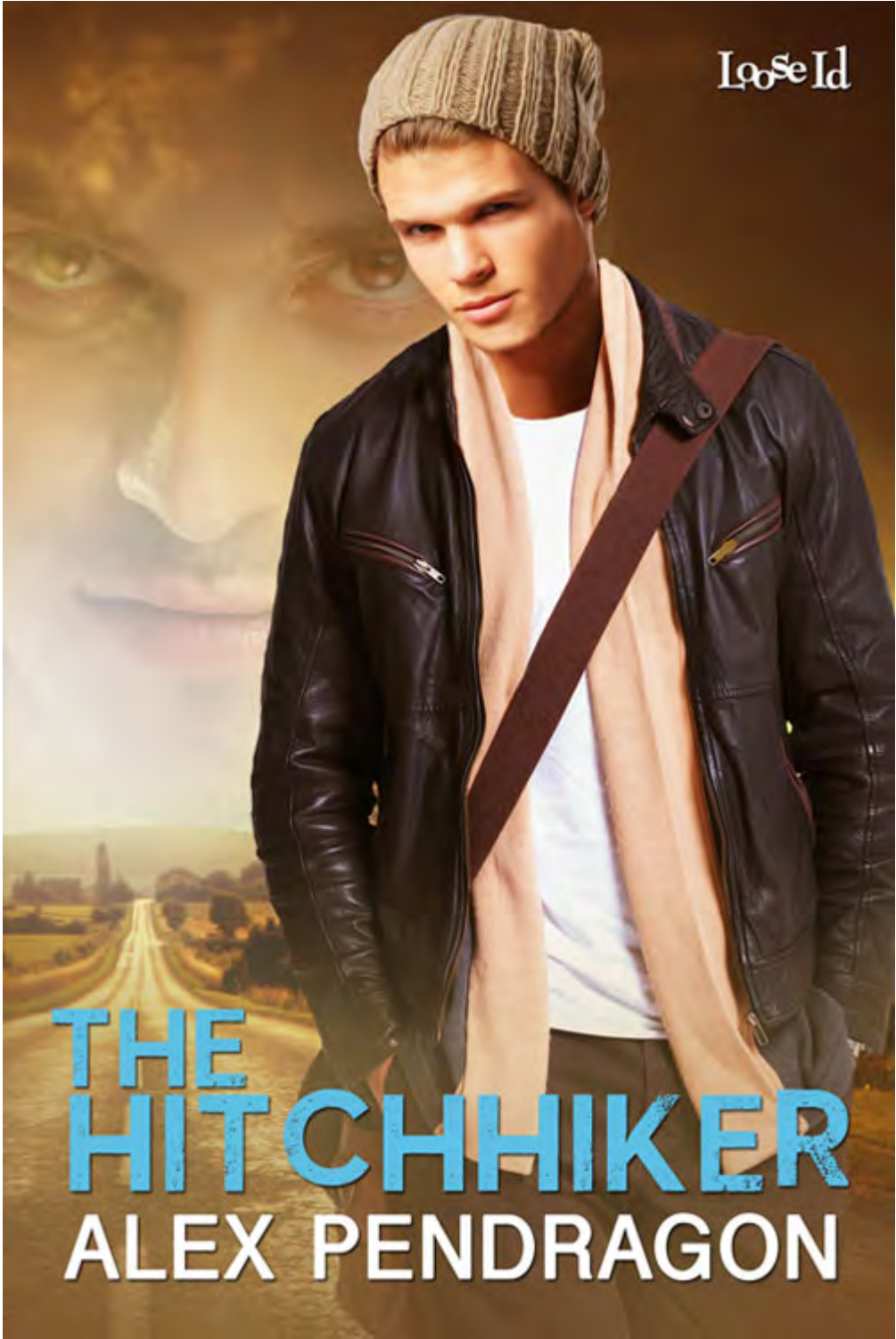


The book cover features a man in a dark leather jacket, a light-colored scarf, and a grey beanie. He is standing in front of a background that includes a large, ethereal face and a road stretching into the distance. The title 'THE HITCHHIKER' is in large blue letters, and the author's name 'ALEX PENDRAGON' is in white letters below it. The publisher's name 'Loose Id' is in the top right corner.

Loose Id

**THE
HITCHHIKER**
ALEX PENDRAGON

THE HITCHHIKER

Alex Pendragon



www.loose-id.com

The Hitchhiker

Copyright © April 2015 by Alex Pendragon

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Image/art disclaimer: Licensed material is being used for illustrative purposes only. Any person depicted in the licensed material is a model.

eISBN 9781623008710

Editor: Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Dar Albert

Published in the United States of America

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 170549

San Francisco CA 94117-0549

www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

Chapter One

They had a saying back in the days when hitchhiking was commonplace: you either pay with cash, gas, or ass. One of the three; no exceptions.

Things have changed a lot over the past couple of decades, of course. I didn't need to have been around in the sixties and seventies to recognize that the age of hitchhiking was over. Maybe it was cars getting more affordable, or people growing up more wary of strangers, or just because too many people turned up raped or dead or simply never turned up again.

So you don't see many at the side of the road anymore, bag at their feet in the dust, cardboard sign with a hastily scrawled destination in hand. Or perhaps simply a thumb outstretched, the goal not so important as the movement itself.

I drive a lot, but I don't travel much. I deliver new cars to the well-heeled for a dealership in Chicago. I'm the guy who pulls up outside your house or your office and, with the broadest smile you can imagine, hands over your keys and tells you he sincerely hopes you enjoy your new status symbol.

I've only been doing it for two years, and already I've got the smile down pat.

It's not what I thought I'd be doing with my life when I graduated. I took the aimless route, and looking back I can see how that was a dumb plan or simply no plan at all. I should've picked something with legs and focused on it, made a career, even if I didn't enjoy it so much as I would its security.

Instead I drifted from course to course and from field to field, never quite settling but ending up with a ragtag of qualifications and no clear way to use them. Oh, and the requisite student debt, of course. Plenty of that.

And now I get to enjoy your heated leather seats for an hour or so until they're properly yours.

If you've been in Chicago anytime during the winter, you'll know how necessary that heating is. The city is cold at the best of times, but for two months or so it's achingly sharp, unforgiving in its biting winds, and liberal in its snow.

So I jumped at the chance of getting away to somewhere warmer, where someone was too impatient to wait for the factory to spit out another model with exactly the right combination of color, toys, and accessories.

Pretty simple for me too: steady drive, avoid scratches, and then fly back home. I'd even managed to time it so that I'd have a little over a full day to myself when I got there—a chance to soak up some of the good weather before returning to the grim, gray bleakness of the city I called home.

You have a lot of rules as a delivery driver, though most of them are common sense. Don't speed, don't take risks that could damage the car, don't eat inside it, and make sure you top off the tank at the last minute by just enough to get the fuel gauge reading *full*.

What we don't have—have never really needed, doing local drop-offs—is a rule about hitchhikers. Maybe the dealership never thought we'd require it or that it would apply. Like I said, the golden age of hitching a ride is long gone, after all.

My boss is an okay guy, but he has that habit of treating you like you're dumb most of the time and then getting angry once in a while when you didn't think like a genius. For this job, it was the former. For a couple of days he'd been telling me that he was mapping out my route, figuring out how far I could realistically drive in a day without either speeding or dawdling, and then picking out places I could stay along the way.

If it had just been me, they'd have put me in the cheapest motels he could find. The car, though, was far more important, and needed somewhere safe to sleep to keep the insurers and the customer happy, so that meant hotels with secure parking. I

wouldn't be in the Four Seasons, but I wouldn't be listening to truckers idling or wondering what the stains on the bedspread were, either, and that was fine with me.

"I'm gonna get that navigation all programmed up for you, Jake, and all you'll need to do is grab the wheel and take instructions," my boss told me, clapping me on the shoulder when I turned up at the dealership to grab the keys and get underway. It was six a.m., and the sickly morning sun could barely thaw the streets. I was too tired to tell him again to please call me Jacob.

I sat in the service area, clutching a mug of sour coffee—they had different supplies for staff and potential customers, and while I'd never tasted the good stuff, I hoped that for the sake of business they got better than we did—and waited for him to finish. He was one of the old school, never tired of telling you about the halcyon days of the Midwest and the automotive industry and how he used to shift car after car after car all day long so that the lot was more like a skating rink with buyers sliding out the gate.

