

# *One for the Road*



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I

THE rusty car door gave a loud squeak as I pushed it open, climbing from the passenger seat. I'd heard a lot of things about truck stops, and what hitchhikers should expect, but I'd been riding with Marlene for too long as it was. She was a sweet old lady who smelled heavily of Pine Sol, but I just didn't feel right making her tote me around for any longer than she needed to.

As I swung my bag onto my shoulder, I bent slightly so that I could peer in at her. Her seat was as close to the steering wheel as possible, and she smiled at me in a grandmother-like way.

"Are you sure you don't want to go with me any farther, dear?" she asked, her voice squeaking like the door.

"Very positive," I told her. "You've already done more than enough for me, and I can't begin to thank you for it."

"You just be careful, young man," she said, pointing a finger at me. Half-scolding me, she added, "It can get dangerous for a boy like you."

I flashed a smile at her. "Yeah, I know," I said. "Thanks again, Marlene."

Shutting the door lightly, I stepped back a little, waving at her. When she started to pull away, the car *put-putting* like in one of those old Mickey Mouse cartoons, I turned and took in my surroundings. I found myself in the parking lot of a pretty large restaurant with an attached gift shop off to the right and a dingy-looking hotel across the street. I sighed, breathing in the scent of diesel fuel, and I couldn't help but smile.

Other people may have considered this to be a bad experience, but I was a little excited.

It was classic movie material, a small town boy traveling halfway across the country to reach a dream. I was on the road to California to become an actor; I could practically see my name in lights now. Despite the fact that I'd left on bad terms with my parents—leaving college to pursue a dream wasn't exactly a good idea in their minds—I felt very optimistic about the future.

Even if I didn't exactly consider myself *too* good-looking, I still thought I had what it took. I was tall and lanky with broad-shoulders and strong arms, and sometimes my mother told me I had a boyish charm to me, something that made me seem a lot younger than twenty-four. My hair was brown and kind of shaggy, curling slightly around my ears and more often than not making me look like I'd just rolled out of bed. I had to say my best feature was my eyes; they were the same shade of blue-green as my father's.

I only hoped the acting agents in Hollywood thought I

was a decent-looking guy.

The sun was starting to set beyond the gas station beside the restaurant, casting shades of pink and orange along the backs of the big trucks getting gassed up. I knew I should probably go to the hotel to get myself a room for the night, but finding a ride was way more important to me at the moment. So I shifted my bag and started toward the station, making my way to the first truck in the line.

It was a big purple Mack with black and silver flames on the doors—very fancy-looking. The driver of it, a short and stout woman with short black hair, was standing beside it. She had a John Deere cap on, but she looked nice enough.

She saw me coming and frowned. “Sorry, hon.” She had a surprisingly high-pitched voice for what she looked like. “Already got me some company for the ride.”

I gave her a little smile, inclining my head just barely, and I continued on down the line. Trucker after trucker seemed to already have someone riding with them or were people that I couldn’t find the nerve to talk to. Some of them looked about ready to bite my head off. The owner of a black truck gave me a little smile as I neared him though, so I felt confident enough to ask him.

“Hey,” I said, somewhat sheepishly. “I guess you’ve pretty much figured I’m trying to hitch a ride, huh?”

“It was just a little obvious,” the man said. He didn’t really look like a trucker, I supposed. He had a long blond

ponytail, and his features were sharp, but strong-looking. He was almost classically handsome. His eyes were steely blue. “Where you headed?”

“California,” I answered.

“Hmm.” He nodded his head. “Pretty far for someone as young as you to be traveling, don’t you think?”

“I’m not as young as I might look,” I said with a smirk, wondering vaguely if he was flirting with me.

Another smile came to his face, a charming one. “Well, I certainly hope not,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Connor,” I said, extending a hand. “Name’s Connor Greeley.”

“I’m Erik.” His hand was firm and calloused as he took mine, his grip tight. It almost seemed like he didn’t want to let go of my hand afterward, and that set off a warning bell of sorts in my head. But I tried not to overreact.

“So,” I said when I’d finally reclaimed my hand, “got any room for one more in this rig of yours?”

“Depends.” And now Erik’s smile seemed more suggestive than charming. My palms started to sweat, and I felt heat slowly creeping up my neck. “What are you gonna do for me if I give you a ride?” he asked, any and all charm gone.

“I can pay for gas along the way,” I offered meekly,

although now I had no intention of riding with this man.

“You must be new at this,” he said. “Boy, you’re not gonna get far if that’s all you’re willing to trade.” His gaze swept over me, drinking me in, and I felt kind of nauseous. “You’re a lot taller than I like ’em, but you’ll do fine.”

“On second thought,” I said quickly, “I think I’m gonna take a break before I get back on the road.”

I started to turn away, ready to run, but one of his hands shot out and wrapped around my wrist in a vice-like grip. I winced, and he pulled me back to him, now pushing me up against the side of his truck. There was a half-smile on his face, but there was nothing nice about it now.

“What’s the hurry?” he asked. “I thought you wanted a ride.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” I said, trying to make my tone firm, trying to pretend I was braver than I actually was. I was tall, yeah, but that didn’t make me a good fighter.

“There’s no changing your mind with me, boy,” Erik said. “It isn’t like you won’t be getting anything out of this deal. You give me what I want....” His gaze did that sweeping thing again, “and I’ll give you what you want.”

“I don’t... swing that way,” I lied. I’d been gay the minute I came out of the womb, but he didn’t need to know that.

“It’ll make it all the more exciting,” he said. “You always remember your first time.”

I looked around, but there seemed to be nobody at the pumps anymore. And if there were people milling about, they wouldn't see us because we were hidden by his truck. I was pretty much screwed, and in a few moments, that would take on a literal sense for me.

"Look, I don't want to ride with you anymore," I said, trying once again to sound tough. I knew it wasn't working by the leer on his face.

"It doesn't look like you have much of a choice, does it?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say to that. What *could* I say? I could try kicking him where I knew it would hurt the most, or I could even try punching him in the face. But like I'd said, I didn't know how to fight. What if he was a master at it? He could have me on the ground in mere seconds, and I wouldn't know what had hit me. And I'd be right back at square one, only this time, he'd be angry at me for trying to fight him.

I thought that I was done for. Everyone who'd told me that hitching was a bad idea had been right, only I wouldn't live long enough to tell them that.

But I guess fate was on my side that day.

"Hey, plan on moving this rig today, jackass?"

Appearing from around the front of the truck, a man started toward us: my savior, my knight in shining flannel.

He was tall and thick with muscle, his shirt clinging to him like a second skin and his worn jeans hanging low and loose on his hips. His light brown hair was short and cut close to his head, a style I'd had yet to see on a lot of truckers.

And despite my predicament, I couldn't help but notice how good-looking he was.

Erik wasn't impressed though.

"I'm kind of busy here, man," he said gruffly, and he didn't let go of my wrist.

"Well, the world don't revolve around you." My savior had a nice Texan accent. "So finish fueling up and get the hell out of my way. I don't have time to wait around for you."

Erik let go of me, turning so that he could glare fully at the stranger. He took a few steps toward the other man, and while it looked like he was supposed to be menacing, the other man didn't even blink.

"I don't want to have to fight you," Erik said.

"Afraid of losing?"

Hot, Texan, *and* quick-witted? What more could I ask for?

"You think you're tough?" Erik asked him next. "Think you're *real* big, don't you?"

While Erik started to throw out every curse known to mankind, my savior looked over the blond's shoulder at me



and gestured with a nod of his head for me to hit the road. I would have rather preferred to stay and watch the fight that was coming up, but I figured that the least I could do was leave him alone now that he'd rescued me. I gave him what I hoped was a grateful nod and quickly started away.

I went straight into the restaurant, hoping that a cup of coffee might calm me down. Now that I was away from both Erik and the man who'd saved me, I felt like I was going to be sick. My hands were still sweating, and I was sure if I talked, I'd sound like I'd just seen a ghost. I never realized how scary a moment like that could be.

I seated myself at the breakfast bar, dropping my bag onto the stool beside me. It was a cozy little place, with orange tile floors and burgundy wallpaper. Kind of old-fashioned, but cozy nonetheless. As a waitress made her way towards me, I checked my pockets to make sure I had enough cash.

She was giving me a real big smile, and the way she pushed her hips out made it apparent that she was flirting with me. Whether it was because she thought I was attractive or because she thought it would get her a bigger tip, I didn't know. It was useless, though, seeing as I didn't like women at all and I was pretty hard up for cash at the moment. She was a pretty girl with a great body and big blue eyes, so I almost felt bad that I felt nothing toward her.

I ordered my coffee politely while still trying to convey that I wasn't interested. She didn't take the hint, and as she

bounced away to get my drink, she wagged her eyebrows at me.

When she returned with my steaming mug, I was almost afraid she'd try to strike up a conversation with me, but fortunately, she had other customers to attend to. With a last smile, she disappeared.

As I waited for my coffee to cool, I pulled out the map I kept in my bag. There wasn't really a point in me looking at it as I'd already memorized everything there was to know about my routes to California, but I needed something to focus on to get my mind off of Erik.

I was kind of wishing I'd stayed with Marlene and her Pine Sol-scented, old-timey car.

And that's when *he* came back into the picture.

"Well I'll be damned, Lucy – you get better-looking each time I come here."

