't; when we were still, so was the water, and it reflected the night sky above us. We were floating in stars. And maybe I was just looking for meaning the closer and closer we got to San Diego and the end of the trip, but it felt special. Like, right up until a group of guys with a cooler of beer turned up and one of them instantly killed the vibe with a cannonball.

Matt and I got out and grabbed our towels, then headed back to our room, shivering in the air conditioning once we got there.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Matt said. "Get the chlorine off me."

"Yeah, okay." I dug around in my bag for my sleep pants and a T-shirt, then sat on the end of the bed and waited for my turn in the bathroom.

I didn't realize how nervous I was until I caught my leg jiggling. Leaning over, I turned on the bedside lamp, then went and switched off the big light, and it helped me feel a little bit less exposed. I took a couple of deep breaths and told myself to calm the fuck down. It wasn't like I'd changed my mind or anything. I wanted this. I just wasn't sure exactly what this was, and that was what had me twitchy.

The sound of running water went on and on, and I wondered if Matt expected me to join him. But then, if he'd wanted me in there, he would have said so, right? This was

Matt.

The water cut off, and a minute later Matt appeared with a towel around his waist. His cheeks were pink and his skin was still damp and I kind of wanted to lick him, which was another first for me.

“Your turn,” he said, flopping onto the bed and shooting me a cocky grin that I was ninety percent sure was a lie.

I ducked into the bathroom and showered quickly, making sure my junk was extra clean since it would hopefully have a starring role tonight. Once I’d dried myself, I eyed my sleep pants and shirt before deciding to follow Matt’s lead. I stepped out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel, and I didn’t miss the way Matt’s gaze tracked over me appreciatively. I crossed the room and joined him, and anticipation crackled between us. Suddenly the bed didn’t seem all that big. We were inches apart, facing each other. Matt’s lips were parted slightly, and I couldn’t look away. I reached out and cupped the back of his head just as he lunged forward, and our mouths crashed together in a hot, messy kiss that was all tongues and teeth and enthusiasm and zero style, and I didn’t care.

This wasn’t like our soft, tentative kisses from before. This was heated and desperate, the start of something more—what exactly, I didn’t know—but whatever it was, I wanted it. Matt made a breathless, needy sound against my mouth, and it shouldn’t have had my dick throbbing just from that, but apparently I had a thing for Matt’s sex noises because my dick perked right up.

We parted to catch our breath and Matt blinked at me and flashed me a crooked smile. Then he gave me a playful shove that landed me on my back. He settled his weight on top of me, and the heat and pressure of his bare chest against mine had me fully hard in seconds. I wasn’t the only one. His erection pressed into my thigh through the thin fabric of the hotel towels, and I’d never been more aware of anything

in my life. I rocked my hips, chasing more friction, and Matt ground down against me and honestly, I was so keyed up that I could have come just from that. But that wasn't the plan. The plan was that we make tonight count.

I reached down and tugged at my towel, letting it fall open.

Matt's breathing hitched. He sat back on his knees, straddling me, then yanked his own towel off, dropping it over the side of the bed. His dick was hard, the tip a deep red, and it swayed as he moved, flush against his stomach. I found myself reaching out and running one finger up the shaft. Matt's eyes grew wide and he tilted his hips forward as his hands clutched at my thighs, his fingertips digging into the muscle.

I reached out and wrapped a hand around his dick and stroked him a couple of times, nice and slow. Touching his dick was different than touching my own—better, somehow—and every time I stroked the silky soft skin, my own dick throbbed. Matt sucked in a sharp breath, his teeth scraping his bottom lip as he stared down at me. He looked so fucking fragile, like he wasn't in control and he didn't know what to do about it.

I let go of his dick and reached up, resting my hand on his waist and tugging him toward me. "Hey. C'mere."

He swallowed and curled forward, caging me in. His damp hair brushed against my collarbone as he buried his face against the curve of my throat. I ran my fingers over the nape of his neck and down his spine in a long, soothing motion while I soaked up the weight of him against me. After a minute he lifted his head and his lips ghosted against my cheek as he sought my mouth. I turned my head just right and then we were kissing and grinding and making out desperately, all uncertainty disappearing. We rolled onto our sides and Matt hitched his top leg over mine, bringing our hard dicks into contact, and the drag of skin on skin as he rocked forward dragged a low groan out of me.

He pulled back and grinned, then leaned in and licked a stripe up the side of my neck and holy shit , who knew something so gross could feel so good? Like, that was something toddlers did. There was no way it should have been hot. But my nerve endings were dancing, my pulse was racing, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than Matt's mouth all over me.

And maybe he was psychic or maybe I said that out loud, but the next thing I knew Matt was sliding down my body, tracing over my skin with his hands and then following the trail he was making with his tongue, tasting and teasing. When he took one nipple into his mouth and sucked, my back arched off the bed and I let out a filthy, ragged moan.

Matt made a pleased sound that echoed right through my rib cage and teased me some more, and by the time he moved his mouth to the other side, I was panting. For someone who didn't know what he was doing, Matt sure as fuck knew what he was doing. Every sharp tug of his teeth on my nipple sent a shock right down to my balls, and I was dangerously close to coming all over myself without him even touching me. "Matty!" I gasped.

He raised his head and grinned. "You like that?"

I let out a groan. "Too much. I'm gonna come if you don't stop."

Matt pressed a soft kiss to my ribs and sat up on his knees, and his expression turned serious. "Okay. So, how are we doing this? Doggie style? Missionary?"

My brain screeched to a halt faster than an SUV confronted by a row of ducklings crossing the street. "What?"

"Isn't that why we're stopping? So you can fuck me? I mean, it makes sense for you to top since you've put your dick in someone before." His brow creased. "That is why

we're stopping, right?"

"What?" I asked again. I stared at him and he stared at me.

He wrinkled his nose. "Isn't that why we got a room? So we could fuck?"

"We got a room because it's our last night!"

"Yeah." He jutted his chin out in the way that signaled this was about to become an argument if I didn't tread carefully. "And that means we're gonna fuck, right?"

"Matt," I began, and he bridled at the tone of my voice, lifting himself off me. He clambered off the bed, pulling his towel around him and glowering at me. "Matt! Get back here, you dick!"

He glowered again, but he'd turned down the heat of the glare at least a few degrees. "Don't you want to fuck me? I know you never did anal with Layla."

"What?" I sat up, jamming a pillow over my junk. "I do want to, but it's not a competition! And if it was—" I ignored the bite of guilt for saying it, because I really liked Layla. I just didn't love her. "If it was, you'd be winning anyway."

His eyes widened and he looked away briefly before he asked, "So why don't you want to have sex with me?"

"Matty, I don't know how ."

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "What?"

"There's like extra stuff you have to do, and I don't want to screw it up." I didn't know whose face was redder, his or mine. But either one of us could have been used

as a traffic signal right now. “I don’t want to do anything that might hurt you.”

His shoulders slumped as the fight went out of him. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I said softly.

It didn’t bother me how he’d overlooked any forward planning or research we might have to do in order to get to anal—Matt making rash decisions without thinking ahead was pretty much why we were here, after all—but it did bother me that he thought he was competing with Layla. That he’d framed anal just as something he could give me that she hadn’t. Like, sex was supposed to be something between us . Layla shouldn’t have even been part of that equation. It bothered me that there was a part of Matt that thought maybe I wasn’t all in, and he had to offer sex as a way to keep me interested.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and planted my feet on the floor. “Hey, Matt.”

“What?”

He didn’t think it was him I wanted? Guess I was going to have to prove it.

“Drop the towel,” I said. “I want to blow you.”

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

MATT

172 miles to go

Yuma, AZ

He wasn't serious. No fucking way was he serious. No way did Jacob want to blow me. Like, I wasn't a masochist or anything. I wouldn't be his boyfriend if I didn't think we could get off together, but I'd figured he'd want to ease into things, especially when it came to getting up close and personal with my dick. But this? Now? No way.

Except even while my brain didn't believe it, my feet were already closing the distance between us. Because what was the worst that would happen? He was lying and he wasn't going to blow me? He was already not blowing me, so I wouldn't be any worse off than before, right? And if he wasn't lying? Well, shit, there was no way I was going to miss this opportunity by being on the other side of the room if he was serious.

I came to a stop in front of him and dropped the towel, hoping he couldn't see how much my hands were shaking. He probably didn't even notice, though, not when my dick was threatening to put his eye out.

“Are you sure you want to—” I began and then almost choked on my tongue because before I could even get the question out, Jacob had leaned forward and licked the head of my dick. I reached out and grabbed his hair instinctively and then forced myself not to rip it from his scalp in my enthusiasm. “I guess that answers that.”

He grinned and looked up at me, then licked his lips. “Salty.”

“Gross,” I lied, and my dick let out a spurt of precum just at the sight of his tongue.

“Nah, it’s okay.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe I like it.”

“Gross,” I said again, my heart pounding, because he’d broken my brain and that was suddenly the only word I knew how to say.

Jacob’s grin grew, because he always knew when I was full of shit. “You said hot wrong.” He raised his eyebrows. “Have you ever given head before?”

“Why? Just because I’m gay?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, duh. You got a head start on knowing sucking dick was on the agenda. I only figured it out like, right now. So have you ever given it?”

“No.”

“Gotten it?”

“No!” I hadn’t done anything . I hadn’t even kissed anyone before Jacob, and he knew that, but I guessed those things weren’t always related, right?

“Huh.” His grin faded into a lazy smirk. “I guess we’ll just have to figure it out together, right?” And then he wrapped his hand around my dick and leaned in and

licked it again. Except this time it wasn't just a tentative taste. This time it was slow and hot and wet, and electric sparks ran up my spine and set every nerve in my body alight, and— oh shit , I wasn't going to last.

I tightened my grip on Jacob's hair and squeezed my eyes shut.

He pulled back, offering me a moment of reprieve, but the next time he leaned in, he took the head of my dick into his mouth. I opened my eyes immediately because I had to fucking see that, right? I was saving it for a near-death situation when my life flashed in front of my eyes. I wanted it to be an Instagram slideshow of just this: Jacob, his mouth around my dick and his gaze slanted upward to catch mine. Because there was no way that anything else in my life would come close to this moment.

Sorry, Grand Canyon.

"How was that?" he asked when he pulled off, and then without waiting for an answer, he slid off the bed and landed on his knees. He licked his lips and leaned in again. "Okay, this angle is better."

Holy-fuck-yes-it-is!