It also meant that the newer breed of tech-heavy cars had left him floundering. It took him close to forty-five minutes to punch a list of waypoints into the sat nav and another twenty to talk me through the route that I'd have a digital voice explaining to me anyway. I gritted my teeth and waited it out, wanting to be on the road already.

I had to admit, it was a nice car. I was never all that much of a car person growing up—I had posters of bands on my bedroom walls, not bikini girls sprawled over hoods—but even I could see that this was something special as I surreptitiously glanced around the cabin while he droned on about speed camera warnings. Lots of leather and what looked like real wood and metal—I was pretty adept at telling the difference between that and plastic made to look like it—along with plenty of buttons.

One day, I guess, the cars will drive themselves to their new owners, and if I'm needed at all, it'll only be because the cars can't smile when they hand over their own keys.

Eventually the marathon briefing was over—complete with him scolding me at the end with the observation that if he "helped me" any more, he might as well do the

driving too—and I was nosing the car out into the still-sparse morning traffic. There's always a moment of fear and awe when you first start, that flush of apprehension that you might accidentally total someone else's car before you're even properly off the lot, but you soon learn to just let the borrowed aura of wealth waft around you and create a relatively safe little bubble.

Chapter Two

I was nearly at the freeway when I spotted him. Tall but hunched some against the cold, pulling his jacket around his chest more closely with one arm while the other was raised, trying to catch the attention of someone driving past. We hadn't had snow—a small mercy—but I knew how frigid it was out there without needing to look at the temperature on the dashboard. I wondered whether his teeth were chattering yet, whether his toes had started to go blue.

Like I said, there was nothing in the rules about picking people up. Giving friends or family a ride was a no-no, but that was more about making a quick delivery and then getting back to do it all over again with another car.

I slid to a stop next to him while I was still making up my mind, power window thrumming open smoothly. He leaned down to look inside.

"You need a ride?" I asked, already knowing the answer but not quite sure of the protocol. He nodded, gave me what I guessed was meant to be a smile, but one chilled of most emotion.

"Thanks, man, I really do. Was starting to think nobody would stop. Are you headed west?"

Nice and generic, I thought. "Pretty much all the way."

"Oh, dude, you're a lifesaver."

I thumbed the Lock button, and he pulled open the door, dropping his rucksack at his feet and pulling on his belt. There was a disposable cotton cover on both the front seats, so I wasn't too worried about him getting them dirty, though I did try to cast a discreet eye over his shoes and whether they were sticking to the paper floor mats.

He seemed clean. Didn't smell, which I suddenly realized could've been a problem. Knitted hat pulled down, with just a little dark blond hair escaping in unruly waves from underneath. Skinny black jeans and a battered military-style jacket. No gloves; why would you go outside in Chicago in January not wearing gloves?

I guess as I was trying to casually look him over, he was doing the same to the car. He glanced at me slyly.

"Nice wheels."

I smiled, shrugged. "Thanks."

He grinned. "Looks expensive. You must be loaded."

I chuckled at that and shook my head. "It's not mine. I'm just the delivery guy."

He nodded slowly; I could sense him looking at me.

"I thought you were a bit young for something like this, but man, who knows these days, right? Plus the seat covers were a bit weird."

"Oh" —I glanced over with a serious look on my face — "that's to stop the blood from getting on the leather."

He stared at me, eyes wide as he tried to figure out whether I was joking or not. I gave it away with a grin.

"Jeez, man, you had me wondering there!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hand across his face. "I thought I was gonna end up in pieces in the trunk."

"Sorry, I'm pretty harmless really. I'm Jacob."

"Cain," he replied, holding out his hand. I reached out awkwardly to shake it. His skin was cold, flesh tight from the brutal weather. I turned up the heat on his side of the cabin.

"How long were you waiting out there?"

"Dude, it felt like hours," Cain replied, wriggling his fingers in the warm air rushing from the vents. I flicked on the heated seat to maximum, mentally picturing the

cold that had seeped down to his bones being driven out like a retreating tide. "I guess it was only an hour really, though."

"An hour's long enough in this weather," I pointed out, and he nodded, still watching as his fingers flexed in the hot air. He had long, slender hands, wrists pulled free of his sleeves as he leaned forward in his chair.

"Either this seat is getting hotter, or I think I wet myself in your car, dude," Cain said suddenly.

I made a show of tightening my hands on the wheel in horror. "Nah, that's the seat, I hope."

He wiped his forehead dramatically. "Excellent, I live to piss myself another day." I laughed at that, and after a beat he did too, voice somehow both youthful and rich, unguarded.

"So what takes you west?" I asked, conscious that he might not be much in the mood to talk about his background.

Cain shrugged. "The usual shit. Nothing happening here; no prospect of that changing anytime soon. I've got some old friends living out there, and they said things are better, or at least you don't freeze your balls off while life is passing by. Seemed like a pretty good plan to me."

I frowned. "And you decided to hitch a ride to get there? Sounds a bit risky."

He closed his eyes, leaned back in the seat. "Nah, it's all good. I mean look, I already got picked up by my new chauffeur."

"Asshole," I told him, but we laughed too, harder still when he started waving to cars in the next lane over like he was royalty or something.

With his eyes closed, I took the chance to examine Cain more closely. He looked fairly young, possibly still in his late teens though maybe twenty was a better guess. Not so pale as some you see in sunless Chicago, but certainly enough to make him stand out from what I imagined was the tanned rank and file of the West Coast.

He was handsome too—full lips, a pert little nose, skin that looked pretty much blemish-free apart from a spray of freckles across his bridge. I could picture him on the side of an Abercrombie bag, maybe, though he might be a little too pretty boy for their tastes.

“So how old are you, Jacob?” he asked me, eyes still shut. I focused on the road again, risking slight glances out of the corner of my eye.

“Twenty-five. You?”

He grinned, all white teeth. “Twenty and aimless.” He opened one eye, half turned to look at me. “Don’t tell my folks, but I’m starting to think I’m never gonna finish college.”

I mimed zipping up my lips. “Secret’s safe with me.”

He dipped his head in mock gratitude. I wondered whether his parents even knew he’d left town.

“Where we headed?” Cain asked, pushing at the touch screen and scrolling through the instructions. “Man, somebody is a bit obsessive with their planning.”

“Blame my boss; he seems to think I’ll go hunting for the biggest ball of twine or the largest peanut in the state if he doesn’t map it all out for me.”

“Damn, I’d like to see that nut,” Cain replied, voice wistful, then chuckled.

I rolled my eyes. “Some other time, maybe.”

The next few miles passed in unremarkable silence. Cain finished with his perusal of the map and tried to find a radio station he could stomach for anything longer than a few bars. I concentrated on navigating through the growing morning traffic as the rush-hour crowds started to filter onto the highway.

“So, you got a girl back in Chicago?” Cain asked eventually, reaching for the seat controls and tilting his chair back a little more. I flicked my gaze across again; he’d unbuttoned his coat, revealing a slim-fitting white T-shirt underneath that hung across a narrow stomach. Jeans low on his waist.

I shook my head. "Nope."

"Sensible man," he replied. "Nothing like a girl to confuse things, right?"

I shrugged.

"Me, I was a late starter. Didn't even get my first kiss until I was eighteen."

If he noticed I was uncomfortable, he hid it well. It wasn't that I wasn't out; I just wasn't instantly out. Something about working with cars and being relatively gesture ambiguous—nothing too macho, nothing too feminine—meant that people just assumed you were straight, particularly in the Midwest.

"I'm sure you, um, made up for it since," I said, nearly lost for words.

Cain looked across at me. "Calling me a slut, Jake?"

I knew he was kidding around, but I shook my head anyway. "Wouldn't dare," I told him, voice somber. "And please, it's Jacob. I really don't like Jake."

"Sorry, dude, my bad. What's the story, shitty ex named Jake?"

I stared at him, face rigid, until I had to look back at the road or drift out of the lane. What kind of signal had he gotten from me?

"I don't know why you'd say that," I said eventually, tone measured.

Cain held up his hands, shook his head as if to pacify me. "Hey, pay no attention to me. I'm just bullshitting around. Didn't mean to offend you, dude."

Suddenly it felt like I was going too far in the other direction. Like I was making myself look homophobic, almost, or just protesting too much. I gave myself a mental kick.