I glanced up from my map as the trucker from earlier, my Texan savior, appeared to my right, smiling a big and handsome smile at the flirty waitress. He looked even better in the restaurant's lighting, and I tried not to stare.

"Oh no," the waitress said playfully, pushing her chest out at him. "Not *you* again. If I didn't know any better, Jace, I'd say the only reason you came up this way was to see little ol' me."

"Of course," he said with a wink I almost wished had

been directed at me. “It’s a real struggle keeping myself from coming up here *every day*.”

She laughed, blushing lightly, and she ended the joke. “I take it you’ll be having the usual?” she asked him, still smiling.

“Thank you kindly,” he said with a nod, sitting down a seat away from me.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as she brought him a coffee and then yelled out something to the cooks. They made the smallest of small talk before duty called and she had to take care of other customers. With her gone, I took in his appearance as he sipped at his coffee, paying better detail to his features.

He looked like he could have been a model. His jaw was strong, his features aristocratic. His nose was straight and angular as if it’d been sculpted by the best artist around, and his eyebrows had a natural arch to them. His cheekbones were high, and his bottom lip was fuller than you’d expect for a man in his line of work. I could tell he was older, and there were a few crinkles that had appeared beside his eyes when he’d smiled at the waitress, Lucy.

But he had to be the best-looking man I’d ever laid eyes on.

His tongue suddenly came out to nurse his bottom lip, which he’d burned with his coffee, and this motion made me a little warm under the collar. I let my gaze travel down to

those faded and worn jeans to see that they hugged his thighs appreciatively; his legs looked as toned as the rest of his body. I longed to see what he looked like without the clothes.

When I looked back up at his face, I nearly jumped on the stool. He was looking my way with a pair of spring-green eyes, and he had a smirk on his face—a cocky smirk. One of his eyebrows raised as he caught me, and I felt myself flush just slightly.

“Uh... I wanted to thank you,” I told him. “For helping me out and all out there.”

“By devouring me with your eyes?” he said, and I scrambled for a response. “Relax, kid, I’m joking. But it was nothing. Guys like him are all the same.”

He sipped at his coffee again, and I looked down at my map, my cheeks feeling like they were on fire. I didn’t know what had come over me; I normally wasn’t so shy in front of guys, but he was different. There was just something about him.

“Anyone ever tell you that hitchhiking is a good way to end up chopped into tiny bits?” the man asked me.

“Plenty,” I answered. “I guess I was too dumb to listen to them.”

“Or too stubborn.” Another sip. “Where you headed?”

“Los Angeles,” I answered.

“What’s there for you?”

“If it all works out, the career of a lifetime,” I told him.

I was fully convinced that this man had the best smile I’d ever seen.

And there was a strange part of me that was contemplating trying to hitch a ride with him. He seemed nice enough. Then again, so had Erik. He probably wasn’t into men though, which would definitely be a downer, but at least I’d have some nice eye candy on the way.

A small ringing sound came from his pocket, and as he pulled his cell phone out, he turned away from me to answer it. I let my gaze linger on his thick shoulders for just a moment more, and then I turned back to the counter, folding up my map. After shoving it into my bag, I grabbed my coffee and stared blankly at the wall before me, unable to hear anything the man was saying. Which was probably a good thing; I didn’t need to be eavesdropping.

When he hung up, he turned back to me, but I tried to act as if I didn’t notice.

“I’m Jace,” he said. “Jace Bennett.”

I turned to him, giving him a little smile, inwardly very excited that he still wanted to talk to me. “Connor,” I said. “Greeley. Connor Greeley.”

His lips curved up slightly, but not in the cocky way he’d been smirking moments before, almost as if he were

genuinely pleased to meet me. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. “Well, Connor,” he said, “You look like you’ve been on the move all day. But you also look like some sort of starved pet. Let me get you something.”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly. I hated it when other people bought me things. “I couldn’t—”

“And I could,” he said bluntly before he turned away from me and leaned over the counter slightly. “Hey Luce, can you make my order a double?”

The waitress, who’d been in the process of refilling someone’s cup, nodded and smiled at him. He settled back down in his seat and glanced sideways at me. I scratched absently at the back of my head.

“You didn’t have to,” I said slowly.

“Ain’t like it’s costing me a fortune,” he said. “Just a nice gesture, right?”

By the time our food arrived, we had a nice conversation going, mostly me rambling about myself while he threw in questions every now and then. Lucy set our plates down; Jace had ordered burgers, and at the sight of the one she placed before me, my stomach gave a rather embarrassing growl. It was probably the messiest burger I’d ever seen and definitely the tastiest I’d ever eaten.

As we ate, we talked a little more, and he asked me about where I came from and what my family was like. I was

so comfortable with him that it felt like I'd known him for years, and he must have felt it too, because he opened up. I learned that he was thirty and that he had been married once but had gotten divorced nearly a year before because his wife had tried to make him quit driving to get a better job. He didn't come right out and say how much he loved doing what he was doing, but it was obvious that he really enjoyed the life he had.

"So, Connor," he said, and I was beginning to really like the way my name sounded from his mouth. "How do you plan on finding someone to ride with now?"

I sighed, too full to finish the rest of my meal, and I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know," I admitted. "I guess I'll have to try and be a better judge of people. Maybe find someone who isn't a trucker, a nice family passing through or something."

"Yeah, us truckers are dangerous," he said. "Wouldn't want you ending up with some big guy who just wants your pretty little ass."

My face heated up again, but I laughed. "I definitely don't want a repeat of earlier," I said.

"Well... I can take you to Carson City," he said, glancing at me.

"Nevada?" I asked incredulously. This truck stop was just a little outside of Cheyenne, and I hadn't expected to find a ride out of Wyoming so early on in my trip. "Really?"

You can take me that far?”

“Sure,” Jace answered as if it were nothing. “I’m delivering some goods to a store there. And you can trust me. I don’t plan on attacking you any time soon. My partners are always willing.” He didn’t even seem to notice what he’d said, but it made me blush slightly. Did that mean he liked both men *and* women? But before I could stew too much on it, he glanced at me again. “So what do you say? We got a deal, Connor?”

I flashed him a grin and nodded. “Carson City would be great,” I said genuinely.

After he’d paid the bill, he told me that he thought it was a little too late to set out on the road again, and that it would be better for us to just grab a room at the hotel across the street. At first I thought he’d meant that we share a room, but when we got there, he asked for two separate rooms. I had to admit I was a little disappointed. And after I admitted that to myself, I was a little ashamed.

I normally wasn’t so easy. But one bright-eyed Texas man changed me for the worst.

“I like to get going early, so you shouldn’t stay up too late,” he said as we reached the door of the room that was mine. His was right beside it. “I’ll come knocking around six, give you time to get a shower before we head out.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “And thanks again, for everything. I’m more than grateful.”



“I know,” he said with a smirk. “I’ll see you in the morning, kid.”

After I returned his smile, he turned to go to his own room. I was still grinning as I unlocked my door, but I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings. I might have felt that there was someone watching me if I hadn’t been so caught up with my silly thoughts of Jace.

## II

SOMETHING woke me up later that night, but I didn't know what it was.

My hotel room was dark, and I was lying on my back beneath the scratchy bed sheet. I blinked a few times, swallowing against my dry throat, and I turned to glance at the clock on the bedside table. The luminous green numbers told me that it was a little past three in the morning, and I sighed.

I closed my eyes again, fully ready to slip back into slumber, and that's when I felt *it*.

The creepy feeling of not being alone—it was what had roused me. There was somebody else in the room with me. Goosebumps rose on my skin, and the hair on my arms stood straight up. My eyes snapped open just in time for me to make out a dark shape standing above me, and I started to cry out.

The noise was abruptly cut off as a hand clamped down over my mouth, and even before the man spoke, I knew who it was.

“Think I would just let you *go*?” Erik asked.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, I could make out his sharp features and his icy eyes. Fear curled in my stomach like a serpent of some kind, and I felt a rusty taste rise in my throat almost as if I were going to throw up. There was a look on Erik's face that really scared me, and I knew that I was in trouble.

"I have a knife," he told me darkly. "If you try to call for help, I'll cut you. And if you try to fight back, I will kill you."

Although I didn't see a knife, I didn't want to find out the hard way if he was lying. I nodded instead, and a surprised smirk came to his face. He thought this was going easier than he'd expected. I tried to remember where my cellphone was, if it was in my bag or if I'd left it in the pocket of my jeans, both somewhere on the floor.

He climbed over me, the mattress sinking slightly under his weight, and he straddled my legs. The hand that was over my mouth went to my neck, and while his fingers wrapped around my throat, he didn't squeeze any. He seemed kind of tentative, hesitant—this told me a couple things. One: he'd never killed anyone before, and he certainly wasn't planning on it now. And two: if I wanted to, I could push him off of me and make a break for it. I had a decision to make and only a few seconds to make it.

As he started to undo his pants with his free hand, I caught him off guard and brought my knee up from under him, driving it into his groin.

A sharp yelp left him as he flinched back, and I used all

of my strength to shove him off of me. He went toppling backward, off the bed, and slamming into the old wooden dresser, causing it to bang against the wall. I jumped up, reaching to turn the lamp on—a person who doesn’t know how to fight *surely* can’t fight in the dark—and I turned to face him, holding my fists up like I knew what I was doing.