My brain stuttered. So did my hips, and it took strength I didn't even know I had not to thrust forward and choke him on my dick. And that wasn't dirty talk—I was literally worried about choking him since this was his first time, and I'd once watched him almost die when he swallowed a baby carrot wrong. And I was bigger than a baby carrot. That went without saying, right? But, just in case, a lot bigger.

Jacob bobbed his head and sucked hard, pulling a groan out of me. My body felt hot, my skin tight, and my heartbeat had a heavy echo in my balls. This was amazing. He was amazing. And him wanting me as much as I wanted him? That was the most amazing thing of all.

My hips jerked forward and Jacob gagged.

“Shit! Sorry! I’m sorry!”

He swallowed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. When he spoke, his voice rasped. “It’s okay. I just wasn’t expecting it. Want to try again?”

I stared down at him, nodding like a bobblehead. “Fuck, yes.”

This wasn’t going to be a porn blow job where one guy had rhythm and the other guy had no gag reflex. This was us figuring it out as we went along, and probably messing it up, and it turned out that was more perfect than perfection.

This time when Jacob took my dick in his mouth, he put his hands on my thighs, bracing himself as he slowly eased forward, swallowing half my dick before pulling back, then setting up a sloppy back and forth that had him sliding on and off my dick with short, jerky movements. My breathing sped up, and my entire world narrowed down to that hot, wet mouth.

When I was a kid, I’d touched a live wire once, and it had sent a shock racing throughout my entire body. It had been fucking terrifying and not fun. This reminded me of that, except it was the opposite. I couldn’t get enough of the jolts of pleasure that coursed through my veins every time Jacob bobbed his head, and when he ran his tongue along my shaft, my dick throbbed in warning. I barely had time to pull back before I was coming, leaving hot streaks of cum across his cheeks as I unloaded all over his face.

Fuck.

Jacob blinked up at me, and I wondered if we were both thinking that at least I hadn’t hit him right in the eye. I stared at the glob of cum sliding down his cheek.

“Um,” I said.

“Dude.” He wiped his cheek with his fingers and inspected them. “Little warning next time, huh?” And then he licked his fingers clean.

My brain shorted out.

My dick, which I’d presumed was out for the count, rallied at the sight of Jacob licking his fingers and let out one last spurt.

My legs wobbled. I sank down on the side of the bed before I embarrassed myself by falling down on my ass—as opposed to embarrassing myself by jizzing all over Jacob’s face. “Um,” I said again.

Jacob shifted so he was sitting on the floor facing me, snagging my towel and wiping his face properly. “That was hot as fuck.”

It was ?

I mean, for me, yeah. But I’d been having my dick sucked. That was never going to be not hot. But for Jacob? He’d liked it too? I felt a sudden surge of bravado, all mixed up with lust and curiosity and even a weird bit of jealousy. Like, Jacob got to suck a dick before I did? Typical! But the jealousy was admittedly pretty hard to hold onto given it was my dick he’d sucked.

“Can I try?” I asked.

It was Jacob’s turn to nod like a bobblehead. His dick was hard, and it bounced as he scrambled up to sit on the side of the bed, like he thought I might change my mind or something. But there was zero chance of that happening. Not when I’d been secretly dreaming about Jacob’s dick since the moment I first figured out what mine was for. I

slid down onto my knees and shuffled around so I was between his spread thighs and wow, now that it was right in my face I had to stop and catch my breath because that was a lot of dick to swallow.

You can do this. You deep throat a hot dog for laughs once, remember?

Which, looking back, was a dumbass thing to do for a guy who'd been trying to stay in the closet. Like, gay or not, you deep throat a hot dog and things will be said around school.

"You're thinking of the hot dog, aren't you?" Jacob asked me, quirking a brow.

"No." I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Yes."

"Hey," he said, worry creasing his forehead, "you don't have to do this."

"No! I want to," I said. "You're pretty big, is all. I'm just figuring out the logistics."

I reached out and wrapped a hand around his dick to hold it steady, then leaned in and licked it.

The skin was silky under my tongue with faint traces of soap and salt, and I liked it. I liked it so much I opened my mouth and wrapped it around the head of his dick and sucked. Jacob jerked like he'd been shot, his hips rocked forward, and precum flooded my mouth. I swallowed around the extra inch of dick without gagging, and a burst of something like pride washed over me. Jacob was right. This was hot as fuck.

Then Jacob's fingers were in my hair, tugging gently, and that dialed every sensation up a notch. Shit. I wanted him to pull my hair harder. Except with a dick in my mouth, I couldn't tell him that, and even if I hadn't had a dick in my mouth, I wasn't sure I'd know how to say it. Was this a kink, or was everyone into it? Jacob tightened

his grip and tugged again—still gentle but definitely applying more pressure this time, making sure I felt it—and I made a noise that was so obviously fucking into it that I guessed we didn't need to have that conversation after all.

I didn't have any more rhythm than Jacob had probably, and I thought he lasted a little longer than I did. It was hard to tell. My brain went kind of fuzzy, and my body buzzed with new arousal—it was warm and slow like a hot bath, not sharp and urgent like it had been when Jacob blew me. It just felt good to be making him feel good, and every gasping breath he gave, every jerk of the muscles in his abdomen or thighs, every time his fist tugged my hair, caused a new wave of heat to course through me.

He did better than me in that he at least managed to gasp out, “Matty!” so I had time to pull off his dick before he tensed and came, decorating my skin with hot, messy streaks. I'd never understood why people thought facials were hot when I watched porn, but apparently it was one of those things where you literally had to be there, because holy shit . This was the hottest thing ever.

I did that!

Well, the cum was his, but I was the reason I was wearing it.

Jacob stared at me, his chest heaving, and I grinned up at him before I stuck my tongue out and traced my bottom lip, licking up the cum there. Jacob reached down and cupped my filthy face, then leaned down and kissed me, and okay, that was officially the hottest thing ever.

“Get up here,” he said and flopped back onto the bed. It took me a minute to remember how my legs worked, but once I could move, I flopped on the bed right next to him. I turned to face him only to find him watching me, eyes bright. “That was awesome. Are we blow job kings? I feel like we're blow job kings.”

I snorted. “We’re so not.” I ran a hand over my cheek, smearing the cum that was still there. “We need a lot more practice.”

“We should have done this earlier,” he said. “Then we’d be blow job kings by now.”

“Earlier?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. If I’d figured out I was bi when I was, like, fifteen or something, we could have had three years of practice already.”

“When you were fifteen, you had zits,” I said. “Hard pass.”

“Fuck off!” He reached up above him for a pillow and thwapped me with it. “You had more zits than me when we were fifteen!” He poked me in the chin. “In fact...”

I twisted my head away. “That’s a mosquito bite.”

“Is not.”

“Is not,” I echoed. “This is why we couldn’t have dated when we were fifteen. We probably shouldn’t date now. We sound like we’re twelve.”

He snorted and stared up at the ceiling. “Do you think there’s a moment when you actually feel grown-up? Or, like, are guys like my dad just totally faking it and building their retirement funds and investments and all that shit but secretly thinking about if they should buy the Lego Millennium Falcon?”

“Dude, Lego costs a fortune,” I said. “You need to be a grown-up to afford it. Have you seen the price of a Lego Millennium Falcon? They’re crazy expensive. No twelve-year-old is buying that with their allowance.”

I'd never even had an allowance. But then again, I'd barely had a dad when I was twelve. But that was about to change. I wondered idly if me and my dad could build a Millenium Falcon together.

No, that was stupid. My brain was being stupid. My dad wasn't going to want to build a Millenium Falcon with me. Like, first we had to get to know each other again. And even if I'd wanted to build a Millenium Falcon—which I didn't—I wasn't going to be all, Hey, Dad, it's been, what? Ten years? Buy me some Lego because I'm broke? That would be weird. Too weird even for me.

But it would be kind of funny if it did happen. Then I could tease Jacob about it because he clearly did want to build a Millenium Falcon.

Except he'd be at college on the other side of the country.

My stomach dropped at the reminder, and the warm glow I'd been basking in disappeared. This was our last night together before he left me to go back home. And I wasn't ready for this to be over, not when it had barely started.

Jacob nudged me, dragging me out of my spiraling thoughts. "How do you know how much the Millenium Falcon costs? You hate fun things."

"That doesn't mean I don't know stuff."

He propped himself up onto an elbow. "No, seriously, how do you know it's even a thing? You don't like Lego."

I knew because I'd looked at it for his birthday last year in the hope of it being on sale. Because Jacob had always been a big secret Lego-loving weirdo.

"Maybe I love Star Wars ," I said.

“You don’t love Star Wars .” He narrowed his eyes for a moment in thought, and then his face lit up. “But I love Star Wars , so that means you love me!”

My heart squeezed.

It was the sort of thing he could have teased me about a week ago—and he had—and we both could have laughed it off. But the words hit differently now we were both lying here naked, smeared in cum. My first instinct was to deny it like I’d always done, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Jacob’s grin faded, leaving a thoughtful, soft expression on his face. “But you love me and I love you. Right?”

And because he’d said it too, admitting it was as easy as breathing. “Yeah. You love me and I love you.”

“Then we’ll make this work,” Jacob said. “We’ll visit as much as we can. And we’ll text, like, all the time. And we’ll send so many dick pics.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Sure,” I said. “ So many.”

I was going to miss the fuck out of him.

But I knew if anyone could make this work between us, it was Jacob. When we talked about a long-distance relationship, even though a million things could go wrong, I knew that Jacob wouldn’t let them. Because when Jacob gave his word, he meant it. And I believed him.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

JACOB

172 miles to go

Yuma, AZ, to San Diego, CA

W hoever said parting was such sweet sorrow was full of shit. Parting sucked .

Like, we hadn't even left the hotel, but already imagining the drive back with an empty passenger seat had me all tied up in knots. How was I meant to live without Matt's constant presence for the next four years?

I mean, don't get me wrong. Matt would get to spend time with his dad and reconnect, which was awesome. For him. But it sucked for me , the guy he was leaving behind—especially since I'd only just figured out that I was in love with him.

Maybe Matt was right about me being slow on the uptake.

I stuffed my bathroom bag into my backpack, giving it a hard shove when I couldn't get it to fit. I got it in there, although the zipper creaked ominously when I closed it. I took a last look around the rest of the hotel room, checking for phone chargers and airpods and shit like that, but the room was clear and I didn't have any more excuses to stay.