The silence was a little tenser for the next couple of miles, and I was beginning to regret picking him up. We'd not talked about it, but I wasn't sure how much of the journey he was thinking we'd be making together. Did he think I was going to drive him all the way to wherever it was on the West Coast he was headed?

For that matter, had I thought I would?

There was a reason I tried to avoid being spontaneous, and this was it. I ended up with my brain gnawing at itself, too cautious and polite to ask outright but too indignant to just go with the flow.

It was Cain who spoke first. Quiet, not making eye contact as he spoke.

"Look, Jacob, I was just messing around. I didn't...I mean, I wasn't trying to say...to say that you..."

I shook my head, stopping him. "Don't worry about it. I was being an asshole. I wasn't offended, just...I guess surprised, maybe."

A beat.

"But no, he wasn't called Jake."

Cain wasn't saying anything, and in the end I looked awkwardly across to see what was happening. He was looking over at me with a big, shit-eating grin on his face.

"I knew it, totally got you pegged." He laughed.

I rolled my eyes again. "Fuck off, idiot."

He wasn't going to shut up. "So do you make a habit of picking up teenage hitchhikers, eh?"

"You're not a teenager. You're twenty," I pointed out.

"Hey, only just," Cain protested.

I sighed. "No, I don't make a habit of picking people up. And I'm starting to regret changing that today."

He feigned being wounded; I scowled at him.

"Oh come on, I make awesome company!" he exclaimed.

I chuckled at that. "Yeah, sure. I'll let you know when I start having fun."

Cain crossed his arms, pouted a little. "Man, everyone's a critic these days."

We covered the next few junctions in silence again, but it was more comfortable than before, even with Cain pretending to be insulted. I was beginning to see why this particular car might be in such demand too: the way it surged from lane to lane, engine

suddenly growling as it leaped forward with even the smallest pressure of my right foot.

In the end the rush-hour traffic cleared out, and I clicked on the cruise control, trying to ease my disappointment at not playing with all that power with the knowledge that at least I should cross the country with my license intact.

“So what happened?” Cain asked eventually. I glanced across at him, but he was looking pointedly forward. “He turn out to be a bad guy?”

“A great guy. And difficult.” Thinking back, I could easily see how both of those were true. Toby had been in many ways the perfect partner: enthusiastic where I was reserved; open when I struggled sometimes to express myself; willing to take risks, whereas I would usually play things safe.

Of course, there was a flip side to all that. Mood swings and a severe lack of patience, and a tendency to get bored and want to “spice things up” even when I thought they were spicy enough as they were.

I’d gone along with his idea to bring a colleague of his into our bed, even enjoyed it some, though I never quite got over my reticence and self-consciousness. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised when I found them staging a repeat of it, only with me absent. Toby certainly seemed surprised when I told him I considered that grounds enough for us breaking up, refusing to believe I could be so “small-minded” as to end things simply because he’d played without me.

In the end, I told him I was okay with him not understanding it as long as he accepted it, and that apparently did the trick. Suddenly I had a lot more closet space and a lot more free time on my hands.

“You must think I’m pretty straitlaced,” I concluded after filling Cain in on the bare essentials. He sat thinking for a moment.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he said finally. “I mean, it’s not like you refused the threesomes or got all morally outraged, right?” I shook my head. “So what pissed you

off was him cheating on you, not him getting freaky with you. That doesn't make you straitlaced; it makes you normal."

"Great, now I'm normal."

Cain jabbed me in the arm. "You know what I mean. It's a normal reaction to get angry at something like that. You thought you had one thing with him, and then he changed the rules on you, and then he broke them altogether."

For all that I'd started to discount Cain as an enthusiastic but pretty two-dimensional kid, what he'd just said made a lot of sense.

"But man, if you got me in bed with two girls...fuck, yeah!"

I laughed along with him, shaking my head. "Did I mention yet that you're an idiot?"

He shrugged, a big grin plastered across his face. "Sure, I'm an idiot, but I don't mind if I'm an idiot with two girls to play with!"

"Please, like you'd even know what to do."

There was that sly look again. "Oh, don't worry, I could teach you a thing or two..."

I decided not to follow up on that. Not so much because I didn't want to hear Cain talk about sex—like I said, he was a good-looking guy and all—but because I knew nothing good could really come of it.

The last thing I needed was to be crushing on a straight guy on a cross-country trip, stuck in a car with him and no polite, reasonable way to tell him to find another ride because he was giving me blue balls. I'd had my share of crushes on straight dudes in school, and I had no desire to make myself as whiny and desperate as I—perhaps a little harshly—remembered of myself from those uncomfortable days.

"So Jacob, you got laid since things with that Toby guy went bad?"

Jeez, the kid was perpetually thinking about sex. I felt my lips tighten. "You literally just met me, and you're asking me about my sex life?"

Cain laughed. "I guess that means no, then!"

I glanced at him, indignant.

"Come on, if you had, you'd admit it. I'm telling you, dude, all you need to do is go cruising through Boystown in this slick ride, and you'll be beating them off." He snickered. "Or maybe they'll be beating you off, whichever you prefer."

He leaned back in his seat and mimed lazily driving a lowrider, one arm outstretched while the other gripped his crotch. I had to chuckle at that some.

"And what would you know about Boystown, eh?"

Cain glanced at me like I was old or foreign or both. "Man, are you twenty-five or sixty-five? Even if I'm not necessarily ordering from the set menu, doesn't mean I can't go down to the restaurant."

Now that was some metaphor, I had to admit.

"Yeah, my boss isn't too keen on me messing up the backseat. We're supposed to leave christening that to the new owners."

Cain flashed a knowing look at me. "Oh please, like the old dudes who can afford a car like this can even get it up anymore. They should be thankful someone is getting any action in it period."

He looked over his shoulder at the backseat.

"Hey, don't go getting any ideas," I told him.

He shot me a particularly sleazy look. "You wish."

It seemed like a good idea not to respond to that one.

"Man, there is seriously no good music out there," Cain said, exasperated, as he thumbed through the radio.

I wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for, but I had a suspicion that if I asked, he would only use it as another excuse to call me old and out of touch. Even though I knew he was joking around, there was enough of a kernel of truth there—or, perhaps, enough of what I could so clearly remember Toby accusing me of—for it to sting.

“Can I at least play something from my phone?” He was digging through the menus now, looking for the wireless options. I knew the car supported it—I’d set up my own phone before I’d left—and it was only a matter of time until he found it. “Shit.”

I glanced at the screen, where a big warning message said, *Not available when car is in motion*. With great power comes nannying responsibility, I guess.

He shot me puppy-dog eyes, but I shook my head. “I’m not pulling over just so you can mess around with the Bluetooth. Anyway, my boss might call, and I need to be able to answer it with the hands-free.”

Cain sighed. “So can I play something on your phone, then? Or would that upset the schedule so terribly, O dedicated leader?”

I ignored the sarcasm, nodded to where my phone was lodged in one of the illuminated cup holders. “Be my guest, O whiniest of the little whiny bitches.”

He laughed at that, and I guessed I’d scored points somehow. After a moment he was scrolling through my phone, where I had a couple of different streaming music apps he could choose from.

“I’m not even going to bother looking through your music,” Cain told me. “I don’t think I could bear the disappointment.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry. I don’t have any of that Justin Bieber or Miley Cyrus that you kids like,” I fired back.

We probably could’ve gone on sparring that way for a while, except all of a sudden the car started shaking as the powerful audio system kicked in. I didn’t recognize the band or the track, but I certainly wasn’t going to confess to that and ask Cain who they were.

I tapped down the volume using the steering-wheel controls, as surreptitiously as I could, but he still spotted it and gave me a withering look.

Soon I was wishing there was a volume button on Cain himself as he began singing—or maybe more accurately half screaming—along with the music. His

enthusiasm was catching, though, and while I didn't know the words, I found myself at least nodding along with the rhythm.

"Whoa, dude, I take it back. You're not sixty-five at all," he said suddenly. I looked across to see him staring intently at my phone, smiling again in a way I was quickly coming to associate with my getting teased. "You should really have a lock on your phone if you're gonna go around saving photos like these on it."

I realized with a lurch what he was looking at and flung out my arm to grab the phone, but Cain held it away from me, out of reach as he continued scrolling through.

"I mean, seriously, that guy Toby was a dumbass for letting all this slip away," he carried on, whistling appreciatively.