“Stupid little prick!” he spat out, grunting and trying to climb to his feet. “When I get my hands on you....” He trailed off, swaying slightly and cupping himself in pain. He looked up at me, and then he paused, his gaze moving over me.

I looked down at myself, and then I flushed. I was wearing nothing but a loose-fitting pair of boxers, and I was very much exposed. I cringed slightly, looking back up at Erik who grinned, despite his agony.

“I’m gonna have so much fun with you, boy.” His words made a chill run down my spine.

I wished I could think of something witty to say, but I kind of just nodded a little bit, voice failing me. Still grinning wickedly, Erik started towards me. When he was close enough, I swung at him with all of my might.

Expecting my punch, he leaned to the side to dodge it, and my whole body turned with the force of my swing, and I found that I couldn’t gain control of my momentum. He was quick, one of his arms wrapping around my chest and yanking me back so that I was against him. I struggled, but his arm tightened on my throat, cutting my air off.

I choked a little bit, and his other hand went to the waistband of my boxers.

“That’s okay,” he said in my ear, his warm breath against my cheek making me shudder. “I like it when they’re feisty.”

I could feel his dick against the small of my back, and I realized that I needed to keep fighting.

Still pushing against his arms and trying to break loose, I stomped on one of his feet, making him howl in pain. As I tried to move away from him, he kicked me in the back of my knee and made me fall to the floor. I rolled out of the way as he reached for me, but before I could think to do anything else, there was a heavy thump against the door.

Both he and I turned to it, panting and out of breath, but for a moment nothing happened. Then the door visibly shook as there was another heavy thud, and on the third crash, the door swung open, lock broken.

And there he stood, my savior once again.

Only this time, he was clad in his jeans and a wife-beater that was way too tight to be legal, much to my delight.

Jace’s gaze went to me first, then to Erik, and his eyes narrowed. “You again?” he asked. “What the hell you doing here?”

“Stay out of this, man,” said Erik, rolling his eyes. “None of this concerns you, and if you don’t get out of here, I will—”

“Let me kick your ass like I did earlier?” Jace asked coolly. He was like one of those smooth TV show heroes who always had those one-liners.

“Why you....” Erik started towards him, hands curling into fists at his sides.

It all happened so fast that I could barely keep up with it, but I watched in awe. Jace punched Erik straight in the face with his right hand first, and then his left. While Erik reeled back in surprise and pain, Jace then delivered an uppercut to his chin, sending the blond sprawling to the floor.

While a very pathetic-looking Erik rolled around on his back, holding his face and moaning in pain, Jace bent and grabbed him by the front of his denim jacket. He heaved Erik to his feet and threw him out of the hotel room like it was nothing.

“If I see you again, I’ll bust you up so bad your own momma won’t even recognize you,” Jace called out to him as I stood up slowly.

He then shut the door, only it kind of just hung there on its hinges, since it’d been forced open and everything. Jace turned to me, his hands going to his hips, and he let out a little sigh. From the looks of it, he hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“Where’d you learn how to fight so good?” I asked him. He’d looked like a professional.

He shrugged one of his shoulders casually, lips quirking slightly. “I get in a few brawls every now and then,” he answered, sounding a little proud of himself. “Are you alright?”

I nodded quickly. “Not a scratch on me,” I said. “I think I got lucky.”

He grinned again, but then we both fell silent. His eyes moved over me, and he turned away, looking somewhat awkward. I realized for the second time that I was wearing only my boxers, and I kind of twitched before I looked around for my pants. Of course they were on the other side of the room. I swung my arms sheepishly, pretending I wasn’t embarrassed.

“So....” I said, “you, uh, you broke my door.”

“So I did,” he said. “Sorry about that. I heard all the commotion, didn’t know what it was.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I said quickly. “In fact, I’m very glad you broke down the door. I don’t think I could have held him off much longer. I don’t even know how he got in here.”

“Guys like him are sly, real sly.” Jace looked around the room, keeping his gaze everywhere but on me. It was sweet, in a way, like he was trying to be a gentleman. “Might have specialized in breaking and entering before becoming a driver.”

"I can't believe he'd go to such lengths," I said with a scoff.

"Well, you *are* a prize."

I wondered if he knew how easy it was for him to make me blush. I looked down at the cream-colored carpet, wringing my hands in front of me and not knowing what to do with myself. Keeping his hands on his hips, he turned to look at the door.

"I guess you'll have to stay in my room for the night," he said. "Or I could get you another one."

"No," I said quickly. "I won't let you pay for another room for me. It's not right. I'll sleep on the floor in your room; it's no big deal."

"I'll take the floor," Jace said. "You can have the bed."

"We can argue about this all night," I said, smiling.

"Or you can take the bed and shut your mouth." He arched one of his eyebrows at me, and I melted inside. I was quickly falling in lust with this man. "So why don't you... throw on some pants and head on over, yeah?"

I nodded, and without another word, he left the room. I quickly pulled my jeans and T-shirt on, and after making sure I had everything of mine, I made my way next door. He held the door open for me as I entered the room, and I saw that he'd already thrown one of the two pillows onto the floor. I made a face.



“Are you sure you want to sleep down there?” I asked.

“Are you always such a woman?” he countered playfully.

Once I realized he was joking, I just had to smile. When we both lay down to sleep—both of us fully clothed—the room fell silent. He’d taken the blanket from the bed while I used the thin sheet, but I didn’t mind. It was *his* bed after all.

“Thanks again,” I whispered into the dark, unsure of why I was being so quiet. “I guess this is something I’m going to be saying a lot.”

“Don’t mention it,” he mumbled sleepily. “Just get some shuteye for tomorrow.”

After only a few minutes, his breathing became steady and shallow. I was almost surprised that he’d fallen asleep so quickly. Was he really that comfortable with me? I was still feeling a little strange about sharing a room with him, and after all of the excitement in my room, I didn’t think I’d be able to go to sleep again.

Not to mention, my brain liked to tease me.

While I was now wearing all of my clothes, I had been sleeping in my boxers, right? While Jace was wearing all of his clothes now, had he been sleeping in something else? Maybe he slept in his jeans, or maybe he preferred stripping down to his underwear. Or maybe, just maybe, he slept nude.

Warmth spread through me as I imagined what his body looked like. I already knew he was built, but was the rest of his body as lightly tanned as his arms, or was that just because he sat in the sun all day when he was on the road? Were there freckles on his chest or back like the freckles that dusted the bridge of his nose? Freckles on his thighs even?

All I knew was that he *had* to be as gorgeous unclothed as he was clothed.

I WOKE up to the sound of a laugh track, and as I started to sit up, I saw that Jace was sitting at the small table by the window, fully dressed and reading a newspaper. The TV beside the dresser was on, and through slight static, I could make out a morning sitcom from the '90s. A blue glow was coming through the window, the sun not having risen yet, and I glanced at the clock. It was just a little before six.

Jace glanced at me. "Oh hey," he said. "I was about to get you up."

Blinking away my grog, I swallowed and sat up slowly, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. For a moment, I was kind of confused at why I was in his room, but at the slight soreness that rose in my knee, the night before came back to me. I still couldn't believe how insane Erik had turned out to be.

“How you feeling?” Jace asked, looking back down at his newspaper.

“Fine,” I answered. “Just... trying to cope, I guess. Last night was probably the most exciting night in my dull, dull life. I had a very boring childhood.”

Smirking slightly, Jace gestured with one hand towards the dresser. “I grabbed you a coffee from the convenience store across the street,” he told me. “Ran out for a few minutes to get myself one; didn’t know if you’d want some.”

“Thanks,” I said. “When did you go?”

“Bout twenty minutes ago,” he answered. “Figured you wouldn’t mind.”

I climbed to my feet, stretching my arms above my head and biting back a yawn. I went to the dresser and grabbed the paper cup that Jace had motioned to. It was surprisingly still warm. “What’s in it?” I asked curiously.

“Cream and sugar,” Jace answered. He glanced at me over the top of the newspaper, his eyebrows raising. “You looked like the type.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked with a laugh. It *was* true; I was a sugar fiend when it came to drinking coffee, but that was besides the point.

“Nothing.” Jace shrugged. “Merely an observation.”

Still smiling, I sipped at the coffee—not as sweet as I

usually took it, but not bad. As he went back to reading, I quickly took in what Jace was wearing: a baggier pair of jeans than the day before and a plain black T-shirt that looked about a size too small and left nothing to the imagination. The sleeves seemed too tight and cut into his muscular upper arms, making him look bigger than he was.

It was still kind of hard to believe he was a trucker and not, say, a male stripper or something.

“If you were planning on grabbing a shower,” he said, “You might want to get it out of the way now. We’ll need to be hitting the road soon.”

Nodding, I chugged the rest of my coffee and made my way into the small, square bathroom after scooping my bag off of the floor. When I was standing under the hot spray, I let myself relax against the wall, and I breathed in deeply through my nose. I checked out my leg, and sure enough there was a bruise where Erik had kicked me. My throat, I was only just realizing, felt a little tender as well, but fortunately I wasn’t in too much pain.

The soap had already been used, I could tell, and my mind just *had* to jump to an image of what Jace had looked like showering. I imagined he’d stood the same way, facing away from the showerhead and letting the water pound against his well-toned back. Closing my eyes, I let my mind wander, allowing a fantasy to take form.