“Can we go now, or do you need to check that you didn’t leave any ass hair in the shower drain?” Matt said, shifting his duffel from hand to hand.

“I don’t have a hairy ass,” I said, “and you’ll be the one who will remember you left your sweet kicks behind twenty miles from here.”

Matt huffed. “Please. Like I even own sweet kicks.”

“Right? Shoes are probably illegal in California anyway,” I said.

“I’m dating an idiot,” Matt said. He tried to glare, but the corners of his mouth quirked up in a smile instead. Turned out that getting his dick sucked this morning had made him almost agreeable.

What? Like we weren’t gonna try that again while we had the chance?

It meant that we were scrambling to leave by checkout time, but it had been worth it. And it wasn’t like we were in a rush since Matt had said his dad would be cool whenever we arrived.

I took one last look around the room and we left.

It took about three hours to get from Yuma to San Diego and about half that time before we started to see anything green again. But somewhere around Boulder Oaks, the scrubby bushes at the side of the road grew denser, and the long grass that waved in the breeze wasn’t bleached yellow by the sun. The hills in the distance were verdant. By the time we hit El Cajon, there were palm trees, and for the first time it really felt like California.

“Hey,” I said, ignoring the directions to Del Mar that were showing on the map. “It’s California. We should go to the beach.”

Matt gave me such serious side-eye that I figured he was going to refuse, and then he said, “It’s California. We should get In-N-Out and then go to the beach.”

I felt a rush of gratitude. I knew he was probably desperate to see his dad, but here he was agreeing to push it back by an hour or so just because I wanted to. His dad might have said we could turn up at any time, but I would have bet anything Matt wanted it to be sooner rather than later .

I wanted to tell him how much I’d miss him, but it was such a pointless thing to say when we both knew it. Also, I didn’t want to fuck with his happy day, you know? I had been his best friend for most of our lives, way before we were anything else, and I knew how much his dad leaving had hurt him. Even when he didn’t show it, I knew. He didn’t talk about it much, but it was such a big thing that it didn’t matter how many years ago it had been—Matt was still living in its shadow. I wished I could have been happier for him today, but all I could think about was how bad it felt for me.

We went and found an In-N-Out that was pretty close to Mission Beach. I snapped a few photos of my Double-Double and sent them to Luke, knowing he’d be jealous as hell at this definitive proof I was in California while he was stuck in Cape Charles. Now that I knew I was driving home alone, I kind of wished I’d invited him and Charlie. Though to be fair, there probably would have been a lot less making out with Matt and sucking his dick if my little brother had been along for the trip. So, on balance, I was glad it was just me and Matt. And I was glad that I’d discovered something new about myself, and about us, on this trip. It would just break my heart when I had to leave him here and go home to Virginia.

I didn’t tell him that, and he didn’t say it either. What was the point of saying it? It was like weather—interesting the first time you felt a change coming, but then it set in and you didn’t need to point out the gray skies and rain because everyone else had eyes as well, and it wasn’t as though talking about it would clear those clouds.

There weren't any clouds in San Diego today. It was a gorgeous, hot day with a brilliant blue sky. Perfect California weather. Matt and I finished our In-N-Out and then we drove to Belmont Park to see the beach.

We got out of the car and looked across the parking lot. The tracks of the Giant Dipper rose in gentle waves above the rest of the small amusement park .

“We’re not going on it,” I said.

“Nope,” Matt agreed, narrowing his eyes at it.

“Because you’re allergic to fun?”

“Because it’s made of wood and is a century old.” His mouth quirked. “But also because I’m allergic to fun.”

We walked down to the beach instead, taking off our shoes so we could walk barefoot in the sand.

It was gorgeous. High tide, because the sand was only a thin white strip. A lifeguard tower stood in the sand, beach umbrellas dotted all around it. There were girls in bikinis and guys in board shorts. There were families too—toddlers in swim diapers, parents wrangling too many kids, and hairy old men with beer bellies that overhung their Speedos. One of the old men was eating an ice cream cone.

“We need to find the ice cream place,” I said.

“Ocean first,” Matt said. And then, when the cool water was tickling his toes, he said, “It’s the Pacific . I’m standing in the Pacific.”

Right.

Back home, when we'd sneaked out in the middle of the night and gone to the beach, we'd been swimming in the waters of the Atlantic. We'd crossed an entire continent to get here. And now I was going home and leaving Matt behind to swim in a different ocean, hoping like hell that somehow we could make this work.

I swallowed around a lump in my throat. I wasn't going to spoil our last day, so I decided to tease him a little instead. "So tell me," I said, "what, pacifically, do you like about this beach?"

Matt's mom said "pacifically" and I knew it drove him crazy. He turned to me with narrowed eyes and prodded me in the chest with a fingertip. "No. Don't you dare."

"What? I'm just asking a question. What, pacifically, is it that's upsetting about that?" I managed to keep a straight face for all of five seconds, but when he scowled at me, I cracked up laughing. "Be pacific!"

"You're such a dick," Matt said. I liked that I was the only person he said that to where it wasn't the prelude to a fight, but a compliment.

I grinned at him and gave him a friendly shove and he stumbled sideways, water splashing up around his ankles. He shoved me back, harder, and I ended up far enough into the ocean that the hem of my shorts got wet. I took a rapid step away from him and raised my hands. "Wait! My phone!"

Matt paused just as he'd been about to push me again. "Shit, is it wet?"

"Nah." I patted at the pocket of my shorts. Cool water lapped at my calves, and suddenly I couldn't think of anything better than submerging my body into the ocean with Matt one last time. "You know what? We should go for a swim."

Matt looked at me like I'd lost my mind for a second, and then his face split into a

wide grin. “Yeah,” he said, splashing through the shallows toward the beach and peeling his shirt off as he went.

We dumped all our stuff in a pile and then ran into the ocean like we were a couple of little kids, splashing and laughing as the spray hit our skin. When we were deep enough, I swam out past where my feet could touch the bottom and let the waves buffet me from side to side, and Matt appeared next to me minutes later, his head popping up suddenly from under the water the same way a seal’s might. He was grinning from ear to ear, his dark hair slicked back and water dripping down his face, and my chest ached at the knowledge that this was the last time I’d see him like this for who knew how long.

I leaned forward impulsively and kissed his cheek, then wrapped my arms around him. We floated there together like a tiny two-person island, the silence between us only broken by the cry of the gulls that were wheeling overhead, the splash of the waves breaking on the shore, and the thump of my heart in my chest as I held on tight and tried not to drown in self-pity.

I’d miss Matt like crazy, but this wasn’t about me.

Matt was finally doing something for himself, something that would make him happy, and I wanted that for him, because I loved him and I always had, even when I was too dumb to realize it. And hey, at least we were together now. It had taken a road trip, a tent, and a skunk to help us figure our shit out, but now that we had, we weren’t going to let a few miles come between us, right?

Right.

“Hey, we’d better head in,” Matt said close to my ear, and I saw that the pull of the tides had dragged us farther out than I’d thought. It was a stark reminder that this wasn’t my ocean. I let him go and we both swam toward the beach, and once we were

in the shallows we splashed our way back to shore. I expected Matt would want to go to his dad's right away, but maybe he was as reluctant to say goodbye as I was because he sat down on the beach next to our stuff. "We can dry off here," he said and flopped backward, spread eagle against the sand.

I lay down next to him, closing my eyes and breathing in the salt air. After a minute, Matt's hand brushed against me and he hooked his little finger in mine. We didn't speak. We didn't need to. I didn't know how long we spent like that soaking up the sun's rays and each other's presence, but I treasured every golden moment.

The mood was broken when a volleyball hit the ground next to Matt's head and sprayed us with sand, and Matt jolted upright. He scowled at the guy who'd thrown the ball, then stood up and brushed himself off and shrugged into his shirt.

And just like that, it was time to go.

Matt's dad lived in Del Mar on a street lined with fan palms, cactuses, and purple bougainvillea. The house was a couple blocks back from the beach on a street that sloped upward. It looked very different from Cape Charles, where the houses in my neighborhood were tall with sharply pitched roofs and built close together. Here they were low-set and sprawling and spread out like sunbathers soaking up the rays.

Very different houses for very different oceans.

"This is nice," I said when we pulled into the driveway of a sun-soaked ranch-style house with a front yard full of red hibiscus bushes.

Matt nodded sharply, his fingers drumming on his thighs.

After almost three thousand miles from Cape Charles, I turned the engine off. We sat for a moment in silence as the heat leached slowly into the car now the air was off. I

could hear sounds from the street: a passing car, a distant siren, someone's sprinkler stuttering as it turned. I wondered what Matt would do if I reversed out of the driveway and headed back the way we'd come, just so we wouldn't have to say goodbye.

I didn't, though. I gripped the steering wheel tight and let out a long breath. "So."

"So," Matt echoed. His mouth quirked, but it wasn't a smile. "Are you gonna camp on the way back?"

"Not alone," I said before wincing at how harsh that sounded. "I'll need someone to protect me from skunks, is all I mean."

"Yeah." Matt's fingers tapped against his thigh, but he made no move to get out. Knowing Matt, he was probably imagining some scenario where his dad had changed his mind or something.

"Hey," I said, "want me to come in with you? Help carry your stuff?" Because I knew there was no way Matt would admit to needing emotional support.

He blinked at me and then gave a terse nod. "Yeah. That'd be good."

He still didn't move, though, and the silence stretched between us, as fragile and delicate as spun glass. Finally Matt broke it. "Call me every night, okay?"

"Every night."

"And don't do dumb shit without me."

"So I should wait until you're back visiting to do dumb shit?"

That earned me a raised eyebrow. “Dipshit. ”

“Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I do.” And then he unfastened his seat belt and blew out a long breath. “Let’s do this.”

We got out of the car and he walked to the front door, backpack over one shoulder, while I grabbed his duffel from the back of the RAV4. His shoulders were a solid line of tension as he rang the doorbell. I could still hear the chimes echoing when I approached.

Inside, a dog barked.

When nobody answered, Matt bit his bottom lip, then rang the doorbell again.

The dog barked louder this time, a frenzied yapping, and a male voice called, “Coming!”

Matt hitched up his backpack, the anticipation written all over his face. He’d waited so long for this.

The door swung open and a short, stocky man wearing a polo shirt and cargos, with tan skin and dark hair that mirrored Matt’s, stood in front of us. He looked us up and down, and there wasn’t even a hint of recognition. I got an uneasy, heavy feeling in my gut.