"Give me the phone, Cain!" I said, not sure if I was feeling angry or embarrassed or some mixture of the two. Most likely the latter. "I'm not joking!"

Fending me off with one arm, he showed no signs of stopping. Meanwhile I was trying to simultaneously keep the car in the right lane, stretch across him to grab the phone, and rack my memory over just exactly which pictures he might be seeing.

I mean, I can't have been the only one to have taken some sexy photos with my phone. I wasn't in the habit of sharing them—not like some guys I knew—but there were times when maybe I thought I looked particularly good at the gym, or in a changing room in a store, or even just lying in bed among the sheets first thing in the morning.

What I wasn't expecting was to have a perfect stranger flick through them. And I couldn't remember quite how risqué I'd allowed myself to get.

"Don't make me pull the car over, Cain!" I shouted.

He laughed. "Oh, so you won't pull over to let me pair my phone up, but as soon as I'm looking at your dick, you're willing to ignore the schedule. Now I see what's really important to you!"

I scowled. "I know for a fact there are no pictures of my dick on there," I told him.

“Oh really? Then maybe you should be asking who has been sneaking up on you and taking photos of you naked, dude.”

He held up the phone to show me, but what with all the shaking as we jostled between the seats, I could only see a vague flesh-colored blur. Had I left any full nudes on there? I didn’t think I’d be so dumb to, but it wasn’t impossible.

Eventually, I gripped the wheel with both hands and tried not to squeeze to the point where my knuckles went white.

“Cain, please. Can I have my phone back?”

He made an elaborate show of taking a few final swipes through and then clicking the Lock key. The phone dropped with a clunk into the cup holder.

“All you needed to do was ask,” Cain replied, smiling.

“I did!”

He shook his head, still grinning. “I guess I didn’t hear you properly, being so shocked by what my eyes were seeing.”

Now it was my turn to laugh, though I did feel like I ought to stay angry for a while. It was an intrusion of privacy after all, right?

“I’m sure you’ve seen worse.”

Cain nudged me in the ribs, winked. “Oh, plenty worse, but not many better. You must work out.”

I could feel the blush rising in my cheeks. It wasn’t that I was self-conscious, as such. I had no problems getting changed in a locker room or lying in my swimsuit at the beach or the pool. Yet it was somehow different being partially dressed in public like that versus having someone looking at photos of you.

“So are they the pictures you use on hookup sites?” Cain asked.

I glanced over at him. “I don’t go on hookup sites; that’s not my scene.”

He grimaced. "I've always thought that the best thing about being gay would be not having to deal with the usual bullshit about hooking up with someone. Girls get so damn messy about that shit."

It wasn't the first time that I'd heard something along those lines. Straight guys seemed to be convinced that gay men were always just moments away from screwing; it was an obsession almost as strong as their intrigue—and mortification—in what two guys could actually get up to together.

Most of the time I didn't have the heart to explain to them that, for me at least, it was more about the person I was with at the time than it was finding somewhere hot and anonymous to jab my dick into.

"So it looked pretty fucking big, dude. What the fuck was Toby's problem?"

My jaw tightened instinctively. There were plenty of ways in which Toby had fallen short, but a greater-than-average interest in what guys had going on between their legs had never been one of them. In fact, if anything it would probably have been better for our relationship if he'd been a little less curious.

Cain wasn't giving up. "Did he not want to take you? Refused to bottom?"

I stared at him for a moment. "I'm not talking to you about my sex life. Anyway, where did you learn about bottoming?"

He sniggered, gave me another sly look. "Oh come on, I know how it works. I'm not stupid, Jacob."

"Would I dare say you were?" I feigned innocence.

Cain thumped me in the arm. "So can you suck it yourself? I bet you fucking can."

"Jeez, dude, stop!" There was no question that I was blushing now. Cain wasn't being put off, though; if anything, my obvious embarrassment was only encouraging him.

"You totally can, can't you? How much can you get in your mouth, dude? Fuck, if I could do that, I wouldn't leave the fucking house."

I laughed despite myself, then tried not to imagine Cain naked. I mean, I hadn't picked him up thinking of him in that sense, but how he was talking...well, was it really a surprise my mind ran away with itself?

Glancing over, I realized exactly where his attention was fixed.

"Stop staring at my crotch!"

He shrugged, but I knew he hadn't looked away. "Can't help it, dude. Sometimes a guy's questions just need to get answered."

Sighing, I rubbed my eyes in despair. "And then you'll stop being a little freak?"

He held up his hand, fingers contorted into what was perhaps meant to be the Boy Scout salute. "Scout's honor," he said, tone dripping with faux earnestness.

"You're so weird." I focused on the road ahead, swallowed. "Well...I guess I can sorta do that, yes."

Cain looked at me. "Sorta?"

I scowled. "Oh for... Yes, Cain, I can suck my own dick. Happy now?"

He hooted with laughter. "Man, not as happy as you must be! Dude, you're so fucking lucky. Can you, like, get just the end of it in there, or can you get partway down too?"

"I'm not answering that, Cain."

"Oh come on! When a guy's lucky enough to be able to do that shit, he should be telling the whole damn world about it. Hey, have you ever, y'know, blown in your own mouth?"

I think my jaw probably dropped a little. "Jeez, Cain, enough! I thought answering your question was meant to stop you, not make you more intrusive!"

He crossed his arms, grinning. Clearly he thought he knew the answer without my actually giving it first.

We drove in silence for a while, only once punctuated by Cain making clearly sexual slurping noises and my subsequent threatening to dump him at the side of the road and hardly bother slowing down before I did it.

It wasn't that I'm a prude; don't get me wrong. I mean, when I was in my teens, I did pretty much all the fucked-up stuff a boy's meant to try out with his body—jerked off in ill-advised places, played with my ass, tasted my own cum.

I just wasn't really the kind of guy who kissed and told, even if it was the head of my own cock I'd been kissing.

We made good time, the roads staying relatively clear with only a little traffic at rush hour. Around midafternoon, I realized Cain had fallen asleep, his head slumped to the side, his breathing slow and even.

I took the opportunity to look at him properly. At some point he'd ditched his coat—flung back onto the rear seat—and his hat, revealing a mop of somewhat unruly blond hair and neatly muscled arms. The white T-shirt was slim-fitting and cut fairly low at the neck, though I couldn't see any evidence of chest hair. Maybe he was too blond for it to show.

Cain's legs—narrow and long in his skinny jeans—were sprawled out in front of him, one turned slightly as his ankle caught under the other knee. I was trying not to stare, still sticking to my ambition of not having some ridiculous fleeting crush on a straight guy, but the healthy bulge in his jeans was visible, even with one of his hands resting partway across his crotch.

I made myself look back at the road.

Chapter Three

It was the sat nav that woke him, suddenly giving instructions as to how to get off the freeway and find the hotel that the dealership had picked out for me. Cain rubbed his face as I swung the car around the off-ramp and caught the lights just as they were turning from green.

"How long was I asleep?" Cain asked, peering out of the windows at the gathering dusk. We were still in the months of short days and protracted nights.

I shrugged, glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "Couple of hours, I guess."

He groaned. "Man, you should've woken me up."

"Why, so you could ask me dirty questions again?"

Cain smirked at me. "You wish."

I decided it was wiser to change the subject. "So, you must've been tired. When did you last sleep properly?"

Cain passed his hands across his face again, then pushed his fingers through his hair.

"Guess it's been a while. Crashing on friends' couches, that sort of thing. You appreciate them letting you, but it's hardly the recipe for a good night's rest."

I was curious to see if he'd open up some more, maybe fill in some of the gaps on what I assumed must be a pretty complicated backstory given he was effectively abandoning his home and moving to the other side of the country. It seemed like that was all I was going to get, though.

"I'm starving," I told him, changing the subject once more. Cain nodded. "You want to try whatever's at the hotel, or see if there's something else nearby?"

He seemed unusually quiet all of a sudden, reticent almost. Not like the boisterous guy I'd been sharing the car with for the past however many hours.

"Cain...?" I started, not sure what had changed.

He stared out of the passenger window, and his reply was little more than a mutter. "Look, I don't really have much...well, y'know. Cash. Not for the moment, anyway, at least until I can find a job over there."

It didn't really come as too great of a surprise, but I wasn't going to press the issue.

"Okay, I get a budget from work for meals each day. They don't care how I spend it, as long as I don't go over that amount. I'm pretty sure we can make it work for both of us."