In my mind’s eye, I watched as the Jace I imagined soaped himself up, sudsy hands moving swiftly and

smoothly over his firm muscles. He was fast, but certainly not careless, cleaning himself efficiently. His hands slowed down as they reached that spot between his legs, and I could feel a warmth start to spread through my stomach as I imagined what his cock must have looked like.

Without thinking about what I was doing, I reached down and lightly stroked myself. As I came to life in my own hand, my fingers tightened around the base of my shaft, and I started to pump myself harder. I knew that I had to make this fast, or else Jace might start to suspect something.

My body built up a rhythm. Putting an arm against the tile wall for support, I began to thrust into my moving hand, biting my bottom lip and keeping my eyes closed, the mental image of Jace something I didn't want to lose. I lifted one of my legs, putting my foot on the side of the tub, and I braced myself, pleasure starting to build in me. Aided by the soap that I'd used, my fist moved swiftly over my cock, gliding down its length smoothly.

Unable to help myself, my breathing became sharper and uncontrolled, my heart racing and pounding against my chest. A noise welled in my throat, but I bit it back, not knowing how thin the hotel walls were. I let my other hand trail down the middle of my chest, fingers stopping to play with my nipples briefly. Then I used that hand to cup my balls, squeezing them slightly.

I had to fight against another groan of pleasure, and I could feel that already, I was close to the brink.

When I came, it was to the image of Jace's playful green eyes and that full lower lip.

I all but collapsed against the shower wall, panting and trying to catch my breath, still cupping myself as if I were afraid to let go. The fire in my gut slowly started to die down, but a different feeling washed over me as I came down from my high. Embarrassment.

I couldn't believe I'd let myself get carried away like that. I couldn't believe I'd had to jerk off to thoughts of Jace. It was actually kind of pathetic, and I felt a little ashamed. Now I had to go out there and face him, worse yet, ride with him all the way to Carson City, Nevada.

How was I going to do that?

I finished up fast, making sure to wash myself thoroughly. After dressing, brushing my teeth and making sure my wet hair was at least presentable, I left the bathroom. Jace was standing at the dresser where his duffel bag was sitting, and he was rifling through it with a furrowed brow. He glanced up at me I appeared, and he gave me a smile with those flawless teeth of his.

"You about ready?" he asked me, and I nodded quickly. "I'm gonna go check out and return the keys. Meet me outside?"

Heaving his bag over his shoulder, he left the room, and I sighed, my shoulders sagging. I straightened my old high school wrestling T-shirt and gathered up all of my things,

not wanting to leave any of it behind, of course.

When I stepped outside, the sky was gray and the weather muggy. I looked around, expecting to see crazy Erik waiting for me or something, but very fortunately for me, he was nowhere to be seen. Jace returned, gesturing for me to follow him, and I tried to ignore the curious way in which he was looking at me.

Almost as if he knew what I'd been doing in the shower.

### III

I WASN'T really one for trucks, but Jace's Mack was very nice. It was painted a bright, cherry red color, and it looked like something straight out of a magazine. You could tell he took care of it. As we neared it, I couldn't help myself.

"Wow."

He grinned proudly. "She's the envy of everyone on the road," he said.

"I bet," I said genuinely.

Still smiling, he pulled open the passenger door for me. I looked up at the seats and suddenly shyness took over. I hesitantly tossed my bag up onto the floor of the cab, but then I paused, glancing sheepishly at him.

"Never... ridden in one of these before," I said, though it sounded dumb, even to me.

"She doesn't bite," he said playfully. "Climb on up."

With a little sigh, I grabbed onto the inside handle of the door, and I started to pull myself up. One of his hands was suddenly on my lower back, holding me so I wouldn't fall, and I felt something short of an electric current shoot up my



spine, making heat rush to my cheeks. He pushed lightly, helping me to get into the truck, and right before his hand fell away, I felt it brush over my ass.

Still blushing, I relaxed against the leather bench-seat, and I turned to glance down at Jace. He flashed me a grin and shut the door.

As I pulled my seatbelt on, I scanned the cab, taking it in. There was a newer-model CD player installed, looking somewhat out of place among the other dials and knobs on the dash, and beside me on the seat was a worn CD book. A green, tree-shaped air freshener hung from the rearview mirror, and there was an unopened bag of Funyuns in one of the two cup holders. But besides that, the cab was very tidy and clean.

Jace climbed up into the driver's seat with ease, and he started the truck before he'd even put his seatbelt on. It came to life with a roar, and the seat beneath me started to rumble and vibrate, adding something to the strange sense of adventure I was feeling.

"Do you get used to this?" I asked, glancing sideways at him.

"Eventually." He grinned.

We were silent as he pulled the truck out of the parking lot, and it was kind of exciting to be in a big truck like this. Made me feel inferior, in a silly way. Despite all of the embarrassment I'd been feeling that morning, it faded away

as I watched the scenery roll by. When I got bored of that, I picked up the CD book beside me.

“Mind if I?” I asked him.

“Knock yourself out.”

As I flipped through the pages of CDs, I couldn’t help but notice that even they were neat and organized—something you wouldn’t expect for someone like Jace. He had a surprising kind of taste in music, very diverse, and I found that we had more in common than I’d originally thought we would. It was hard not to have a crush on this man.

“If you want to put something in, be my guest,” he said, nodding towards the CD player. “I’m fine with anything.”

I shrugged my shoulders, shutting the book. “I don’t know,” I said, “Not really in the mood for music.”

He nodded his head, understanding.

The sky lightened as the morning went on, and it turned out to be a beautiful day. As the truck rumbled down the road, I began to notice something. Every now and then, Jace’s head would turn my way. They weren’t lasting looks that he was giving me, rather quick glances as he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel.

I didn’t know whether I should feel flattered or nervous.

“So,” he said, after what felt like hours of silence,

“Who’d you leave back home? I bet no one was particularly happy to hear you were hitching your way to sunny California.”

“My parents were downright pissed off,” I said, making him laugh. “I’m the oldest, and I was supposed to set an example for my younger sisters. Leaving college wasn’t exactly the kind of example my parents were looking for.”

“What were you studying?”

“Literature.” I shrugged my shoulders. “And I liked it well enough, but it wasn’t my passion. And I’m twenty-four years old, you know? I’m old enough to make these decisions, in fact, I’m almost *too* old for it. Not many people become actors late on in life. I should’ve pursued it as soon as I’d graduated high school.”

“What did your sisters think of you leaving college?” Jace asked.

“They’re at that age where they don’t understand the seriousness of a lot of things,” I answered, thinking fondly of Cari and Chelsea. “I told them I might end up on TV one day, and they acted excited for about five minutes until their favorite cartoon came on.”

He smiled, nodding his head. After a thoughtful pause, he said, “So... no girlfriend? I’m guessing she wouldn’t have let you go.”

“No girlfriend,” I said. “Not since middle school at least...”

when I realized I didn't like girls." I didn't know why I'd said it, but it'd kind of just come out. Jace didn't seem to mind.

"No boyfriend?" he asked, and I could suddenly tell that he was trying too hard to sound casual. He was actually *interested* in me.

"Not since high school," I answered, a smirk coming to my face.

"You aren't some sort of asshole, are you?" he asked, looking at me. "Why else would someone like you be single?"

"I don't think I'm an asshole, but you know how that goes," I said, and he chuckled. "What about you? Besides your ex-wife?"

"The road's my love," he answered, smirking. "Kind of cliché, right?"

"No, it makes sense," I said. "I mean, I'm sure there aren't a lot of people who'd make a good match for you what with hours like yours and all?"

"I could get me someone who liked to travel," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It does get awful lonely, even with Sadie." The grin he tossed at me was playful. "That's her name."

It took me a second to realize he was talking about the truck, and I started laughing. "Sadie?" I echoed. "That's... nice."

“It’s my ex-wife’s middle name,” he told me. “I’d change it if it didn’t seem to fit the truck so damn well.”

We shared another laugh, and when we fell into silence, it wasn’t awkward or weird, it was comfortable. After a little while, I turned the radio on, and we just enjoyed each other’s company for some time.

He was pulling onto an exit when he spoke next, giving me a guilty look. “I know I said I had stuff that I had to deliver to Carson City,” he said, “But I also have to stop off at Big Piney. Shouldn’t take too long, and afterward we’ll be out of Wyoming for sure.”

“I don’t mind,” I said, finding it kind of funny that he seemed to expect me to be angry. *He* was the one doing *me* a favor. “Big Piney. That’s near the range, isn’t it?” I asked, picturing my map in my mind.

“Yep.”

“What are you delivering?” I asked.

A smirk came to his face. “Honestly? Canned goods.”

“Really?” I was somewhat surprised. I mean, I knew people needed their food, and how else did canned goods get to store shelves? I guess I’d just been expecting something a little more... exciting.

He laughed at the expression on my face, and I realized how much I liked his raspy-sounding laugh. “Before this, I delivered women’s clothing,” he told me. “But not fun things

like bikinis and lingerie. Old lady clothing. I'd say that canned goods are a step up."

I laughed this time, nodding my head, but inwardly I was contemplative. Jace was very vague about himself when he talked, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was probably bisexual. He obviously had no problem with me being gay, and the looks he gave me when he thought I wasn't looking were very suggestive. But I also got that he liked women.

I only hoped it wasn't more wishful thinking on my part.