“Can I help you?” he said, glancing past us at the RAV4.

I blinked and the uneasy feeling grew. It wasn’t exactly Welcome home, son , was it?

Matt's breathing hitched, and his voice cracked when he spoke. "Dad? It's...it's me. It's Matthew."

"Matthew?" His dad's voice went high, and all the color drained from his face.

And then he shut the door in our faces.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

MATT

San Diego, CA

The story of my parents' divorce wasn't very exciting. Just, one day Mom said that Dad was leaving and they weren't going to be married anymore. They didn't tell me together because Dad was hardly ever home, which looking back made the whole thing blindingly obvious, but I was eight. What the hell did I know when I was eight?

Turned out I didn't know much more at eighteen.

When he was leaving, I'd asked Dad where he was going to go and if I could come with him.

"When you're old enough," he'd said and tousled my hair.

Last time I saw him.

Stupid fucking kid for believing it.

Stupid fucking?—

"Matt?" Jacob asked. "Matty?"

He'd sent letters. A bunch of them at first, then not many. But he sent cards for my mom to pass on to me on my birthday and at Christmas, brightly colored envelopes with just my name on the front. Presents sometimes. Money mostly, maybe five or ten dollars at a time. But when I was a kid, money seemed a lot more exciting than a present. Money made me feel grown-up. Gave me something to brag about. It wasn't until I was older that I realized he couldn't even be bothered going to a toy store or ordering something online.

And even then, I still believed it when the cards said things like, "I wish you lived closer, kid. I'd love to see you."

I'd thought he meant it. I'd taken it as an invitation.

Stupid fucking kid.

Not stupid enough that you checked with him first, a voice whispered in the back of my skull. Because you didn't want to know for sure, did you?

And where the fuck did that leave me?

Standing in my dad's driveway in Del Mar staring at his closed front door while Jacob said my name over and over again.

My dad hadn't even recognized me, for fuck's sake. What kind of father didn't know his own son? Not the kind of father who was going to welcome me with open arms, that was for sure.

My eyes burned and I blinked furiously.

"Matty?" Jacob asked again. "What's going?—"

The door swung open, and hope swelled in my chest even though I wanted to stomp it down.

My dad stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind him, forcing me to step backward. He glanced around like he was in a spy movie or something and said, “What are you doing here? Do you need money?”

“No,” I said. “It’s?—”

“Good, because now you’re eighteen you’re not my responsibility.” He paused. “You are eighteen, right?”

“Jesus,” Jacob murmured, and the sympathy in his voice had me close to my breaking point.

Well, fuck that. I hadn’t come all this way for nothing. I squared my shoulders.

“Yeah,” I said. “Eighteen now. And you always said I could live with you when I was older.” Even though my gut was churning I said it casually, like this was all some misunderstanding or maybe a joke. Like any minute now my dad would tell me to grab my bags and come inside, that he was just messing with me.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he looked me up and down again, then let out a long breath and said, “Jesus Christ, Matthew. How did you even find me?”

Like I was a stalker and not his son.

“I found your address in—” My voice rasped, but I forced the words out. “In some of Mom’s paperwork. For the child support stuff.”

My dad dragged a hand through his hair. He looked upset, like I was the one ruining everything. “You’re not supposed to have my address, Matthew.”

“But you said I could live with you.”

His face twisted. “That’s—that’s something people say. I didn’t think you’d take me seriously. You were a kid. What the hell else was I supposed to tell you?”

The truth?

I’d spent most of my life being this angry, angsty asshole, so where the hell was some of that fire when I needed it? I wanted to be mad at him. I wanted to be able to scream at him, or punch him, or put a fucking rock through the front window of his nice house. But I couldn’t get angry—not at him anyway.

I was angry at that stupid fucking kid, though.

That stupid fucking kid who’d believed his dad’s bullshit and now just wanted to drop to the ground and start bawling his eyes out. Instead, I said in a voice that barely sounded like mine, “But what am I supposed to do now?”

I could still hear the roar of the ocean in my head, louder than almost everything else. Loud enough to drown me, except I was still hanging on by a thread. Hanging on for his answer.

When my dad spoke at last, he didn’t look me in the eye. “You can’t stay here. You need to leave.” He pulled his wallet out of the pocket of his khakis. “You need gas money?”

I stared at the bills he waved in front of my face .

Then he waved them in front of Jacob's.

"Let's go," Jacob said. He didn't take the money. "Matty, let's just go."

The roar of blood in my skull was like the sound of the ocean from under the water. I was dimly aware of Jacob draping an arm around my shoulders and leading me down the driveway toward the car. He took my backpack from me and stashed it in the back along with my duffel while my dad watched, probably to make sure we left.

The door opened and a kid stepped outside. Maybe six or seven. Messy dark hair like mine. "Daddy? Who is that?"

And my dad turned his back on us and said, "Nobody. Nobody at all."

Jacob didn't say anything as we drove away. Just gripped the steering wheel tightly and stared out the windshield, as tightly wound with nerves as he had been the day we'd hit the interchange outside Norfolk.

He didn't have his phone plugged into the car, so there was no route showing on the screen. If he had any idea where the hell we were going, he didn't share it with me, and I couldn't bring myself to ask, too busy listening to the echoes of nobody playing over and over in my brain.

Did he play baseball with his other son? He'd gotten me a glove when I was about six or seven, but I'd never been good at it.

Watch the ball, Matthew! Don't run away from it!

In the end, he'd been as good at parenting as I'd been at catching. At parenting me, anyway. He was probably doing a bang-up job with that other kid—apart from, y'know, not telling him he had an older brother.

Jacob was still focused on the road, his knuckles white, and I still had no clue where we were going. He could drive us right into the ocean for all I cared. Maybe he was so pissed at me that was what he was planning.

We pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall and he turned the engine off. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't, so I said something instead.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No!" he yelled, sounding pretty fucking mad actually. He twisted to face me. "No! Matty, I'm mad at him !"

Jacob was the best person I knew, but I bet even he would be pissed when he realized it was my fault we'd just driven all the way across the country for nothing.

"Okay," he said, drawing in a deep breath. "Are you okay? That's a dumb question. Okay, so we have gas. I don't think..." He grabbed his phone and started to scroll. "Okay, I think if we drive away from the coast for a while, motels will be cheaper than around here. But we should get one pretty quick, don't you think?"

Why the hell was he asking me? I'd wanted him to drive us into the sea. But I shrugged.

"Because...can you look at me, Matty? You're not looking at me."

I reluctantly lifted my head.

"We're gonna get a motel," Jacob said. He looked almost scared, and I hated that all of this was my fault. "Okay?"

"Whatever," I said, hating the way my voice cracked. I cleared my throat. "Yeah." At

least I wouldn't be sleeping on the beach my first night in California, but after that? Who the fuck knew?

Jacob nodded and started the car. "Okay, let's go find somewhere."

Somewhere turned out to be a La Quinta at Miramar with twin beds, a gas station out the front, and a McDonald's right across the road. Jacob's brow creased when he handed over his card.

"That your college fund?" I asked in a low voice as I trailed him down the corridor on the way to our room. "You're not supposed to spend your college fund. "

"Shut up," he murmured. "Come on."

I'd been keeping it together by sheer force of will since we'd left my dad's, determined not to look like the pathetic mess I was, but I could feel my control crumbling as we approached the motel room door—like now there was a safe space in sight, all the rage and confusion that was bubbling up inside me was desperate to spill out.

I just had to make it to the other side of that door.

"Hey," I said as Jacob held his card up to the reader and opened the door, "I bet you wish we'd taken my dad's money now." I forced a wry smile.

We stepped inside and Jacob whirled to face me, eyes blazing. "Don't you say that! Fuck him! You don't need anything from him!" Two bright spots of color appeared on his cheeks, and his chest heaved.

I'd never seen him this fired up, not over anything.

He sucked in a deep breath, and when he spoke again he was calmer, but I could tell he was deadly serious. He reached out and cupped my face. “The only thing of your father’s that’s worth anything is you .”

And just like that, that thread I’d been holding onto since standing on my dad’s front doorstep snapped, and I fell apart.

My eyes flooded with tears, my lip wobbled, and an ugly sob tore its way out of my chest, because how dare Jacob care about me this much when my own father didn’t even want me? When all I was worth to him was fucking gas money ? It was too much to take, and when he opened his arms and said, “I’m here, Matty,” I fell right into them, shaking and crying in a way I never had before.

When shit happened, I didn’t cry . I got mad and lashed out. That was what I’d always done. But somehow, Jacob had stripped all my layers away, and now he was stuck with this—a sobbing, pathetic mess. But I couldn’t stop and I didn’t care. And weirdly, he didn’t seem to care either. He just held me and rubbed a soothing hand up and down my back as I cried out all my disappointment and betrayal and hurt in a flood of tears.

It took a long time, but eventually I was able to take a snuffly breath without crying. I kept my face buried against Jacob’s chest, though. He shuffled us over to one of the twin beds and sat down, drawing me with him.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d cried. The crying wasn’t the bad part. This part was the bad part. I’d stopped crying, but if I pulled away from him, at some point I’d have to make eye contact. And possibly words. And I didn’t want to do that. I didn’t want to move. I wanted to stay here while the world carried on without me. Forever, if I could.

Jacob moved first, leaning back from me a little. “You want to grab a warm shower

and then a nap?”

I didn't reply at first. The flood of emotions had left me exhausted, and undressing and walking to the bathroom seemed like too much effort. But I was still covered in dried salt from our swim at the beach, and at least I wouldn't have to talk to Jacob if I was in the bathroom. So I sat up and scrubbed my palms over my face, then nodded.

“Yeah.” My voice was hoarse but Jacob didn't mention it. He knew better. When I glanced at him, he didn't look weirded out or disgusted at me being a crybaby. He did have that little worried crease in his brow that he got when he wanted to fix things and didn't know how, though. I leaned forward and smoothed a thumb over it. “I'm fine,” I lied.

I was fine—as long as I didn't think about what had happened or what the hell I was supposed to do now.

Standing, I shuffled into the bathroom, moving as slowly as an old man. I undressed and turned the shower on. I made it as hot as I could stand and then stepped under it. Stood there for a while. Then I sat down. Well, sat. Slid down the wall in a wave of despair. Same thing.

I stayed on the floor staring at the off-white tile and not thinking about the future, just listening to the static in my brain. I had no idea how much time had passed when there was a faint knock on the door and Jacob asked, “Did you drown in there?”