Cain glanced at me quickly, then looked away again.

"I can't let you do that."

I thought about explaining to him that it was no problem, or saying that I wasn't actually as hungry as I'd just said I was, or trying to find the right words to justify that I wanted to help and had been glad of the company all day.

"Don't be a fucking moron." I settled on in the end, believing that the blunt approach would probably be more effective anyway. "Stop complaining and just accept it, okay?"

No reply, and he kept staring out of the window, but I was pretty sure I saw the crease of a smile on his face.

"Right, so that's settled," I said, leaving no room for argument. "Let's see what there is."

We weren't exactly going to be spoiled for choice, but there was a fast-food place on the corner, and Cain gave a somewhat embarrassed shrug when I asked him if he thought that was okay. I tried and failed to keep a running total in my head as we

ordered, but it turned out to be fine; I even remembered to ask for the receipt, which I tucked into my wallet since I knew my boss would expect it.

When we pulled into the parking lot of the hotel, Cain pointed to a couple of picnic tables just outside and slightly around the corner from the entrance.

“Let’s sit there,” he suggested.

The yellow concrete of the hotel and the tungsten floodlights of the lot weren’t exactly atmospheric, but it was mercifully free of snow and – with a jacket – not too cold to sit outside and shovel fries into your mouth. I could see he was trying not to conspicuously inhale his food, but even with what restraint he could manage, I could tell Cain had been hungry.

Eventually he sat back and swung his feet onto the bench as I picked through the remainder of my burger.

“Thanks,” he told me, spoiling the moment of sincerity slightly with the subsequent belch.

I bowed my head graciously. “Yeah, I made it all myself.”

He grinned at that, nodding slowly as if in admiration of my culinary skills. I pushed the last of my fries across the table, and after a raised eyebrow, which I answered with a shrug, Cain finished them off.

“Hey, it’s just nice to find someone who appreciates my hard work in the kitchen,” I joked.

“Toby not a fan of home-cooked meals?”

I frowned. “Do we have to talk about him? I mean, he’s really just part of my past now, y’know?”

“Sorry, dude,” Cain said, rubbing his hands on his jeans. I slipped the stack of napkins toward him, and he grabbed a couple, scrunching them between his fingers. “I won’t mention him again.”

It was not like I missed being with Toby. He was arrogant and self-centered and somehow at the same time neurotic and needy, and it had proved to be just as exhausting trying to pull him out of his bouts of moodiness as it had been dealing with his infidelity.

Yet at the same time it had been another person in my life. Someone warm and, at least at times, reassuring to come home to, rather than an empty apartment.

No, I didn't miss him, but thinking about him made me then go on to consider the fact that, since he'd left, there hadn't been anybody to take his place.

"So...can I sleep in the car, dude?" Cain glanced across at me nervously.

I frowned. "What?"

He gave me a look as if to say *please don't make me spell it out to you*. It took a moment to figure out that, if he didn't have cash for a meal, he probably wasn't going to have the money for a room.

"Oh..." I dropped my eyes, suddenly self-conscious. "I mean, I can probably get them to give me a twin. If you, y'know...don't mind sharing a room, that is."

I probably should've given it a little extra thought. We were, after all, strangers, but I knew I couldn't let him sleep in the car—someone else's car, the businesslike part of my brain reminded me—and I certainly couldn't let him sleep outside, given how cold it would get overnight. That only left one answer, really.

"You don't have to—" Cain started.

"Stop. This is going to be so much easier if we just skip the whole awkward acceptance part and go straight to the point where we're both content with how things have been settled. Okay?"

He stared at me for a moment. "Okay."

The woman at the reception desk didn't even look up when I asked for two beds, not the double that had been booked, only made uninterested eye contact when she told me to "enjoy my stay," trotted out with all the authenticity of corporate rote.

I started to feel the nerves as we went up in the elevator. Cain had his bag slung over his shoulder; mine was between my feet as I flexed the plastic key card between my fingers.

It turned out to be the perfect example of a cookie-cutter, generic hotel bedroom, down to the inoffensive abstract watercolor above the beds and the overpatterned, stain-disguising carpet. He hung back long enough for me to pick which bed I wanted. I dumped my bag on the one closest to the bathroom while he took the other, by the window.

I stretched, feeling the bones in my spine click and jolt their way into place after a full day at the wheel. Those seats were comfortable, but nothing could quite mask the toll of a road trip, not really. Suddenly, the thought of a hot shower was very appealing.

"Do you mind if I...?" I asked Cain, nodding at the bathroom.

He shook his head, then leaned back on the bed with his hands behind his head. "*Mi casa, su casa,*" he joked.

The bathroom was probably even more generic than the rest. Did they have some production line somewhere, popping out these premade little pods for bathing that would then be slotted into the waiting holes in the room?

I held my breath as I turned the shower on, hoping for a strong torrent and fearing a weak trickle. The resulting stream was somewhere in between but looked good enough. Glancing in the mirror that was quickly beginning to fog, I ran my hand through my short dark hair, pinched the bridge of my nose. Leaning in, I could see faint red lines in the whites around my eyes.

All this after just one day. How was I going to look by the time I made it to San Francisco?

Questions so unpalatable could wait until the end of the week, I decided, shucking my shirt before dropping my jeans. As I slipped off my boxer briefs, I gave a sudden passing thought to whether Cain was out there going through my phone again, trying to do another mental audit as to what else he could find on there if he went looking.

Still, that assumed some degree not only of teasing—like today had been, however uncomfortable at the time—but of maliciousness, and that didn't seem in his nature. Or, however much of his nature I felt like I knew from the hours we'd had in each other's company.

Was I being naive, or even stupid, allowing him to stay with me? If I'd had an overprotective mother, she'd probably have said yes. Toby would've said I was inviting the comfort of a stray and likely to get just the poor results that inevitably led to.

And yet—I stepped under the water and felt its insistent needles pound my scalp and shoulders, felt the uncontrollable sigh of impending relaxation hiss from my lungs—even if he got attached, even if I myself got attached, there was no question that we'd be going our separate ways, was there? His destination was his somewhat nebulous “West Coast” goal; mine was back in Chicago.

Were we even to decide to hang out, for one reason or another, over the weekend I had earmarked for some R&R in the sunshine, eventually I'd have to go back home to work and my apartment and my life there. Leaving Cain to figure out his own future, thousands of miles away.

I shook my head, both to clear my eyes of water and my brain of the circuitous thoughts. It was a nonissue, the sort of thing that only a person prone to the occasional obsessive thinking would mull over and over. I refused to let myself get into that habit again.

Instead I busied myself with a fistful of shower gel, scrubbed at my chest and under my arms, then worked down across the expanse of my stomach and around to my ass. The muscles in my legs were cramping, and I let my shoulders rest against the cool tiles as I breathed in the steam.

If I'd ended my relationship with Toby with anything worthwhile, it was probably my appreciation of showers. Until I'd met him, I'd been more of a bath person, treating showers like an occasional punctuation of the day rather than something worth lingering in.

Toby, though, had been dismissive of baths—*“swimming there in your own dirt”* he’d described it to me, on more than one occasion—and while I was never entirely convinced by his argument, the fact that he particularly enjoyed shower sex at least opened my eyes to the potential for heightening sensations that falling water offered.

One of his favorites had been slipping into the cubicle while I was still washing my hair, taking advantage of the fact that I couldn’t see anything through the suds sliding down my face. Only able to respond by instinct when I felt his hands trail down the sides of my chest. Fingers easing between my cheeks. Fingertips grazing my hole and starting the slow, insistent circling that I knew would end with me impaled on him; arching myself around to bring our mouths together as he pushed up into me with long, wet strokes.

Just thinking about it was enough to cause me to perk up some, my cock filling out and starting to pull away from my groin.

Cain’s curiosity wasn’t the first time my crotch had inadvertently been the center of attention, of course. I’d been noticeably bigger than other guys in high school too, with the ensuing comparisons fueled by adolescent hormones as much as jealousy.

It took a while to figure out that the best way to deal with the embarrassment I felt was to embrace it. To flick my hips from side to side, listen to my classmates’ hooting laughter as my cock slapped wetly against my thighs in the post-gym showers. To accommodate the stares, I’d put my shirt on before my underwear and give them time to get their side-eyed look.

I looked down my body, across the narrow trail of wet fur leading from my navel to my groin, and fought the urge to take myself in hand and jerk off. The knowledge of Cain a few feet away through a thin hotel wall was the only thing stopping me.