We stopped just outside of Big Piney at what appeared to be a small general store. As he was getting ready to climb down from the cab, Jace told me that I could wait in the truck if I wanted to, and for a moment, that was exactly what I planned to do. Then I changed my mind, and I opened my door to get out.

While I'd been deciding, he had opened up the back of the truck and had hopped up into it. I peered into the shadowed truck, able to make out his form among the stacked crates.

"Need some help?" I called in to him.

He glanced up, surprised to see me. "You don't mind?" he asked.

"Believe me, it's the least I could do."

Straightening, he tossed a set of keys at me; it was a good thing I'd managed to catch it, because there were a lot

of them gathered on one ring, and it would've hurt like hell if it'd hit me. There were worn out stickers on each key, which was obviously how he told them apart. Without them, the keys would have all looked completely the same.

"Find the sticker for Big Piney," he said. "Maybe you could open up the back door for me?"

As he went back to the crates, I quickly pulled out the key that was labeled: *Piney*. As I neared the back of the small building, I figured the store hadn't opened yet or else the workers would have been there to let him in themselves. It was, after all, only around nine in the morning. A store like this probably opened around ten or eleven.

I got the door unlocked, and I pushed it open, revealing a dank and darkened room that smelled of dust and mildew. I reached in and felt around for a light switch, flicking on the first one my fingers came across. It illuminated a dull, overhead lamp. Boxes of all shapes and sizes, both open and not, were scattered around what was obviously a storage room.

Turning back to the truck, I saw Jace working the lift, lowering himself and some cargo from the truck. He had three crates stacked on a carrier, and I vaguely wondered how long this delivering thing took him. He wheeled the carrier towards me when the lift had reached the ground, boots crunching in the gravel, and I stepped aside to let him pass me into the store.

"As much as I love driving," he said, "I hate to tell you

that this part gets boring.”

I smirked and leaned against the door frame as he started to move the crates from the carrier. There was just enough lighting to see the way the muscles in his shoulders flexed and the way the tendons in his forearms tightened. I had to admit, it was quite a show to watch. I didn’t want him to catch me watching him though, so I pretended to be interested in a loose thread hanging from the bottom hem of my shirt.

His phone rang suddenly, and he stopped what he was doing to answer it. I knew I should have walked away to give him some privacy, but there was a part of me that just liked hearing his voice. He was speaking kind of quietly, and I couldn’t make out everything he was saying.

“Hey... Big Piney, making great time.” A long pause. “What do you mean? It’s a good thing you got me now.... Oh yeah? Sure, I got ’em. Okay. See you later, boss.”

Suddenly he was right beside me, almost startling me.

“Bad news, Connor,” he said, his gaze lowered. “There was a mix-up at the warehouse, and it turns out that Carson City was never on my route.” He paused, and I tried to keep my expression neutral. This meant I had to find someone else to ride with. “But there is a little good news. Instead of Carson City, I’m going to Palm Springs.” He grinned, and relief flooded me. “Looks like you’re gonna be stuck with me for a little longer.”



“Palm Springs?” I repeated, excitedly. “No way. Are you serious?”

“I can drop you right in Los Angeles myself,” he said. “Just hope you don’t get sick of me, kid.”

With a new sense of excitement, I helped him finish unloading all of the crates that were meant for Big Piney. Everything that was left in the truck was going to a store in Palm Springs, and I couldn’t believe how lucky I’d gotten. I was almost thinking that Jace must have been playing a mean joke on me. This kind of fate didn’t happen to people in real life, did it?

“You don’t look like you mind being stuck with me,” Jace said when we were on the road again.

“Of course not,” I said, shrugging. “A ride’s a ride. And besides, I like you.” I hadn’t meant it as anything; I was just being honest, but as the words left me, they hung in the silence, and a wave of embarrassment rolled over me.

But when I glanced at him, Jace was smiling at me. Not a cocky smirk, and not a playful grin, just a smile. He nodded his head. “Well, I like you too, Connor,” he said. “And I’m glad you’re riding with me.”

Blushing, I returned his smile, and I nodded shortly. I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t know what *to* say. Instead I turned to look out the window again, and I sighed quietly. There had been something in his tone, something that made it seem like maybe he might have liked me in the

way that I liked him. I didn't want to get my hopes up though.

"You alright?" His voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I glanced back at him.

"Yeah, of course," I said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I don't want to scare you or anything," Jace said. "I'm not like guys like What's-His-Face back in Cheyenne, Blondie." I nodded, knowing he meant Erik. "I don't want you thinking that I'm expecting anything from you."

I smiled. "I know," I said. "And just the fact that you seem so worried now makes me know you're telling the truth."

He grinned, looking very relieved. Then his expression turned into an arrogant one, and he shrugged one of his shoulders. "Not that I wouldn't enjoy it, mind you," he said playfully. "But like I said, my partners are always willing."

I wasn't completely stupid, and I knew what he was implying. And that excited me more than you could have imagined. But I tried not to show it, and I only returned his grin before going back to looking out the window. So I'd been right—he *was* into guys, and he *was*, as far as I knew, into *me*.

It looked like my ride to California had just gotten a lot more interesting.

THE hours of the day went by slowly, but there was nothing boring about it. After our shared little moment, things between Jace and I seemed even *more* comfortable than before, if you can believe that.

We mostly just listened to music and talked; when he wasn't asking me questions about myself, he was telling me all the vulgar jokes he knew from other truckers. This part was especially fun for me, hearing all the dirty words that left his pretty lips.

Our lunch consisted of a few snacks from a gas station we'd stopped at, but for dinner we came across a truck stop with barely any activity. It was still relatively early when we finished eating, so Jace decided that we should keep riding after he'd fueled his tank rather than get rooms at the hotel next door.

"When we get to the next one," he was saying as he started the ignition, "Would you terribly mind if we shared a room? It's a lot cheaper and a lot easier for us to get going in the morning."

I shook my head. I didn't really see any sense in him asking. We'd already had to share a room, and it wasn't like it would be anything new. "No," I said, "I don't mind at all. Get two beds so you don't have to sleep on the floor this time."

"Oh?" he asked. "And what makes you think it would be

*me* sleeping on the floor this time around?”

I smiled a little at him. “What?” I asked. “I can’t just bat my eyelashes at you or anything?”

“Well... maybe so,” Jace said, shrugging one shoulder. “You do got a cute pair of dimples too.”

He’d been giving me those flattering quips all day, and while he still made me blush, it wasn’t as bad as it’d been before. We were developing a bond of sorts, though I couldn’t explain it. It helped that we were both openly attracted to each other, even if we were both holding back from making the first move.

“So, I see,” I said, looking out the window. “Mr. Strong-and-Silent is easily won over.”

“Depending on who’s trying to do the winning,” he said. “What might be easy for you isn’t necessarily easy for someone else.”

“I bet you’re lying,” I said with a little laugh. “I bet you’re a real man slut, aren’t you? It doesn’t take much for you to drop your pants.”

“Where is this new spunky attitude coming from?” he asked. “I have to admit, I’m really liking it.”

“See.” I gestured to him. “You’re ready to drop trou right now.”

“Oh, I see how you want to play it,” Jace said, nodding.

“You got a lot of nerve, kid, considering I’ve already seen you in nothing but your underthings, and you haven’t seen me yet.”

“That doesn’t count,” I said, and he gave a bark of laughter.

We fell silent as the truck barreled on down the road, and I was still smiling to myself as I watched the plains roll by. I couldn’t help but wish I was able to read his mind, just so I’d know what he was thinking and feeling about me. And if it was the same way I was feeling about him.

When one of his hands suddenly settled on my thigh, I nearly jumped in the seat.

I turned to him, but he was watching the road. I looked down at his hand, where I could feel a tingly kind of warmth radiating, and then I looked back at him. He turned to me with a half-smile, and his gaze searched mine as if he were trying to read me. He was asking me if this was okay.

I couldn’t believe what was happening.

Smiling at him, I tried to ignore the way my body was reacting to his touch; I had to admit, it’d been a while since I’d last felt another guy’s hand on my body. His own smirk grew, and he gave my thigh a squeeze, the gleam in his eyes a teasing one. My dick was almost instantly rock hard, and he knew it.

“I sure am glad I saved your sorry ass from Blondie back

in Cheyenne,” he said softly.

“Can’t be as glad as me,” I retorted.

He turned back to the road but didn’t remove his hand. We rode like that for the rest of the evening.

## IV

WHEN we stopped for the night, it was at a big and relatively nice hotel located on top of a surprisingly fancy restaurant. I tried to give Jace some money for the room, but he pretended not to even see it. I felt kind of awkward about that, because even though he only spent a little money on me here and there, I knew it would start to build up. I would have much rather had him demanding money from me than not seeming to care.

He paid for a room with two queen-sized beds, and as we rode the elevator, he whistled a tune. We didn't mention anything about the way he'd held my leg all day, not that I thought it was a good topic for conversation or anything, it was just that he seemed to have completely forgotten about it while I was *still* convinced I could feel his warm palm through my jeans.

Almost as soon as we reached our room, he made a beeline to the bathroom, telling me he needed a shower. It was exactly *not* the kind of mental image I needed, and I was left on my own in the bed I'd claimed for myself. As I mindlessly watched some lame movie on the SciFi channel, my thoughts were muddled and confused.