The forced note of levity in his tone didn't hide his concern.

“Not yet.”

“I got food,” he said.

I dragged myself to my feet, my fingers squeaking on the wall tiles. Turning off the water, I dried myself on the thin hotel towel before wrapping it around my waist. I stepped out into the room to find Jacob on the phone. He pointed over to the tiny round table in the corner where a McDonald's bag sat as he said, "Yeah. Yeah, we will. Thanks, Mom." His gaze lifted to meet mine. "I gotta go. Bye."

I sat down on one of the beds.

"I got you food," Jacob said, grabbing the bag and setting it beside me. "And your clothes."

A pair of track pants and a soft T-shirt landed on the bed next to me. I brushed the fabric of the T-shirt with my fingertips. "This is yours."

"Is it?" He wrinkled his nose and looked genuinely confused. "Nah, I don't think it is."

It was.

Just a plain blue T-shirt I'd borrowed one night when I was sleeping over at his place and never given back. It had been in my possession for so long that I wasn't surprised he didn't remember it was his. But I remembered, because I'd worn it to sleep for weeks after, imagining I could smell him on it when all it really smelled like by that point was me.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked, because maybe his answer had changed since last time.

The mattress dipped as he sat beside me. He shook his head. "Still no."

I nodded slowly. "I think I'm mad at me."

“Why?”

“Because I’m stupid. ”

He shook his head. “You expected your dad to mean what he said. How does that make you stupid?”

“Because he never came to see me in ten years, Jacob. Ten fucking years . He never even called. I only knew he’d remarried because I stalked his Facebook, so it’s not like he was going out of his way to stay in touch, you know? He didn’t want anything to do with me. But I was still dumb enough to ignore all of that and plan my whole fucking future around a comment he made when he walked out on us when I was eight .” My throat hurt and clearing it didn’t help. Not when a fresh wave of tears was waiting right behind my words. “So yeah, stupid.”

Even though my stomach was churning, I opened the takeout bag and shoved a handful of fries into my mouth so I wouldn’t say something that made me start crying again. I unwrapped my burger with shaking hands.

Jacob tilted his head back and stuck out his chin the way he did when he was getting ready to argue. “So your dad’s a liar. So what? Doesn’t make you stupid. I mean, you had a whole plan. You found out where he was, and you found a way to get here. That sounds pretty clever to me.”

“Yeah, I’m a genius,” I muttered, biting into my burger.

“And your dad’s an asshole.”

“Yeah. I guess Mom was right. Like, whenever we’d fight, I’d yell that I’d go live with Dad then, and she’d yell back that he—” My voice cracked. “That he didn’t want me. It only came up when we were fighting. I thought she was just...I don’t

know what I thought. That she was only saying it because she was angry with me, not because it was true.” My shoulders slumped. “What the hell am I going to do now?”

I was just so fucking tired.

“Hey,” Jacob said. “We don’t have to do anything right now. We can figure it out in the morning, okay?” He gently took my food wrappers and dumped them in the trash, then closed the curtains, shutting out some of the traffic noise and making the room darker. “I’m gonna take a shower, okay? I’ll be right back. Try and sleep.”

Part of me wanted to snap at him for treating me like I was broken or something, except right now? I sort of was . Or at least I was too wrung out to fight with him about it. That was frightening in its own way. I’d never been too tired to be angry in my entire fucking life, and it was like I didn’t even recognize myself. I didn’t know what to do , except listen to Jacob.

So I climbed under the comforter, squeezed my eyes shut, and fell asleep to the sound of the shower.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

JACOB

2728 miles to go

San Diego, CA, to Goose Run, VA

Matt slept for about an hour, leaving me nothing to do but sit at the little table and jiggle my knee while I watched him. I also watched my phone screen, hoping Mom and Dad would come through with a text message full of advice that would make everything magically better. That was what parents did, right? At least, that was what my parents did.

My chest hurt when I looked at Matt.

Matt's parents weren't like mine. His mom was okay, I guessed, but she worked a lot of long hours, and sometimes it was like she was his roommate instead of his mom. I'd thought that was pretty cool, the way Matt could do pretty much whatever the hell he wanted because his mom barely noticed. I didn't think it was cool now. His mom was hardly ever there for him, but it turned out she was Carol fucking Brady compared to his dad.

Who the fuck didn't want to see their own kid? Sure, it had probably been a shock when Matt turned up, but the guy hadn't even recognized him. And when he'd found

out who he was, he'd been desperate to get rid of him—like Matt was an embarrassment, a relic of a past life that he wanted to keep hidden. He hadn't even hugged him, too busy chasing us off the property before the neighbors saw. He hadn't wanted to know him.

The ache in my chest grew.

Matt was awesome, and sometimes it felt like I was just about the only person who knew that because he was also a weirdo who got a kick out of acting like an asshole, but you know who else should have known how amazing he was? His parents.

I checked my phone again, but there was nothing.

Funny.

When I'd decided to come on this road trip with Matt, I'd told myself that my parents couldn't really stop me since I was an adult. I didn't feel much like an adult right now, sitting here waiting for Mom and Dad to tell me what to do. But shit, at least I had them to fall back on. Who did Matt have?

The pinging notification of a text message made me jolt and check my phone, but there was still nothing. It had to be Matt's phone then, which was sitting on top of his open backpack. I grabbed it in case it was important.

The preview screen showed a message from his mom. For a split second, I had a glimmer of hope that maybe she was going to be there for Matt after all, but then I read the screen.

Your father just called me. What the hell were you thinking?

That seemed like something I didn't need to see, so I set the phone back down. As I

did, my fingers brushed against the cover of the sketchbook Matt always carried, and I saw that the new elastic band he'd gotten to keep it closed was missing. I lifted the book out and discovered it wasn't missing at all. It had snapped, just like the first one, and gotten caught in the wire spiral of the spine. I pulled it out, turning the book over as I did, and the pages fell open.

A couple of menus and the postcard from Goose Run and some receipts fell out. I barely noticed them. I was too busy looking at a sketch of myself, and it was incredible. I wasn't sure if the invasion of privacy here was mine, for looking in his book, or his, for stealing what must have been a thousand glances at me that I hadn't noticed. Back when I'd thought I was straight—somehow only a few days but also a whole lifetime ago—he'd been watching me. And this wasn't one of his funny doodles. This was...

I didn't really have the word for it, except that it hurt a little to look at it. To look at me, as he must have seen me, totally fucking oblivious when it was so fucking clear that he was in love with me.

I turned the pages and found more pictures of me interspersed with Matt's doodles and rough sketches. There was a cartoon of me being chased by a skunk and another one of me asleep in the passenger seat with my mouth open with a row of zzzz s. They were cute, and it was obvious that Matt was an expert at sketching me. None of those drawings was as much of a love letter as that portrait was, though. I closed the sketchbook, my heart pounding fast and my breath catching in my throat.

"It's just messing around," Matt said, his voice raspy from sleep, and I jolted and dropped the book.

I straightened up and threw him a wary look, unsure how he'd react. "They're really good. The skunk one is funny."

His mouth twisted, and he sat up and stretched. “Maybe I’ll be one of those guys who does caricatures of tourists at the beach or something.”

I stared at him. “In Cape Charles?”

“What?”

“You’d do caricatures at the beach in Cape Charles,” I said and Matt looked away. My stomach tied itself in a knot. “Matt, you’re coming back to Virginia with me.”

I didn’t know if it was a statement or a question.

“Why the hell should I?” He jutted his chin out, but there was none of the usual fire in his expression. “Zeke’s lease is up soon. He’s probably already moving his shit into my room. ”

“At least you have a room in Cape Charles, even if it’s full of Zeke’s shit,” I said. “You don’t have one here!”

Matt narrowed his eyes. “I’ll figure something out.”

He was so fucking stubborn. But so was I, when I needed to be. “Matty, think about it. You’re starting college soon. You can’t just stay here.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was never going to go to community college in Melfa! I wasn’t going to go home!”

“Yeah, I get that now, but you’re still enrolled there, right? You could still go. And you have stuff going on back home that you don’t have here. Like...like me .”

Matt looked like he was about to argue but couldn’t quite think of what to say, so I

took advantage of the silence.

“I could cope with you being here when I thought you’d be happy, you know? Like, if you wanted to live with your dad, who was I to stop you? But knowing you’re here alone? I’ll spend all my time worrying that you’re getting into fights or, I dunno, having your kidneys stolen.”

Matt’s mouth dropped open. “My kidneys ?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never lived on the West Coast. There could be a roaring trade in body parts!”

“Oh my god. You’re an idiot.” Matt rolled his eyes, but I caught the first traces of a smile.

“Maybe, but I’m an idiot who loves you.”

His eyes widened, like maybe those words were shocking, but why would they be? I’d loved Matt for years, and that had never changed. The rest—the kissing, the touching, the flutter in my stomach when I thought of the kissing and touching—that was new, but it was laid over a foundation that had been unshakable for over half my life.

“You’re my best friend. Even before anything else, I love you. And—and now you’re my boyfriend too. I love you both ways now, I guess.” His wide-eyed look scared the shit out of me. “I’m saying it wrong. Am I saying it wrong? ”

He opened his mouth and closed it again, like for once in his life he didn’t have a smartass answer.

“Matty.” I closed the space between us, the sketchbook still clutched in my hands,

and knelt on the floor beside the bed. “This—I don’t even have words for this drawing. And not because it’s me, but because it’s you . It’s your feelings in this. Please don’t make me leave you here when I love you.” I leaned over and grabbed the sketchbook and flipped it open to the portrait he’d drawn. “And this says you love me too.”

He reached out and took the sketchbook from me, tracing his fingers over the page. “But I can’t just...go back.”

And there it was. Matt hated when people laughed at him or looked down on him. Sometimes they weren’t even doing those things, but he thought they were anyway. Matt didn’t just have a chip on his shoulder. He had a whole potato.

Or maybe that was the wrong sort of chip. My point still stood, though.

I leaned over and shoved his shoulder. “Why not? As far as anyone knows, we went on a road trip and now we’re back. And they’ll be so busy gawking at the fact you snagged yourself a hot boyfriend they won’t care about anything else.”

Matt raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you think you’re hot?”

I gestured to the sketch. “I mean, I look pretty hot there. And you drew it, so you must think so too.”

That got me a reluctant smile. “You’re kinda cute I guess.”