I ran my palm down the length of my shaft, held my breath, then turned off the water.

The towel had the roughness of the overwashed, raw against my clean skin. Craning back, I scrubbed it across my shoulders, buffed at my chest until the flesh was

tingling and glowing. Eventually wrapped it around my waist as I reached for the door handle.

Cain was lying on his bed, arms clasped behind his head, eyes closed, shirtless, lean torso tapering down into the waistband of his jeans. Feet bare.

"Shower's not bad," I told him after what felt like an awkward moment of silence. I mentally kicked myself in case he was already sleeping. But he turned his head toward me, only opening his eyes at the last moment.

"Part of me wants to just lie here and sleep, but I bet I stink so bad."

I sniffed, with pantomime vigor. "Yeah, I can smell you from over here."

He grimaced. "I'd say you were an asshole, but you're probably right."

Shrugging, I reached for my phone on the nightstand. I'd fired off a quick message to my boss before showering and sure enough had got a terse *okay* in response to my reassurances that not only had I made it to waypoint one, I'd done so without a scratch or a speeding ticket.

I guess, after the interminable instructions of the morning, I should be happy it was just okay and not a pep talk for day two.

Cain stood, and I couldn't help but glance over when I heard the jangle of his belt buckle. He pushed his jeans down in one fell swoop, stepping out of them, and was left in nothing but boxer briefs. Low cut and short-legged and clinging to his contours.

I tried not to stare, compromised on fleeting stolen glances.

He stretched, then padded past me and into the bathroom. The door was almost closed – and my held breath almost released – when his head popped out again.

"Soap and everything in here, right?" I nodded. "Awesome, dude. And thanks again, I really mean it."

The door clicked shut, and I waited for the snick of the latch, but it never came. Guess Cain was trusting; then again, you'd have to be, hitching a ride these days.

Pulling off the towel, I wondered what I would sleep in. Usually the answer would be nothing, but that didn't seem quite appropriate with Cain around. I settled on putting my boxer-briefs back on, figuring I could always slip out of them under the covers if they proved too uncomfortable during the night.

I was flicking through a book on my iPad, lying on the bed, when I heard the shower stop. The door opened in short order. Cain stepped out still literally dripping, a towel snaked around his hips and flailing at his hair with what I realized must be a spare hand towel. He looked over at me, grinned.

"Man, I needed that!" he exclaimed, running the towel across his chest. I forced myself to look intently at my book.

He sat on the edge of my bed, dumped the hand towel on the floor, and reached out to pluck the tablet from my hands.

"What're you reading?" he asked, gaze roaming the screen. "If it's something dirty, I promise I won't tell your mom."

I chuckled. "Don't worry. I won't make a liar out of you. It's just a regular book."

Cain scrolled up a page or two with his thumb. "Hey, regular books can be dirty too, y'know. I wondered if I might come out and catch you jerking off or something."

I blushed a little, thinking back to the indecision I'd felt in the shower just a few minutes before.

"God, you're obsessed with my dick, Cain," I told him, covering embarrassment with a little bravado. "First raiding my phone, then jumping out of the shower in the hope that you'd spot it in action."

He laughed at that, dropped the tablet next to my legs, and looked fixedly at my groin, holding his hands up to his eyes like binoculars.

"Dude, it's like snake charming; it's got me hypnotized," he joked, swaying slowly from side to side as if mesmerized.

"Dumbass. It's not the snake that does the hypnotizing."

Cain shrugged, scratched at his crotch absentmindedly. "I guess you have more experience with snakes than I do."

He stood up, grinned at me. "So, you gonna show me or what?"

I shook my head, disbelieving. "Come on; are we in high school or something?"

The look he gave me in response somehow managed to be both bashful and sly simultaneously.

"Hey, you show me yours; I'll show you mine," he teased, pulling his towel free but holding it in front of himself still. Pushing his hips forward, I could see the vague bulge his junk made through the damp fabric.

"Who says I'm interested in seeing yours?" I scoffed.

He smiled at me, winked. "Oh, I bet you are."

"Just because I'm gay?"

He shook his head, cocked it to one side. "Nah, just because you know it's gonna be as pretty as the rest of me."

I couldn't help the splutter of laughter at that one, then picked up the tablet again.

"Go to bed, Cain," I told him, eyes on the screen. "We've got to get going early tomorrow."

He sighed—more, I think, at the thought of an early start than at not having proved sufficiently persuasive before—and walked around the foot of my bed to his. I could see him in my peripheral vision, just vaguely. Fought the urge to look across as he dumped the towel and stood with his back to me.

Cain plugged in his phone and then stood for a moment thumbing through it. I tried to focus on the book, but my brain kept flitting back to him. One look, it said; one look and you'll be able to focus again.

Gradually, I let my head turn just a few degrees so that he was more than just an uneven blur in the corner of my eye. A few droplets of water glistened across his back; his hair was knotted and unruly. Ass compact and round and strong thighs underneath.

I was about to look away—really, I was—when he turned, his body in profile to me. I could see the jut of his prick, the smooth flat expanse of his belly. When my gaze flicked up to his face, and I saw he was still engrossed with his phone, I thought I'd gotten away with it. Then he glanced across at me, satisfaction in his expression, not surprise.

"Guess you owe me, dude."

I snapped my head forward again, feeling a little mortified at having been caught. Honestly, I didn't want to be one of those predictable gay guys, staring at straight men like they were eye candy. Even if they made themselves pretty available for staring at, like Cain seemed to have no qualms about doing.

Clicking off the light, I rolled under the covers so that I was facing away from him. Already I could feel my boxer-briefs gnarling up around my thighs; I reached down and tried to straighten them surreptitiously, barely succeeded.

I drifted off to sleep with memories of the road and of high school intermingling.

Chapter Four

My alarm was shrill and unmistakable, and surely going off far, far too early. Still half-asleep, I reached out and swiped it into silence, then clawed the phone upright so that I could see the time. Damn.

I lay there for a minute, forcing my eyes to stay open, staring blankly at the still-dark ceiling. Cain made a sleepy, grumbling noise that I assumed was something along the lines of *no, too early* based at least in part on my own reaction.

It took some mental coercion to get myself to stand up, a little more to not succumb to lying straight back down again. I'd slept heavily and still had the grogginess of that clouding my thoughts. Looking across the room, I could make out Cain watching me from behind heavy-lidded eyes.

I snapped on the bathroom light, stood in the doorway. Hooked my thumbs in my boxer-briefs and, trying not to think too hard about anything, pushed them down off my hips, so that they tangled in a soft white heap around my ankles.

Turning slightly, I knew Cain would be able to see me, lit up from the harsh halogens of the bathroom. My cock still had its morning chubbiness, arching out from my groin. Then I stepped in through the door and pushed it closed behind me.

When I emerged again, the final drips of the shower trickling down my spine, I realized we'd evidently stepped into a new realm of openness. Cain sat on the edge of his bed, phone in hands and legs open, his dick clearly exposed between his thighs.

I stared for a second—he had a handsome cock, if there was such a thing—then looked away. Found myself glancing over again and forced myself to look at my bag instead of Cain's junk.

"Sleep okay?" he called out cheerily. I resisted the urge to look back over my shoulder. "Man, I was out like a light."

"Yeah, me too," I told him. "Guess all that time on the road takes it out of you. Never understood why."

I heard the creak of the bed behind me as Cain stood. Imagined him stretching again.

"Have I got time to shower?" he asked.

"Sure. We just need to be on the way in about thirty."

"Cool." He walked over, standing just to my side. I stifled a smile as he scratched himself. "Well, I won't be that long, but don't leave without me, okay?"

"Ha, of course not," I assured him, pulling out a pair of baby-blue briefs from my bag.

"Dude, you sure you'll fit in them?" Cain asked me, chuckling.

I gave him the finger as he wandered in for his shower. By the time he was done, I was dressed—cutoff jeans and a T-shirt, sunglasses hooked at the neck, just on the off chance we encountered some good weather on the drive—and had my stuff packed. Cain flung his wet towel on the bed and squatted to dig out fresh clothes. I tried to avoid staring at the way his firm cheeks spread as he crouched down, busied myself with my phone instead.

When I looked up again he was buttoning his skinnies, or at least trying to.

"Shit, trying to get into these with wet legs is like trying to squeeze toothpaste back into the tube," he complained.