There was a little part of me that was seriously contemplating coming onto Jace. What was the worst that could happen? He'd already made it clear that he wouldn't complain any, and it would be a good way to pass the time. Not to mention it'd been a while since the last time I'd had sex, and the more I thought about it, the more I was craving it.

The bathroom door opened just as I was starting to nod off, and I glanced up to be met with a sight that almost blinded me. Jace left the steamy bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped clumsily around his waist, held together at one of his hips with a loose hand. His hair, which looked longer because it was wet, was stuck to his forehead and neck with water, and droplets still clung to his golden chest.

He flashed me a sheepish, if not embarrassed, grin as he passed my bed to go to his. "Left my clothes out here," he explained. He grabbed his duffel bag with his free hand, swinging it over one of his shoulders.

I gaped stupidly at him; my gaze zeroed in on where the white towel met skin just beneath Jace's naval, knowing that what was hidden behind it was (what I had convinced myself to be) the most beautiful thing in the world. I shifted awkwardly in the bed, able to feel heat rushing to my groin, stirring my cock to life. He started back to the bathroom, his movement snapping me out of my thoughts, and I blinked, speaking before I'd even realized I was doing it.

"Jace. Wait."



He paused, turning and glancing at me with an eyebrow raised in question, and I had to fight against the blush rising to my face. There was a sly look in his eyes, an amused glint that told me that he already knew what was going through my mind. Yet again, Jace Bennett was teasing me.

“I... ah....” I trailed off, not knowing where to begin.

“Been a while for you too, huh?” he asked, giving me the cockiest of grins imaginable.

I let out a nervous-sounding laugh, and I nodded slightly, scratching at the back of my head. “You could say that,” I said honestly.

He studied me with a thoughtful gaze for what felt like an eternity. He lightly dropped his bag to the floor, and as he started towards me, my throat dried. I let my gaze sweep over his legs, which were long and muscular, and I could feel my erection straining against my jeans at just the thought of him. He reached me, standing over me, and he placed his hands on his hips, letting go of the towel.

“You *have* done this before, right?” he asked me, still smirking.

My gaze was locked on the towel, which seemed to slip lower and lower with each passing second, exposing more and more of his tanned abdomen. I nodded my head, forcing myself to look up and meet his eyes, which were unreadable but very visibly darkened with lust.

“I have,” I said slowly.

And the next thing I knew, his dry lips were on mine. They felt soft, but he kissed me firmly, and a shiver of sorts ran down my spine. His hands came up to my face, and he cupped my cheeks, as if fearing I’d try to pull away now that we’d started. I let my eyes fall closed as his lips shaped mine, and I slanted my mouth against his, tilting my head to the side slightly. There were no sparks as I’d been admittedly expecting, but there was a feeling that came with it, a primal desire. Probably because I’d been alone for so long.

As one of my hands came up to rest against his dampened neck, he pulled my bottom lip between his and sucked on it lightly, making my cock throb against my pants. A part of me was still very much in disbelief that this was going on, but another part of me thought that it hadn’t come soon enough.

His tongue slipped past my lips and into my mouth, a warm intruder that explored with ardor. I pushed my tongue against his, swirling it around the tip of it; I’d always thought I was a good kisser, but he seemed to rival me. And suddenly his hands left my face, and he pulled away. I looked up at him, slightly confused, with my lips all but burning for more of him.

With a little smile, he pushed the towel away and exposed himself for me.

Jace wasn’t completely hardened yet, but he was long and thick, clean-shaven and smooth. One of his hands went

to his dick as I openly stared, and he stroked himself a few times, still smiling at me. When he reached for the bottom of my T-shirt, I could only lift my arms up and let him pull it off me. Dropping it to the floor, he started to lean in again, and I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck.

Our mouths met once more as he pushed me gently back to the mattress. He moved over me, straddling my hips, and the muscles in his bare thighs pulled the skin taut and made my mouth almost water. This man was perfection defined.

When he pushed his tongue into my mouth a second time, it was without a moment's hesitation. As our mouths moved against one another's, his hands slid down my chest and to the waistband of my jeans, where his fingers dipped beneath the material to lightly ghost over my skin, creating goosebumps. I allowed my own hands to wander over his body, over his shoulders and down his back. As my hands brushed the smooth skin of his ass, I squeezed his buttocks, and he nipped at my bottom lip in response.

The kiss broke again, and as I took in a few deep breaths, his mouth danced across my jaw line before leading a trail of butterfly kisses to my neck. I let my head fall back some, and my breathing hitched just slightly as I felt his tongue trace the column of my throat. His teeth grazed over my collarbone before he bit me lightly and I made a small noise. As he sucked and licked along my skin, his hands went to my chest to play with my nipples.

His warm mouth replaced his fingers a moment or so later, his lips closing around one of my nipples and making me inhale sharply. His tongue worked wonders on it, twirling over the little nub, and I ran my fingers through his wet hair, encouraging him. When he was done with that nipple, he moved over to the other, paying it just as much attention as he had the first. Then he started to move lower, trailing his lips down my abdomen.

He kissed along the waistband of my jeans, before looking up at me and reaching for the fly. He passed me a smirk as he unbuttoned and unzipped them, and my cock practically sprang out from its confines. As he pulled the jeans down, I lifted my hips some so that it would be easier, and soon my pants joined my discarded shirt on the floor, and now we were both completely naked.

“Are you sure about this, Connor?” he asked, even as one of his hands wrapped around the base of my cock.

I nodded quickly, and his hand started to move. His gaze locked with mine as I breathed shallowly through my nose. He stroked me slowly, as if he didn’t want to rush things, and the pleasure that came from it was near amazing—either it had been *way* too long since someone else had touched me, or Jace was a sex god.

Both were very probable.

He gave me a rough kiss, his teeth catching my bottom lip for just a moment, before he started to lower himself again, mouth trailing down my stomach. With one of my

hands tangled in his hair, I couldn't help but push slightly, guiding him down my body. He looked up at me with a last smile before he brushed his lips over the tip of my dick. I let out the breath I hadn't realized that I'd been holding.

As he took me into his mouth, a moan escaped my throat.

Jace started to work his magic on me, and I grasped at the bed sheet beneath me, balling it in my fists. His lips worked like a professional's, and his tongue moved along the underside of my shaft as he moved. One of his hands still held the base of my cock, and the other went to my balls, starting to play with them, massaging them. Another unintentional noise escaped me.

It was easy for me to almost reach my breaking point early on, but he stopped without warning and moved off of me. With a furrowed brow, I started to question him, but he only went to his duffel bag. I propped myself up on my elbows and watched him as he dug around in the bag, and a second or two later, he produced what looked like a small tube of lubricant and a condom.

Hot, Texan, quick-witted, and safe? Surely this was all a part of my imagination; no man like Jace was real.

As he came back, excitement flared up inside of me, excitement and adrenaline. The next few moments happened in a quick blur, and I soon found myself on my knees with my chest flat against the mattress. He pressed his finger against me first, surprising me slightly.

“Relax,” he said in a low, soothing tone.

When he started to work his finger in and out of me, I felt myself slowly give way to the feelings inside of me with relief and pleasure. His mouth moved across the back of my neck as he added another finger, and I said his name in an undertone. I slipped one of my arms under my body, and I grabbed my cock, starting to pull on it lightly.

The mattress shifted under us as he moved, pulling his fingers from me and positioning himself. He entered me with his breath held, pushing his thick cock into me slowly, almost inch-by-inch until he was completely buried. Then he waited, allowing me to get used to his size. When he started thrusting into me at an even pace, I closed my eyes and welcomed each movement of his with one of my own. We fell in sync with one another.

I continued pumping myself, bringing myself closer and closer to the edge. His hands were on my hips, fingernails digging in slightly, and started making low noises. We moved as one, lost in the moment—or at least, I knew I was lost. It felt like the whole world had slipped away, and I was left alone with my Texan sex god. I moaned his name as my pleasure started to build, rising and boiling over in me. A hot rock in my gut seemed to be expanding, heat spreading throughout my body and warning me that I was fast approaching a climax. My stroking became quicker and more desperate; I felt like there was an itch I needed to scratch, a fire that I needed to put out.

His movements sped up as well, and he rocked against me with more fervor, clutching my waist tighter. One of his hands moved up my spine, and he grabbed a handful of my hair, pulling on it slightly and making me groan.

Then he hit something inside of me that sent a bolt of white hot ecstasy coursing through my veins, and my back arched as my balls tightened and drew up. As I orgasmed, I said his name again, and I would have fallen to the bed in a heap if he hadn't been holding so tightly onto my body.

With a guttural-sounding noise in his throat, he started driving into me harder. I lay beneath him, panting and exhausted, and he rode me rough and fast. His body suddenly stiffened above me, and he came as he held his breath, barely making a sound at all. Then he groaned and pulled his cock out of me.

I let my body fall to the mattress, and I tried to control my breathing as I was coming down from my high. Moments later, Jace joined me, lying beside me on his back. We were silent for a long moment, and while the sound of my pulse pounding in my ears started to die down, I listened to his heavy breathing.

Then he side-glanced me, his eyes half-lidded, and his expression soft. "Get the light?" he asked me.

I figured it was the least I could do for the show he had put on.

As I lay back down, I instinctively curled up next to him,

and he didn't seem to mind. When I draped one of my arms over his chest, he leaned over to brush his lips over my temple.

"This is gonna be a good drive," he said with a rusty-sounding chuckle.