“Come home, Matt. I only just figured out I love you, and I’m not ready to leave you behind when there’s no reason for you to stay.”

He opened his mouth but nothing came out, so he tried again. “You really want me to come home?” he asked, voice small.

“I need you to.” I caught his hands in mine, hating how his fingers shook. “Please.”

Matt’s gaze held mine for a moment before he ducked his head and his dark hair curtained his face. “How come you’re the only person in the world who wants me?” His voice cracked. “My mom barely gives a shit. Even my dad?—”

But however he’d been going to end that bitter sentence, I had no idea, because he wrenched his hands out of mine and covered his face as his shoulders began to shake with sobs.

So I climbed up on the bed with him, put my arms around him, and waited out the storm. Because what the hell else was there to do?

Egg McMuffins. Not exactly the breakfast of champions, but I wanted something I could eat as I drove. The sooner we got the fuck on the road, the better. Even though Matt had said he’d come back with me last night, I was still half-convinced he’d change his mind. So I packed our shit, packed the car, shoved him in the passenger seat, and drove across the road to the drive-thru at McDonalds and breakfast on the go.

Matt wasn’t talking much this morning, just like he hadn’t talked much last night. Okay, so he wasn’t usually very talkative, but he could say a million things with a glare alone. This morning he wasn’t even glaring at his McMuffin. He just looked tired and wrung out.

“Put some music on,” I said, nodding at where my phone was sitting in the cup holder on the center console. “Road trip music. Pick something good.”

He picked up my phone and fiddled with it, and soon the sounds of Twenty One Pilots’s “Stressed Out” filled the car. Matt did glare then, like he expected me to tell him to put something more upbeat on, but honestly, it was fitting. I was stressed out

not knowing what was going to happen with Matt's living situation, so I couldn't imagine how he felt—although I had some idea, given how his shoulders had sagged when he'd agreed coming home was the best choice .

He perked up some after he ate, just like I'd known he would. He wasn't back to his usual self—he wouldn't be for a while probably—but he gave me shit about my lane changes and stole half my hash browns, and I took it as a good sign. When I'd spoken to my mom last night, she'd just said, "Come home, Jacob"—like I was planning to do anything else. I'd only been half-joking about the stolen kidneys. I just had to hope his mom wasn't as stubborn as Matt and would take him back.

It was weird. When we were driving to California, everything was new and a little intimidating. It was our big road trip. Our first time doing something without our parents—well, my parents—breathing over our shoulders. But somehow going home was scarier because it felt even more unknown than our road trip had.

I read somewhere once that the first time you take a trip, it feels like it takes a long time because your brain has to map it all from scratch. And when you go back, it doesn't seem to take as long because you're using less memory this time around. In theory, going home to Cape Charles should have felt quicker because we weren't being bombarded by entirely new sensory information. In practice, it felt like a couple hundred years. We were tired, and Matt was unhappy, and at least twice a day I was tempted to turn around, drive all the way back to San Diego, and run over his asshole father so many times that he was just a smear on the asphalt.

That probably wasn't in keeping with my dad's rule of driving safely, though.

We stayed in motels instead of campsites, and my college fund suffered because of it. But it was easier than putting up the tent every night and having to buy food before we got there. We picked motels with fast food places nearby and cuddled at night. It was the only good part of the trip.

By the time we pulled into Goose Run Gas, my stomach was so full of greasy food I could have eaten an apple and shit out fritters, but Matt wanted a Mountain Dew and I could do with stretching my legs .

It was mid-afternoon. We could be in Cape Charles in around three hours, though we'd hit peak rush hour in Norfolk and that wouldn't be much fun. It would be worth it, though, just to get home tonight.

“Did you talk to your mom yet?” I asked him as we got out of the car at the gas station.

“Nope,” he said and slammed the door. He crossed the sunbaked ground, heading for the store.

I hurried to catch up as the automatic doors rattled open and blasted us with cold air, then headed straight for the fridges to grab a water and Matt's Mountain Dew. I was standing there when I heard Matt's laugh—a sound I hadn't heard in days. My skin prickled with a sense of déjà vu, and I turned around and stared over the shelves toward the counter.

Trucker Cap Danny was working today. The guy who'd given Matt his number the first time we were here. It felt like a whole lifetime had passed for us, but it was only a little over two weeks for him, which clearly wasn't long enough for him to have forgotten Matt. I hadn't given the guy a second glance the last time we'd been here, too busy being jealous—even if I hadn't known that was what it was—but now, looking through my new rainbow-colored glasses, yeah. He was cute. Not as cute as Matt, but I was most probably biased.

I was most definitely bi-assed.

I walked over with my drinks and tried to act casual. “Hey,” I said, “want anything

else while we're here?"

I wouldn't lie, it was a relief to see Matt's smile directed at me. "Hey. I was telling Danny about the Grand Canyon."

"Oh yeah, it was awesome." I set the drinks on the counter and draped an arm over Matt's shoulders. Was I staking a claim? Maybe. But Matt leaned into my touch, so I figured he liked it.

Danny's eyebrows rose and his face split in a grin. "Oh, hey, congratulations!"

"What?"

He shrugged. "Seems like it's something new? "

I flushed. "Yeah."

"Turns out I'm irresistible," Matt deadpanned. "Did you get my Mountain Dew? If you didn't, it's a deal-breaker. Danny would bring me Mountain Dew."

"Whoa," Danny said, holding his palms up and snorting with laughter. "You've already got a hot guy bringing you Mountain Dew. You don't need me. Besides, it's Coke or nothing."

He thought I was hot too? And he was a Coke drinker?

Okay, so suddenly he seemed okay. It would be unfair to hate him just because he'd given Matt his number a couple weeks ago. That just showed he had taste. And he'd thought Matt was single. He had been single. But yeah, a lifetime had passed for us since then.

We lingered a little longer in the gas station than we otherwise might have, and I thought it was because we both knew this was our last stop before home. I was sick of driving, but I knew Matt wasn't anxious to get back to Cape Charles and face his mom. And not just that, but this was the end of our road trip, the end of our summer, the end of a major part of our lives. From now on it'd be college and jobs and adulthood, and it didn't matter if we were ready for that or not because there was nothing we could do to stop it. I'd been scared about that before this summer but not so much anymore. I didn't know what the future held, sure, but I knew I could handle it.

We could handle it.

And I saw that same certainty reflected in Matt's eyes when he unscrewed the lid of his Mountain Dew, took a swig, and then nodded outside where the car was waiting for us. "Ready to hit the road?"

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

MATT

Cape Charles, VA

Cape Fucking Charles, Virginia.

Population: old people, tourists, and Jacob.

I'd been busting my gut to get out of Cape Charles forever, and now Jacob was driving us right on back there. Turn left on the highway just past the Food Lion at the white and blue sign that promised people they'd love our town. Then down Stone Road past all the familiar houses and fields, watching as the distant water tower grew closer and closer. And once you hit the water tower, you were in town.

Jacob didn't ask before he turned off at the Food Lion, just headed for his place like always, instead of mine. My mom usually worked late, and I usually ate at Jacob's place and had done forever. I was probably going to get a grilling from Mr. and Mrs. Mercer over the whole California clusterfuck, but at least I'd get fed as well.

When we made it into town, it wasn't dark yet. In the summer, it was light until about 8:00 p.m., which gave me time to figure out where I'd be staying tonight, at least. I hadn't heard from my mom since she'd texted me in California. I'd messaged her and told her we were heading back. I figured I'd just show up on her doorstep and hope

for the best. What was that saying? Home was where they had to take you in, or something like that. Mind you, that felt like it had been written by someone who wasn't trying to squeeze three adults and one guitar collection into a double-wide.

I hadn't told Jacob any of that. What was the point? He'd only worry. Instead, I'd spent the drive back doing my best ostrich impression and pretending this really was just a fun road trip with my new boyfriend where we stayed in motels and slept naked next to each other. But that river in Egypt was looking pretty fucking dry right now, and reality was looming.

After being on the highway for so long, it felt like we'd slowed to a crawl in the familiar streets of Cape Charles, like I could get out and walk faster. We turned onto Plum Street and drove past the park, past houses with their Fourth of July bunting still up, and we finally made the turn into Peach Street, where we pulled into the driveway at the Mercers' house.

Jacob switched off the engine and sagged back into his seat with a sigh, and silence fell between us. I waited for him to get out, but he just sat there, staring at the steering wheel.

"Long fucking drive," I muttered at last.

Jacob smiled and put his hand palm up on the center console. I put mine in it, and we laced our fingers together.

"Long fucking drive," he agreed softly.

The front door of the Mercers' house burst open, and Luke bolted down the steps. "Get in here, you dickwads!" he bellowed. "You're late for dinner!"

"Luke!" Mr. Mercer yelled from inside the house.

“Sorry, Dad!” Luke yelled back and then waved across the road. “Sorry, Mrs. Pope!”

The old lady across the road flicked her garden hose in his direction, and an arc of water splattered on the street. It didn’t come anywhere near Luke, though.

I let go of Jacob’s hand. I wondered if he’d hold mine again with his parents watching. Had he told them we were together? Or was that one of those conversations that was better in person? I’d always been shit at social cues but Jacob would know. And I’d find out what he was planning on telling them soon enough, if I could just get my shit together and get out of the car.

I sucked in a breath and opened the door at the same time Jacob did, and we got out.

And just like that, our road trip was over.

Luke dragged Jacob into a hug, then bounced around to the back of the RAV4 to help with our stuff, I guessed, or just to get in the way. Mr. and Mrs. Mercer came out of the house just as Jacob opened the back and dragged his backpack out, dropping it on the driveway. He pulled out a second bag that was filled with laundry and leaned in and reached for the tent.

It was only a cheap model, but it folded away to next to nothing and weighed even less, and if I was honest, the thought of that tent was the only thing that had kept me from panicking the whole drive back. Like, it was still warm at night. If Mom didn’t want me at home, at least I’d be able to camp out. “Hey. Can I have that?”

Jacob paused with one hand on the strap of the tent bag and turned to face me, his brow creased. “What?”

“The tent. Can I have it? It’s not like you’re gonna use it at Old Dominion.”

Jacob's fingers flexed on the strap. "No, but I paid for it."

I just glared. Usually that was enough to make Jacob back down, but it didn't work.

He drew himself up to his full height and put his hands on his hips. "Matty, why do you want the tent?"

A tense moment passed before I caved. "Just...just in case, okay?"