I chuckled. "You should've dried off properly, then."

Cain scowled at me. "Someone was in a hurry to leave, weren't they?"

I shook my head. I'd told him thirty minutes, and there were still about ten left on the clock. Not that it had been anything more than a vague goal rather than a fixed schedule, and I said as much.

"Well, I didn't want to get the blame if we ended up late," he explained.

"So now I get to hear you complain all morning about how uncomfortable your legs are, right?"

Shrugging, Cain jammed his old clothes into his rucksack and slung it over his shoulder. Last touch was the hat, pulled down low over damp hair. He grinned at me.

"Drive on, chauffeur!"

"Watch it, else you're riding in the trunk."

I dumped the key cards at the front desk, and we retrieved the car from the parking lot. Happily no perils had befallen it overnight.

The navigation woman was as perky as before—I found myself wondering if there'd be a market for more realistic voices that grew increasingly terse if you didn't stop to let them have virtual restroom breaks periodically—and soon had us back on the highway. My boss had been pretty clear about not stretching the car's legs unduly, but I still got a mild shiver of a thrill from planting my right foot briefly and feeling the engine press us back in our seats.

"I didn't have you down as a boy racer," Cain observed.

I glanced across at him, splayed comfortably in the passenger seat. "What do you mean?"

He scratched his nose. "Well, you kinda seem...a bit uptight, maybe. Controlled. I thought you'd be more of a cruise-control kinda guy, y'know?"

I wasn't sure how to take that. Was he calling me safe or—worse—dull somehow?

Perhaps Cain read my mind, or my expression gave it away. "Look, I'm not saying you're boring."

"No, just uptight," I prompted.

A shake of the head to that. "Stop assuming I'm criticizing you. I just meant that you seem like you have a lot of self-control, and I didn't think you'd be one for gunning

the engine, okay?" He used both hands to adjust how his hat sat on his head. "It's not a big deal."

Still, his comment rankled, and I found myself wondering why that was. We were in a completely artificial situation, after all—someone else's car for a start—and so Cain had hardly seen me acting naturally. He couldn't really be expected to have a clue about what my normal driving style was, never mind how I interacted with people generally.

Some of it was, perhaps, because it rang true. At least, I'd heard similar comments before. I couldn't lay the blame entirely at Toby's feet this time around; he'd been the most recent boyfriend to accuse me of being uptight, sure, but certainly not the first.

It wasn't like I tried to be withdrawn or cautious. I didn't make it my goal to be reserved or see it as some important thing that I keep people at a safe arm's distance. No, it was more like my general reticence was stoked by being in a relationship and—more importantly—being expected to open up and make myself vulnerable.

Let's face it; that's scary stuff. I'd gone into things with Toby saying all the usual platitudes, citing all the obvious warnings and self-promises. That I'd not let myself get more caught up in things than he seemed to be. That I'd walk away if it seemed like it was getting toxic.

And walk away I had, though by that point it was far too late to try to claim I'd been sticking entirely to my initial principles. No, I'd broken things off, but that was after letting him stomp all over me for a long time.

"I guess I just don't like the feeling of losing control," I said eventually to Cain.

He nodded. "Yeah, maybe that's what I was trying to say. I love that feeling of when you're diving in headfirst, and you can't really guess what's happening next."

"Gimme an example," I asked.

Cain nodded slowly, deep in thought for a moment. "Okay, so this old girlfriend of mine, she turned out to be pretty kinky."

I rolled my eyes. "Are all your stories about sex, or just the ones that filter to the top of your dirty mind?"

Cain smiled broadly and shrugged a little. "Hey, they're the most entertaining ones is all."

I waved my hand, as if to say *go on, then*.

"So, this girl, she was kinda freaky. Liked having sex outside, talked about wanting to get caught doing it. Wanted to tie me up while we fucked, or maybe get tied up. Like I said, kinky stuff.

"Well, this one day, we're at her parents' place, in their pool. And she's got on this tiny little bikini, and I'm trying to swim laps because I can't really just sit there in front of her mom and dad watching their daughter get a deeper tan with my tongue hanging out."

I smiled. "Don't tell me; you screwed the parents too."

Cain scowled. "Eww, no. Nothing like that. Kinky, remember, not perverted."

I gestured for him to go on with his version of the story.

"So anyway, her parents go in, and it's just me and her at the pool now. I'm done with laps, and she's sitting on the edge with her feet dangling in the water. And she tells me to come over, so I swim to where she's perched, and she sorta wraps her legs around me and pulls me in close.

"I think about dragging her in with me, but before I can do it, she tells me to get out of the water. I push myself out and see that she's taking off the bikini top. No sign of tan lines anywhere. She puts her arms out, and I take the hint and do the same, and she wraps the fabric around my wrists to tie them together."

I grin inwardly. If Cain thought this sort of stuff was kinky, I should take him to some of the clubs my friends had spared no details in telling me about. That would probably prove to be an eye-opener.

“Let me guess, next thing you knew she’s on top of you, and your face is pressed between her tits, right?”

He laughed. “Something like that, yeah. I’ll spare you the details since...well, y’know.”

“Since I’m one of those gays who clearly wouldn’t want to hear about nasty old straight sex?”

Cain shrugged; I saw him adjust himself out of the corner of my eye, wondered just how worked up at the memory of it all he was getting.

“Nah, you’re the uptight one, remember? Wouldn’t want to get you all hot and bothered. You might freak out on me and drive us off the road.”

I let the car wobble a little in the lane, and Cain mimed gripping onto the dashboard in panic.

“Anyway, she blew me, and while she was doing it, she stuck her finger up my ass,” he said, tone matter-of-fact. “Jeez, I thought my balls were gonna fly up my dick.”

There was that hand of his again, squeezing at his crotch. He shifted on the seat, leather squeaking from underneath the cotton cover. He spread his legs a little farther apart and half turned to me.

“Regretting the hipster jeans?” I teased.

Cain rolled his eyes. “Oh please, hipster? This is just fashionable now. I’m sure you remember fashion—y’know, from the olden days, when you were still young and all?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I admitted. “Old before my years. This really is my car after all, and I’m actually eighty.”

He snorted. “Well, thanks for the ride, Granddad. Just try not to have a heart attack, okay?”

“I’ll do my best, kid.”

Reaching for the audio controls, he sighed. "I forgot to pair my phone up again. Does that mean I'm stuck with your 'golden oldies' presets?"

"Fuck off," I told him good-naturedly.

"What do I have to say to borrow your phone again?"

I fixed him with a stare, before looking back at the road ahead. "Considering the last time you got your hands on it? You'd probably have to agree to blinding yourself."

Cain pulled off his hat, ran his hand through his hair, and then tugged it back on again. "Come on. I already apologized for all that, didn't I? Anyway, I've seen the good stuff for real now, why would I be interested in the photos?"

I winked at him, conspiratorial. "Who said that was all the good stuff?"

He sighed, exasperated. "Okay, fine, whatever. You can do magic tricks with your magical gay dick. I promise to stay out of your photos, dude, just please don't leave me with this bullshit radio."

I squeezed my fingers into my pocket, lifted my hips some so that I could pull out my phone. Cain reached out to take it, but I kept my grip at the last minute.

"Just remember, don't make me use my magic dick for bad voodoo, okay?"

He pantomimed horror. "Anything you say, Merlin. The wand is off-limits."

Before long, a band I didn't recognize was testing quite how loud the speakers could go—or, to be more accurate, how much I could put up with, given I'd seen exactly how much had been spent on audio upgrades and was pretty sure my ears would give out before the car ran out of decibels—and Cain was effectively dancing in his seat.

"This is my favorite track, so don't even think about turning it down," he warned me, when I winced at a particularly piercing chorus. After a moment I had it in surround sound, as Cain started singing along. What he lacked in talent he more than compensated for with enthusiasm.

At the end of the song, though, he swiped the screen to lower the volume some. I nodded my silent thanks, then eyed him cautiously as his fingers lingered on the phone's touch screen.

"You'd better not..." I started, but he elbowed me in the ribs to shut me up.

"Dude, seriously, chill out. Not everything is about your fucking dick, okay?" He turned the phone so I could see a track list. "Why are you so damn crazy about everything?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I guess I just don't like people laughing at me. Is that so strange?"