And I found that all I could do was smile and nod before sleep started to overtake me. There was a shred of worry in the back of my mind that maybe the next morning would be awkward and strange. But I pushed the doubt aside for the time being. I just wanted to revel in the glory of the moment for now.



V

WHEN I woke the next morning, Jace was still asleep. I'd ended up half-turned away from him, and one of his arms was slung possessively over me. He didn't stir as I moved beneath his arm, turning so that I could look at him. His lips were slightly parted as he slept, and his cheek was pressed against the mattress. He looked a lot younger in his slumber, and I took a second just to admire him.

I shimmied out of his grasp, peeled myself off the rumpled sheet, and glanced at the clock. It was a little after seven, and I knew how Jace liked to get an early start. I turned to him, placing a hand lightly on his shoulder, and I shook him. I had to say his name a few times, but after a moment, his eyelids fluttered as he stirred. He cracked an eye open, and when he saw me, a lazy smile graced his mouth.

"It's about a quarter past seven," I told him. "If you wanted to get up."

With a heavy sigh, he rolled over onto his back, stretching his arms above his head, and I couldn't help but let my gaze appreciatively take in his body.

"Not really," he said, voice thick. "But I know I have to."

Despite what he'd said, he lay there for a little longer. He smiled up at me, and then he grabbed my arm, pulling me towards him. I let myself get drawn to him, and he kissed me deeply. It was strange, the kind of closeness we'd developed. When we broke apart, one of his hands moved through my hair, and his gaze locked with mine.

"I don't think I've ever met someone like you, Connor," he said.

"Me too." I blushed. "I mean I don't think I've ever... met someone, you know... like you and all."

"Are you always so articulate?" he asked me sarcastically.

"What can I say? You bring out the best in me." I laughed as if I'd just made the funniest joke on the face of the planet.

Still grinning, he kissed me again, biting my lip. "So it looks like we'll be needing a quick shower, huh?"

Much to my disappointment, though we shared a shower, we didn't fool around as I'd been expecting. Suddenly Jace was all about working, and he barely even touched me as we stood under the hot spray.

When we left the hotel, we were headed straight to California, and I couldn't have been happier. It'd been only three days since I'd left home and caught a ride with the Pine-Sol-scented Marlene, and I couldn't believe things were

going so well for me.

Not to mention, the more time I spent with Jace, the better things seemed to get.

It was almost something you'd expect to see in a movie. We spent our days on the road, occasionally stopping to play with one another, something which he had no qualms about—he didn't care where we were, or who was around. When the mood struck him, he pulled Sadie off the road. And then we spent our nights cooped up in our hotel room, enjoying each other's bodies.

One such day, I found myself bent over the hood of a 1978 Camaro, its yellow paint job rusted in some places. The car had been abandoned behind an idle gas station, and while I was slightly worried about who might come around the building any moment, the way his hand moved swiftly over my cock was enough to make me forget all my fears. We'd originally stopped to pick up some drinks and maybe use the bathroom, but the Camaro had been way too tempting.

And like I'd said, when the mood struck, it struck. Jace didn't care where we were.

Jace's other hand, the one that wasn't squeezing and working my cock, was resting against my back, keeping me bent at just the right angle, and he thrust into me slowly, as if he were trying to savor it. He drove himself deeply into me, and he rolled his hips from side-to-side as he kept his dick buried, making me take in a sharp gasp and say his name.

I didn't last long, and I groaned as I came, moving in tune with him as he pumped my dick. He followed along right after, and when we'd both managed to catch our breath, we pulled our pants up and tucked ourselves away. Just as he was tossing the used condom into a trash can, two people came around the building.

It was an older man and a young boy, a father and son on vacation, apparently. They were headed to the bathrooms, and Jace and I tried to appear as natural as we could. Very fortunately for us, the father's gaze went straight to the Camaro.

"Is that a '78?" he asked jovially. "Boy, you don't see many of them nowadays."

"In good shape too, right?" Jace returned the buoyancy, and beside him I tried to keep my expression neutral.

After a polite conversation with the man about cars, he disappeared into the bathroom with his son, and Jace grabbed my arm. Grinning impishly at me, he pulled me away from the Camaro. After picking up a few things from inside, we returned to the truck, and as we were climbing up into the cab, my gaze landed on a road sign not too far from where we'd parked.

"Wow," I said. "I didn't know we were already so close."

He followed my gaze as he pushed his key into the ignition, and he nodded his head. "Yeah," he said, expression becoming unreadable. "Time sure does fly sometimes, huh?"

“When do you think we’ll reach Los Angeles?” I asked him.

He pushed his lips out thoughtfully, cocking his head slightly. “Without traffic, I’d say maybe by tomorrow afternoon, early evening.”

“Really?” I couldn’t place the tone my voice had taken on—worried, maybe? It felt like Jace and I had just met, and already I would have to part with him.

“Hey,” he said, suddenly sounding like he had an idea. “How ’bout we take a break with this driving thing? It won’t matter if I’m a day late or something. Let’s find a bar around these parts and just have ourselves a few drinks, blow off some steam.”

“Blow off some steam?” I echoed. “Isn’t that what we were just doing?”

Laughing, he nodded. “Yeah, well, there wasn’t any alcohol involved, and I could sure use a beer,” he said. “I’m sure we can find a quaint little place somewhere.”

Pausing for a thoughtful moment, I nodded. A night off sounded *really* good actually; that meant more time for me to spend with Jace. I was trying not to think about what it would be like when he and I had to go our separate ways. It wasn’t as if I’d known the man for months or anything, but it felt like it. I’d never met anyone like him before in my life, and I’d never felt for any other man the way I felt for him, as crazy as that sounds.

And the realization that we were almost in Los Angeles was looming over me like a storm cloud.

The bar we ended up finding was seemingly in the middle of nowhere, but quite busy. The jukebox was blaring some swanky Southern rock hit, and while bottle-blond women in jean skirts tore up the dance floor, their men could be found at the multiple pool tables. It was a fun-looking kind of place, and mostly everyone looked nice enough, but for some reason, I stayed close to Jace as we neared the bar.

He ordered my drink for me, but the bartender—an old man with a feather earring—made me show him my ID while Jace smirked smugly to himself.

“You get that a lot, don’t you?” he asked me as our beers were set before us. “People carding you, I mean.”

I nodded, rolling my eyes. “Oh yeah,” I said. “I don’t know, maybe it’s just me, but I don’t think I look *that* young.”

“Don’t complain,” Jace said. “People my age would give anything to look younger than they are.”

“You?” I asked playfully.

“I’m comfortable in my own skin.” He shrugged, grinning cockily at me.

“Good, because I’m comfortable with it too,” I said. “I’ve always had a thing for older men, you know?”

He laughed, and I got the idea that if we hadn't been in such a crowded place, he might have kissed me. Instead, his warm gaze locked with mine, and we shared a smile.

I'd never been one for going out and drinking, especially at bars. But as the night wore on, I found that I was having a lot of fun, even if it was mostly because I was there with Jace. I played a few songs on the jukebox, some old favorites, and I even danced with a few girls. I'd not had the heart to tell any of them that I wasn't interested. A few guys tried to pull me into their games of pool, but I knew I was no good and had to decline.

As I was returning to where Jace was at the bar—he'd stayed there the whole night, watching me with a knowing little smirk—I found that he was no longer alone.

A burly man with a shock of red hair was standing in front of him, and while the redhead seemed to be glaring, Jace was smooth, calm, and collected. I slowed down, and when I stopped hesitantly beside them, they glanced at me. The redhead's beady eyes moved over me, and I felt kind of nauseous. He reminded me distinctly of Erik.

"Where you boys from?" the redhead asked, and I glanced to Jace.

"Around," Jace answered. "Just stopping by to wind down. Got a big day tomorrow."

"Well, we don't take kindly to strangers," the man said. "This is a family-run business; no one gets in without

permission.”

“We’ve been here all night,” Jace said, and I almost closed my eyes. He was using his instigating tone, the one I’d heard him use with Erik. Was he looking for a fight?

“And what are you talking about, Kev?” a man behind the redhead asked, looking at him with a confused expression. “We don’t have a problem with newcomers—the more the merrier—”

“Shut up,” the redhead, Kev, snapped at him. Then he turned back to Jace and I. “You two rub me the wrong way. Don’t look like regular drifters.”

“Never said anything about being a drifter,” Jace said. “We’re passing through on a job. I drive trucks for a living.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

I almost couldn’t believe this was happening. Then again, remembering everything that’d happened to me in the past few days, I *could*. I let out a little sigh, wanting to tell Jace that it’d be best if we just left, but I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself.

“Would you like me to change it?” Jace asked, and I stared at his profile incredulously. I had fallen for a man who liked getting into barroom fights. Just my luck.

“Tell you what,” the redhead said, leaning closer towards Jace and lowering his tone so that only we heard him. “You give me a few minutes with your pretty little man



friend here, and we'll call it even. You'll be welcome here whenever you want... as long as you bring him, of course."

My eyes widened, and my palms started to sweat. I almost felt like I was going to throw up, and that feeling only intensified as the redhead's gaze drank me in again. Jace's shoulders visibly squared, and I could see his jaw clench.

"Oh?" Now Jace's tone was dark. "That right?"