"In case of what?" he asked. And before I could tell him to mind his own business, Mrs. Mercer was right beside us. Her forehead had exactly the same suspicious crease that Jacob's did.

"In case of what, Matthew?" she asked too, and shit, I wasn't sure I could lie to Jacob's mom. Actually, scratch that. I was one hundred percent sure I couldn't lie to Jacob's mom. I'd probably burst into flames or something.

I swallowed. Was there a way to say in case nobody has room for me without sounding like a fucking loser? Asking for me.

In the end I settled on, "I'm not sure my mom is expecting me."

"No, but she texted you the other day, right?" Jacob said. "After..."

After my dad swept me off his porch like I was dogshit.

"Yeah." I flashed a weak smile at Mrs. Mercer and shrugged. "But, um, I haven't heard from her since then. And there's a possibility that Zeke has moved in with his guitar collection. I mean, he can move some stuff if he has. It's no big deal."

Oh wow. Turned out I could lie to Jacob's mom after all. Just not very convincingly.

“If it’s no big deal, why do you want the tent?” Jacob asked.

“Dude, are you homeless right now?” Luke asked, wide-eyed.

“Nobody is homeless,” Mr. Mercer said firmly.

“Lots of people are,” Luke said. “Like, it’s a big problem , Dad.”

Mr. Mercer pinched the bridge of his nose. “Grab a bag and go inside, Luke. Boys, you go inside too and get cleaned up for dinner. I’m going to go over and apologize to Mrs. Pope for Luke yelling dickwads loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear.”

“Watch out for her hose,” Mrs. Mercer said and then leveled a stare at Jacob and me.

“Come on, inside with you two.”

Jacob picked up his backpack and went inside, and I followed him up the stairs to his room. He dropped his bag on the floor and turned to face me. “Were you really going to camp out?”

I shrugged. “Only as a last resort. Like, she’s probably just freezing me out right now because she’s pissed.”

“Jesus, Matty.” His face twisted up, but he looked hurt, not angry. “Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t know if you could move back home? Why don’t you tell me this stuff? This is like your dad again! I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong!”

I didn’t tell him because I didn’t want to be his loser boyfriend, someone he had to rescue all the time. I didn’t know how to explain it, but I did my best. “Because you’re all I have! And if I keep fucking up, you won’t want me either!”

Either .

I wished I could pull that word back the second it was out of my mouth. I saw the moment it registered with Jacob. The way his eyes widened with understanding and with pity, which was the last fucking thing I wanted. But I didn't even have time to tell him to keep it to himself before he pulled me into a hug and squeezed me tightly.

"You're my boyfriend," he said. "And you're my best friend. I will always want you."

I buried my face against his chest and let myself be held. Jacob was right. He'd always been there, whenever I needed him. I could throw rocks at his window at 2:00 a.m. and he'd appear, like a genie coming out of a lamp.

I took a deep breath. "You'll want me all the way from ODU, I guess."

"It's only an hour away."

"But you won't be here ."

Jacob let out an unhappy sound, but what could he say when he knew I was right? He wouldn't be coming home every night. And he wouldn't be coming home most weekends either, because he'd have study, and whatever part-time job he got, and friends .

It was only an hour, but it might as well have been the difference between here and California all over again.

It wasn't fair of me to bring it up, but it wasn't like it was news. Water was wet, Jacob was leaving, and everything sucked. The only good thing in my life right now was that Jacob did want me, and he'd told me he loved me.

“Dinner!” Mr. Mercer called from downstairs.

Jacob pressed a kiss to my forehead before letting me go. We headed downstairs, me trailing after him. I ran my fingertips along the wall, an ache in my chest as I thought of how many times I’d done this and how, when Jacob was at college, I wouldn’t just be able to turn up like a stray dog whenever I wanted. Mrs. Pope across the street would probably turn her hose on me—if Mrs. Mercer didn’t first.

I must have eaten thousands of dinners at the Mercers’ place, but this was the most awkward. And yeah, that was including the Christmas dinner I crashed when I was eleven and Jacob’s grandma, who had dementia, kept asking who I was and if I was lost and if someone ought to call the police. I still didn’t know if she’d wanted them to return me to my family or arrest me.

Mr. and Mrs. Mercer sat at opposite ends of the table. Luke sat on one side and Jacob and I sat on the other. The spot next to Luke’s was empty; cousin Charlie must have gone home already.

Dinner was chicken alfredo with a side of asparagus. I’d barely taken a bite when Mrs. Mercer said, “So. We have some questions.”

Shit.

“Why do you two have a tent?” she asked, which wasn’t the question I was dreading.

“Oh,” Jacob said and glanced at me, the idiot. Hesitating just made him look guilty. Some things you just had to brazen out, but Jacob had never gotten the hang of that or of telling a half-truth like he’d be willing to swear to it in a court of law. Like now, when he spoke and ended on a questioning note, as though he was afraid to commit to the whole thing. “We bought that because some nights we stayed in campgrounds?”

It was the questioning note that did us in.

“Some nights?” Mrs. Mercer asked, arching a brow .

Jacob was hopeless under interrogation. “We only camped at the side of the road a few times!”

“You what ?” Mr. and Mrs. Mercer said at the same time.

I shoved more chicken and pasta in my mouth while I could, just in case I had to make a quick exit. I didn’t want to do it on an empty stomach. This might be my last decent meal before Mr. and Mrs. Mercer accused me of endangering their son and kicked me out for good.

Jacob bit his lip. “We were fine! And there was only one night we ended up sleeping in the car anyway, so we were totally safe. Mostly.”

Mr. Mercer pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do I want to know why you ended up sleeping in the car? Or is this something I’m better off not knowing?”

I willed Jacob to go for option two, but my psychic powers were obviously on the fritz because he said, “Um, it was kind of funny really. We were hiding from?—”

“Were you chased by a bear ?” Luke asked, eyes wide.

Jacob glared at him. “No. A skunk.”

Hearing him say it like that, it was funny.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who thought so. Mrs. Mercer’s mouth twitched, and it looked like she was trying to hide a smile when she said, “Well, I’m glad

you're safe, but you're a pair of idiots."

"I didn't think we had to include 'Don't camp out on the side of the road' in the list of rules, but obviously we were wrong," his father said, but he was doing an even worse job of hiding his amusement than Jacob's mom.

I stopped shoveling food in my mouth quite so fast since it looked like I wasn't getting thrown out. Plus, this was a killer alfredo and I wanted to enjoy it.

"Um," Jacob said, and he put his hand on top of mine, the one that was resting on the table. "There's some other stuff we need to tell you."

"Oh?" His mother looked pointedly at our joined hands .

Holy shit, was Jacob about to come out to his parents?

"Yeah." Jacob cleared his throat and gave my hand a squeeze. "Thing is, we never checked our tire pressure once. We kind of forgot."

He paused, waiting for a reaction.

His dad waved a hand. "Not the worst thing you could have forgotten."

Jacob nodded, and his grip on my hand eased a little. I stared at him, confused as hell. Why would he even tell them that? Was this his way of working up to telling them we were a couple?

"And I accidentally turned off location tracking and never figured out how to turn it back on. And I forgot to check in a bunch of times."

"We noticed," his mom said drily.

“Also, I spent a bunch of college money on hotels on our way home?” he said in a rush, and there was that questioning note again.

His mom raised an eyebrow and I braced for impact. Because obviously she was going to blame me for that, right? Obviously. I was the dumb kid with the bad ideas. But she didn’t. She hummed thoughtfully and said, “We agreed college money could be used for emergencies, and given what happened in California, I think getting home safely qualifies.”

At the mention of California, my stomach dropped. I pushed my plate away, unable to take another bite with the way my gut was churning with lingering shame.

Jacob squeezed my hand again, and somehow that single point of contact between us was enough to make me feel better. It was so dumb. Didn’t mean I didn’t soak up the touch, though. He turned to face me, and I knew what he was asking. Was I ready to tell his parents about us?

I was not ready.

At the same time, I was as ready as I’d ever be. How could I tell if we should do it or not? But I remembered how good it had felt to tell Jacob the truth. And who was I kidding? I’d spent years pining over Jacob, and now somehow he was mine—or maybe I was his—and if he was willing to tell his folks we were together, I wasn’t going to stop him just because I was scared shitless.

I tilted my chin down in a subtle nod.

“I’m,” he started, then stopped. “We’re. Me and Matt, I mean,” he said. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. He looked at me helplessly, his brow creased.

Jesus. I loved Jacob but he was killing me right now.

“We’re together, is what Jacob’s trying to say,” I said before we got trapped in a never-ending Groundhog Day of Jacob starting sentences he couldn’t finish. Either shit or get off the pot, the old guy who lived next door to us at the Seaview Mobile Home Park used to say.

There was silence.

Luke was the first one to break it. “Ooooooooooooooh!”

He sounded like a middle school kid catching two other kids kissing.

“Luke,” Mr. Mercer said. “Thank you for telling us, boys.”

“Thank you for telling us,” Mrs. Mercer repeated.

That was it?

Jacob and I exchanged a glance.

“Um,” Jacob said. “Are you okay with it?”

His mom blinked at him. “Why wouldn’t we be okay with it?” Her forehead creased. “Are you okay with it?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “I’m not liking guys against my will or anything.”

“So what, you’re gay now?” Luke asked, looking between us with interest.

“ Luke ,” his parents said in unison.

“I’m bi,” Jacob said. “I think. And Matt’s gay.”

“Huh.” Luke stuck a spear of asparagus in his mouth. “Cool.”

Luke was sixteen and a lot of the time he said stupid stuff, but he was surprisingly chill when it mattered. I allowed myself a small smile .

“So,” Mr. Mercer said, pointing between Jacob and me. “Is this a new thing or...”

“A new thing,” Jacob said.

“Well, congratulations,” Mr. Mercer said.

“Thanks?” Jacob said.

Mr. Mercer let out a breath and exchanged a look with Mrs. Mercer. “Well, same rules as with Layla, I guess.”

“Exactly. Your bedroom door stays open, Jacob,” Mrs. Mercer said, and what ?

“Aw, come on!” Jacob said. “Seriously?”

“It’s not like either of them can get knocked up!” Luke agreed. “Plus they’re both eighteen!”

“Sleepovers in separate rooms,” Mr. Mercer agreed. “Jacob upstairs and Matt downstairs.”

Have you ever fallen asleep during a film and when you wake up you just know

you've missed a major plot point because nothing makes sense? That was how I felt right now. And so did Jacob and Luke, obviously.