The redhead wasn't the brightest, and he seemed to think that Jace was seriously contemplating it. A crooked smirk came to his lips, and he started to nod his head. That's when one of Jace's fists landed square in the middle of his face, smashing his nose and sending him flying backward. Of course, all of the redhead's friends hadn't heard what their dear Kev had been saying to Jace, so they all simultaneously pounced on Jace.

I stood there like a bump on a log, not knowing what to do, and even when someone harshly grabbed one of my arms, I did nothing. I started to get pulled towards the exit, and I noticed that Kev's friends were also leading Jace to the door. I'd never been thrown out of a bar before, but I guessed there was a first time for everything.

Jace was laughing as he was shoved outside, and I stumbled after him, falling into him. He grabbed me by the crook of my elbow to steady me, and he turned back towards the bar as Kev's friends gathered there, staring hard at us.

"You call that a scrap?" Jace asked, eyes gleaming as he

grinned a shark's grin. "Why don't you boys go back to hiding behind your momma's legs, yeah?"

The men slammed the door harshly, and still chuckling, Jace turned and started walking away. I quickly fell into step beside him, and I glanced at him as we neared Sadie. It was insane, the fact that he seemed to enjoy fights, but it was also kind of hot. He looked at me, feeling me staring at him, and I shook my head.

"That's three times, you know?" I asked. "Three times that you've saved my ass."

"Third time's the charm," he said, stopping and turning to me. "I'm a regular superhero, aren't I?"

"I think so," I said, nodding my head. "I really don't know what I'd do without you. Thanks, Jace. For sticking up for me in there and all."

"It was nothing. Just can't stand people like him."

We both fell silent, and I looked down, staring at my feet. One of Jace's rough hands was suddenly on my chin, and he lifted my face up. His green eyes were like cat eyes in the dark, and I found myself quickly becoming lost in them. He leaned forward and caught my lips with his, holding me in place as he kissed me.

If this was how things ended after getting kicked out of a bar, then it wasn't that bad an experience at all.

WAKING up the next morning, I could feel someone watching me. Blinking, I glanced to my right, where Jace lay facing me on his side and propped up on an elbow. He smiled at me. We were both in the large bed of our hotel room, and we were both fully nude, me under the sheet and him atop it.

“What time is it?” I asked, rubbing at my eyes.

“Seven,” he answered.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Just a little bit.” After a moment, he leaned in and brushed his lips over mine. “We don’t have to get up just yet. If we leave too early....” His voice trailed off, but I knew what he’d been getting at. If we left too early, that meant we’d be in Los Angeles a lot sooner.

“We can’t stay in bed all day,” I said playfully.

“I don’t need all day, just a little longer.”

He leaned in, and we kissed again, only this time it lasted. As our lips moved, he lifted up the bed sheet and slipped beneath it to join me. He got on top of me, grinding his hips down and pressing his half-hardened cock against mine. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he sucked on my bottom lip, and as my fingernails traced lines in the smooth skin of his back, he started moving against me. He teased me, rubbing his erection against mine, and my breathing quickly became unsteady as sparks of pleasure danced through me.

As our bodies moved together, him thrusting and me bucking to meet him, a sense of desperation settled in. His dick rubbed and prodded mine, sliding along its length roughly, creating a sensation I'd never felt before and causing a low noise to well in my chest. Our mouths broke apart, and his moved down my chin and to my neck. As he bit and sucked, leaving his marks on my throat, I groaned out his name and raked my fingers through his hair.

Neither of us lasted long, but it didn't matter. It wasn't a moment of savoring and reveling; it was a moment full of passion and primal desire. We needed this, and we needed it fast.

After we'd both climaxed, the room fell almost completely silent with the exception of our heavy panting. Jace didn't move from over top of me, rather relaxing on me and resting his forehead against one of my shoulders. I moved my hands up and down his back, caressing him lightly, and we lay like that for what felt like an eternity.

"Connor?"

Something in the way he said my name made me think he was about to say something important. Was he going to ask me to stay with him on the ride? Was he going to tell me what he felt for me?

"Yeah?" I asked.

He lifted his head so that he could look at me, but he said nothing. He studied me for a long moment, and then he

kissed me again. Whatever he'd been about to say was lost, and I was pretty disappointed.

If he had asked me not to leave when we reached Los Angeles, I would have stayed. If he'd told me that he loved me, I would have returned the gesture. Or maybe I was just reading too much into things, being my usual hopeless romantic self.

Whatever it was, I tried not to let it bring me down. I had enough to worry about knowing we were so close to the end of our adventure.

VI

THE sun was setting as I climbed down from the cab, hopping down to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Jace and I had spent all day dawdling and trying to stall, yet we'd still managed to reach Los Angeles by nightfall. As I glanced up at the building before me, wanting nothing more than to jump back up into Sadie, Jace came around the front of the truck.

His hands were shoved in the pockets of his jeans, and his shoulders were hunched just slightly. When he reached me, he met my gaze steadily, and there was an unreadable expression on his face. His mouth curved up into a smirk though.

"This is kind of... hard," he said, visibly swallowing. I watched the sensual motion of his Adam's apple as it bobbed, and my throat dried. "But I don't know why."

"Yeah," I agreed in a murmur.

"Hard to believe we've only known each other a few days," he said, chuckling nervously.

I only nodded this time, and an awkward silence fell over us. I bit my bottom lip and looked around, unable to

think of anything to say. Jace scratched at the back of his head, and he sighed heavily, looking around us; he didn't know what came next either.

I took a deep breath, and then I decided to just go with it. "I, ah... I was having a lot of fun with you, Jace," I said. "And I've been thinking. I like to travel. And it turns out that I like big trucks more than I thought I ever would."

He gave a laugh, and he looked away again. "No," he said. "It's not a good idea, Connor."

"Why not?" I asked quickly, dropping my bag on the ground. "What would be so bad about it?"

"I hear the way you talk about acting," he said to me. "You love it, it's your life, and you don't want to do anything else. And that's great. You're smart, and you're strong. I think you can do anything in life if you put your mind to it. Me? I'm a washed-up, high school dropout trucker. I don't have anything going for me."

"You're saying you don't think you're good enough for me?" I asked, laughing slightly. "Are you insane?"

"No, but you are if you're serious," he said simply. "As much as I would enjoy you coming with me, this is your life. This is your dream. I'd always feel guilty for making you change your path."

"You don't want me?" I asked, making sure to keep my tone playful.

“If that were the case, I’d have kicked you out of the truck a long time ago,” he said, smiling. “But what I also want is for you to do your own thing. Not to go along with my dumb ass.”

I lowered my gaze, folding my arms over my chest and sighing. I’d been expecting him to say something like that; he was a hot-headed Texan brawler, but he was smart. It didn’t mean that I liked what I was hearing though. I nodded slightly.

“Answer me this then,” I said. “Am I crazy, or is there something between us?”

“I’d say there’s definitely something,” he answered, nodding. “I’d go as far as to say that I think I’ve fallen for you completely, and I can’t even explain it. Almost like you put me under some sort of spell.” As I laughed, he reached over and placed a hand on the side of my neck. I still felt that tingly kind of warmth that I’d felt when he first touched me. “Look, Connor, you go and try your acting thing. I bet you’ll become a star in no time, and then I can go around saying that I knew you way back when, punching people out when they don’t believe me. And maybe one day we’ll run into each other again.”

“Do you really believe that?” I asked him. “Everything you just said?”

He nodded but didn’t say anything.

We exchanged phone numbers, trying to slow time down



as much as possible. I realized that I wasn't necessarily upset that we were splitting up; I was just feeling awkward. If I'd hitched a ride with someone other than Jace, I'd have probably just jumped out of the truck with a "thanks" and said my good-byes. But what was I supposed to say to Jace?

"So I guess I better be heading to Palm Springs," he said. "My boss'll start to wonder when I don't call it in."

"Yeah... guess so."

"Here." He suddenly reached into one of his pockets, and he held out a wad of cash to me. "This is an expensive state, so this is for you until you can get a job. Don't even try to give it back."

With a smile, I shoved it into my own pocket, and then I leaned in to kiss him. The next thing I knew, he was climbing up into his truck with a last grin and a wave. As Sadie pulled away from me, the sun was almost completely set, and I stood at the curb for what felt like hours.

It was strange, but I didn't feel as sad as I thought I would. I didn't even feel slightly lost like I'd been expecting. I realized that despite the fact that I'd grown to really care for Jace Bennett, he was right. I had the chance to do something with my life, and if I gave that up, I would always regret it.


A new sense of excitement came to me. As one adventure ended, another one was just ready to begin.

I was that much closer to my dream, and I'd met a great man on the way there. I hoped beyond hope that I would get to see him again, but even if I didn't, I would always remember him. And I would always remember that if it weren't for him, I wouldn't have made it to Los Angeles at all.


But now, it was my time to shine.

LACEY-ANNE FRYE is a young, loner gal with too much time on her hands. Born and raised in Maryland, she became interested in writing when she was in the first grade, although her short plays and stories from back then are more embarrassing than her baby photos. She currently resides with her biggest fan, her mother, from whom Lacey-Anne inherited the storytelling gene.

When she isn't writing and creating a billion new characters, she can be found sleeping, shopping for cheap DVDs online, and playing video games. Lucky enough to have a family who supports her love of male/male romance, Lacey-Anne is able to bounce ideas and possible plotlines off her mother during dinner or her brother while they're shooting and taking down zombies on his PlayStation 3.



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