"Matt," Mrs. Mercer said, "you're staying with us in the basement. Bring your bags in after dinner and we'll get you set up."

Wait, what? I was staying? As in staying?

"Uh, what?"

And then it hit me. I got up and walked out of the room and into the kitchen. Which was rude as fuck, but I didn't want to cry like a little kid in front of all the Mercers.

When a hand fell on my shoulder, I knew it wasn't Jacob's.

"I called your mother," Mrs. Mercer said softly.

I nodded and stared out the screen door into the back yard. I didn't trust myself to say anything.

"You're living with us now."

"I'm eighteen," I said, because I always had to argue about everything with everyone. "You can't make me do anything."

"Probably not," she said. "But Jacob can. Come back and finish your meal. We're having brownies with ice cream for dessert."

"That's my favorite," I said, my voice rasping .

She squeezed my shoulder. "I know."

“ You’re such an asshole,” Luke complained as he dumped a set of clean sheets on the pullout couch in the basement. “I was gonna wait until Jacob had moved to college and then petition Mom and Dad to let me have the basement. It was going to be my epic party space!” He glowered at me and then said, “Dad says we’ll get you a real bed next week.”

Turned out that no matter how hard he tried, Luke was no more capable of being an asswipe than his big brother. I snorted, ignoring the comment about the real bed that had my stomach twisting in new but not necessarily bad ways. “For you to have an epic party space, you’d have to have friends.”

Luke flipped me the bird and bounded up the stairs without answering. It was lucky we actually did get on since I was going to be living with him now. I guessed I was about to find out what having a little brother was like after all.

I sat down on the pullout couch as it hit me all over again.

I was going to be living with the Mercers. I wouldn’t be slinking in the door like a stray dog. I’d been rehomed. Also like a stray dog. Part of me wanted to be mad that nobody had asked me, but that was just my stubborn streak talking. Mostly I was relieved.

Mrs. Mercer had sat me down after dinner for a talk and laid out some ground rules. Because of course there were going to be rules. But it was nothing too onerous: keep my room more or less tidy, take care of my own laundry, and not flunk out of community college.

“But you don’t even like me,” I’d said in a small, pathetic voice.

“Yes, Matt. We think you’re awful. It’s why we’re asking you to stay. We’re masochists like that. ”

Turned out Jacob's mom was as sarcastic as I was. I could work with that.

And when she'd hugged me, it hadn't been awful. In fact, it had been kind of nice once I got past standing there, as stiff and awkward as the Tin Man in The Wizard of Oz , and relaxed. Which was a good thing because I got the feeling she was planning on hugging me a lot . I could work with that too.

Jacob came bouncing down the stairs and sat next to me on the couch. "You okay?"

I nodded. "It's just a lot, you know? Going from thinking your folks barely tolerated me to living with them."

Jacob bumped his shoulder against mine. "Matty, I love you, but you're prickly as fuck. Like, you're not exactly easy to get to know, you know? But they've always liked you fine. They were worried about you more than anything."

Warmth flooded through me at the way he casually dropped the words I love you .

"I love you too," I said, because I could. "I'll miss you when you're gone."

Jacob sighed and leaned his head on my shoulder. "I know. It'll suck. But I'll come back and visit when I can. And it's better than you being in San Diego."

I wanted to cling to the last of my stubbornness and tell him he couldn't know that, but he was right on both counts. It would suck. And it was better than San Diego.

"I'm gonna send you so many dick pics," I said, "and you can tell those fancy college boys about your hot boyfriend back home."

"Dick pics," he said, grinning. "I could get behind that."

I didn't know if I had the guts to send dick pics or not. I guessed that was something for Future Matt to figure out. You know, Future Matt? He was that guy who dated his best friend Jacob and lived with the Mercers and went to community college in Melfa—and didn't hate it.

I liked the sound of Future Matt a lot.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:22 am

JACOB

374 miles An entire lifetime to go

ODU, Norfolk, VA

Seven months later

It was spring break and most of the guys in the house were going to Chincoteague. Not me, though. For the first time in ages, I wasn't heading through the tunnel to the Eastern Shore. And instead of packing just a towel and some board shorts, I was packing jeans and boots as well.

Dale, my roommate, stuck his head around the door. "Oh, you're still here, bro?"

"Yeah."

"I thought your boyfriend was coming to pick you up?"

"Yeah, not until after lunch, though. He had to work this morning."

I checked the time. Between Matt's and my end-of-semester college schedules, we hadn't seen each other in three weeks and I'd missed him like crazy. Texts and calls weren't the same as seeing Matt's face split into a grin or having his head resting on my shoulder. But the next week was going to be just the two of us, and I was looking forward to having Matt all to myself.

“Dude,” Dale said, looking at the cans of beans shoved in my backpack. “Are you sure you don’t want to come to the beach instead?”

“There’s a beach at the lake.”

Dale gave me a look. “I meant a real beach.”

“You know I’m from Cape Charles, right? I don’t have a shortage of real beaches in my life that I need to address over spring break.”

“Okay, but we’re all staying in a motel .”

“Bro,” I said, “I know you have a crush on my boyfriend, but you can’t take him on spring break with you.”

“I do not have a crush on Matt!” Dale, the straightest guy to ever straight, exclaimed. “He’s just really fucking good at Elden Ring .”

“Get the hell out of here, Dale.” I jammed a flashlight into my backpack. “Have a great spring break!”

He knocked twice on the doorjamb, something he always did but had never explained. “You too. Have fun camping and try not to get killed by a scary dude with a chainsaw.”

“Yeah, I’ll try.”

The house was mostly empty when I took all my stuff downstairs a while later. There were a few guys still here but the main living room was clear, so I dumped my bags in the hallway and went and flopped on the couch.

Joining a fraternity hadn’t been in my plan, but Greek life at ODU was pretty low-

key, the rent at the huge fraternity house was reasonable when it was divided between a bunch of us, and I liked living here. Charlie had talked to me a lot about choosing the right fraternity, and I'd accidentally picked a good one—or rather, they'd picked me.

Matt gave me shit about being a frat boy, but that was just Matt being Matt. He slotted right in with the guys when he came to visit—which wasn't often enough, but we were making it work. I never had worked up the nerve to send a dick pic and neither had he, but we made up for it the weekends we were together by getting our hands on the real thing. Dale was pretty good about giving us our privacy when Matt was here, so that helped.

There was the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway, and I was on my feet in a second. I hurried out to the entrance and opened the door just as Matt knocked, and the sight of his smiling face was enough to make my breath catch. I still found it hard to believe that I was dating my best friend. Like, I'd never thought that happened outside of the Hallmark movies Mom swore she didn't watch, but here we were.

“Hey,” he said, holding up a grocery store bag. “I got snacks for the drive.”

“I haven't seen you in weeks, you asshole. Get over here.”

He laughed and stepped into the doorway, dropping the bag. I grabbed his face and kissed him, and he threw his arms around my neck and kissed me right back. Like always, he tasted of sun and salt and home.

I could have stayed wrapped up in him all day but we had a schedule, so I reluctantly pulled back. Matt pressed up on his tiptoes and stole one more kiss, then let me go. He picked up the bag. “So, you ready?”

“I would have been ready yesterday except you had your last exam. How'd that go?”

“Aced it,” he said with a grin.

I looked over his shoulder. “And Dad was so impressed he let you borrow the RAV4?”

“He was always going to let me,” Matt said. “I’m his favorite.”

Hearing him say that so casually made me smile. It was a joke, but it was one he never would have made last year. At least I hoped it was a joke and Dad wasn’t planning on writing Luke and me out of his will or anything.

“Get your stuff,” he said. “It’s six hours to Hungry Mother.”

We’d reserved a campsite for the week at Hungry Mother State Park. We still had our trusty Walmart tent but we’d traded in the yoga mats for a real camping mattress because we were fancy now or something. I couldn’t wait.

I headed back into the house to grab my stuff with Matt beside me. “Oh hey, I saw Layla this morning,” he said. “She must be back in town for spring break.”

“Yeah? How is she?” I asked. I still felt kind of bad that I’d been a shitty boyfriend, even though it hadn’t been deliberate. I just hadn’t been able to give her the affection she deserved because it turned out I was already committed to Matt—I just hadn’t known it yet.

Matt threw me a wry look. “She’s seen us on your Insta. She said her parents found out about us, and they think we’re horrible and sinful, but they also think that because you have a boyfriend now you couldn’t have slept with her in high school, and that means she must still be a virgin. She said, and I quote, ‘Tell Jacob thanks for that.’”

I snorted.

“Also, there was some super hot blond guy with her, so she totally has a type, and her type had condoms in his basket. So good for them.”

“Speaking of condoms...”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Yeah, like I’m bringing snacks but forgetting condoms and lube. What do you take me for?”

“Just checking.”

“Well, I already checked. A dozen times.”

I laughed. I’d never really been that into sex when I was with Layla, but with Matt it was a whole different ball game. I still didn’t know if the difference was because he was a guy and my attraction to guys was weighted a little heavier than it was to girls, or if it was because it was Matt. But whatever it was, the sex was incredible.

Matt was incredible.

“Like, dude, what do you do?” Dale had asked me earnestly one night. “Do you toss a coin to see who goes on top, or do you take turns? ”

I think throwing my pillow in his face had let him know it was none of his business because he hadn’t asked again. And for the record Matty mostly got to pick what we did because he was bossy as shit, and it turned out I liked that. I liked it a lot .

“Did you pack your sketchbook?” I asked him.

“Yup. Sketchbook, snacks, condoms, and boyfriend. That’s everything I need. Plus a cooler full of Mountain Dew.”

“A whole cooler?”

“Well, it’s half Mountain Dew, half Coke. Your mom sent the Coke because, and this is another quote, ‘He’s an asshole when he’s uncaffeinated.’”

“My mom said that?”

He shrugged. “I said it was a quote, not who said it.”

“Asshole.”

Matt grinned. “Yeah, but you love me.”

I really did.

We loaded my bags into the RAV4 and closed the rear hatch door.

“You ready to battle that scary Norfolk traffic again?” Matt asked me, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight.

“That depends,” I said. “Have you got a better playlist than last time?”

“Fuck you, I have impeccable taste in music. But yes, I have made a whole bunch of road trip playlists.” He held the keys up, jangling them.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

He tossed the keys and I caught them.

Matt grinned. “Let’s hit the road.”