Cain grunted in frustration. "Who's laughing? Why do you have to assume everyone's gonna be an asshole to you? I don't think I've said anything aside from that I wish I had what you've got hanging between my legs, and if you can't take a compliment, then you have some serious trust issues you should, I dunno, go get therapy for or something."

He dropped my phone in the cup holder, made a show of moving his hands away from it cautiously, as if it might explode if he moved too fast.

"I didn't mean to sound..." I started again, after a moment's thinking, but Cain wasn't going to let me finish. Not yet, at least.

"You sound batshit crazy, dude. Seriously. Do you not have people you bullshit around with like this?"

"Hey, I have friends!" I insisted, feeling ridiculous even saying it. Cain reached for my phone and flicked to a new track, dumping it back when he was done.

"Well, they need to pull that stick out your ass, Jacob."

I gripped the wheel, tried to focus on nothing but the process of driving. The next few miles ticked by in silence, with my brain trying both to figure out whether Cain had a point, and what he might be thinking too.

His sense of humor was certainly different than mine. My friends...well, I knew they joked around with each other a lot, but they were different with me. Maybe I'd given them the impression that that sort of stuff was out of bounds, or maybe I just didn't invite it for some reason.

Oh God, could it really be that I was so dull?

"Look, thanks," I told him eventually.

Cain glanced over at me. "What for?"

I gave him a lopsided grin. "I don't know, for being...jeez, for being nice about my dick, I dunno!"

He squawked with laughter at that. "For 'being nice about your dick'? Christ, Jacob, you're such a fuck-up!"

I frowned, but the mood seemed lighter, and Cain was clearly entertained at my phrasing.

"Anyway, yours looks perfectly fine," I continued.

Cain looked smug. "Yeah, I knew you'd be looking."

"You were practically waving it in my face," I pointed out.

"You wish I was."

I gave him a skeptical look. "Not every gay guy wants to get into every other guy's pants, you know."

"No need, I wasn't wearing pants, was I?" Cain fired back, grinning.

"Sure, okay, but even with you swinging your junk around the room, that doesn't mean I'm interested in it."

"Interested in it..." he echoed pointedly.

"Well, from more than an anthropological perspective, anyway." I smiled, wondering if there was any government funding for projects on cataloging cocks.

"Hmm," Cain muttered, sounding unconvinced but at least not pushing it. My brain jumped to find a way to change the topic. Preferably onto something that wasn't connected with my genitals or how socially awkward I was.

"So, why are you really leaving Chicago?"

Cain stared at me briefly, then pointedly looked back at the road ahead. We'd driven through the morning now, pushing back lunch by brief agreement until we could find somewhere just off the highway. It was academic, really, since the next stop was already booked and so it didn't really matter if we arrived an hour early or an hour late, but somehow that urge to shave a little off your transit time is always there.

"Look, if you're uncomfortable talking about it—"

"I'm uncomfortable," Cain shot back before I could finish. I opened my mouth. Closed it again a moment after.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand wearily. "No, that's not it. I'm not uncomfortable. Just... Man, I dunno, confused by it. That's all."

I nodded, still far from understanding but figuring it was better to stay quiet if I wanted to hear anything from him. Watched as the speed hovered smoothly at the sixty-five mph notch. It felt almost criminal not to ease my right foot down and wake the engine up some, almost like the car was telling me it wanted to go faster. The exhaust got throatier. The valves and pistons sang their mechanical song of speed and freedom.

I pictured my boss's face, the client's face. Pictured handing over the keys and a damage report. Pictured clearing out my locker at work and looking for a new job in depressed Chicago.

I clicked on the cruise control.

"You wouldn't understand," Cain said eventually, breaking me out of my reverie. I chanced a look at him, but he was still staring straight ahead.

"No?"

A sigh. "No, I don't think so. I mean, you have a job; you're stable. It's not like that for everyone."

I swallowed the chuckle that had threatened to bubble up into my throat. "Stable? Dude, I'm a glorified delivery boy. I'm the FedEx guy, only I'm wrapped up inside the package rather than holding it."

"Doesn't sound so bad."

I thought about it. "No, I'm not saying it's bad. Just that it's nothing worth writing home about. Most of these people I take cars to, they don't even see you as a person. Just another service."

Cain pinched the bridge of his nose, turned a little in his seat. I could feel his eyes on my profile.

"Sounds like you resent them—the rich guys who can afford this sort of car."

I grimaced. When had the conversation become about me rather than him?

"It's not that I resent them. I don't have any dumb, noble hopes of making America equal for all. I just..."

Silence. The hushed murmur of an expensive engine.

"I just don't think I'm the poster child for stability and success, is all."

It's funny. Toby had said something similar back when we'd been dating. One of the times I'd come back home, griping at some near-invisible slight from a shift full of entitled people.

"So why don't you quit and do something meaningful?" he'd asked me. Toby never commiserated, unless of course his own sob story was more painful, and even then he preferred to co-opt the misery rather than share in the wallowing.

I'd not had an answer for him then, and I still didn't have one now for Cain.

"What did you want to do when you were growing up?" Cain asked me, nudging me from my introspection.

I shrugged. "Beyond being an astronaut, you mean?" No laugh at that. "I didn't really know, to be honest. Sort of tumbled my way through high school and halfway through a degree, and then dropped out without the cash or the stomach for any more loans to do the rest. Not that I'd have known what to finish it in, anyway."

I signaled to overtake a truck, indulged in a little extra speed, then forced myself to let the cruise control resume its nannying and settle again into the smooth, easy pace.

"By the time I was done, I needed a job more than I needed a career, so I just took whatever I could find. Ended up doing this a couple of years ago, and it sort of stuck, I suppose."

"What do your parents think?" Cain's tone was a study in casual brevity, but I didn't need to know him for more than a day to hear the brittle edge to his voice.

I considered my mother and father's bland disinterest for a moment. "They didn't really have any great plans or expectations for me in the first place, really. It's not like I'm making them proud with what I'm doing at the moment; then again, I'm not really making them ashamed, which I guess is an achievement of sorts."

He laughed once, a sharp bray that had nothing to do with humor.

"Lucky you," was all he said.

We rode along in silence for a handful of miles more, the mood not so much tense as loaded. Every potential opening to a conversation I played out in my head ended up uncomfortable and awkward, and I ditched them all.

"I guess I'll still be a disappointment to them when I'm in California; I just won't have to see it on their faces every day," Cain said eventually, unprompted. I sat still, assuming that he'd fill in the blanks himself, without my intrusion. Sure enough...

"My dad always just assumed I'd do what he'd done, and go to law school. My mom... God, I dunno, she just had this weird idea of my slotting into a perfect life with a perfect woman and some perfect kids. Even though I kept telling her there would be plenty of time for that. I mean, jeez, I'm only twenty! It's too fucking early to get married, right?"

I nodded thoughtfully. I'd got the impression Cain was running from something from the start—like I said, hitchhikers are rare enough these days—and it seemed like overbearing parents and their expectations was the answer.

It was almost a cliché, though I didn't doubt it was taking its toll on Cain, no matter how many people had gone through the same thing before him. Enough, certainly, for him to want to escape it all to the other side of the country.

"Do they know you're leaving?" I asked cautiously.

He gave me a slightly manic grin. "Hell no. Oh sure, I'll send them a message when I get there, just to let them know I'm not dead or kidnapped or something, but right now they don't have a fucking clue."

Trying to imagine whether my own parents would notice if I was suddenly missing made my head hurt, so I stopped thinking about it.

It wasn't that they were callous about it. That would imply too much feeling either way. It was more a matter of indifference.

"So what will you do there?" I asked, remembering I'd posed the same question the previous day, with the answer being notably vague.

Cain reached out to the rank of buttons between us, flicked at the volume knob reflexively even though there wasn't any music playing.

"I'll just hang out there for a while, see how things work, and then try to find something to make some cash. I'm low maintenance, dude. I don't need much."

"Not even a coat for those rough Chicago winters," I observed.

He laughed. "I wouldn't need it where I'm going, would I? San Francisco, city of dreams. Man, I cannot fucking wait to never see snow again!"

"Huh, how about that," I replied. "I'm going to San Francisco too." I decided not to point out that he was confusing his city slogans; anyway, he made a persuasive argument about the weather.

I glanced across at him, where he was giving me a beaming grin.

“These friends of yours, they know you’re coming?” I couldn’t help but dig a little deeper. Not that I was feeling responsible for him, but more that I couldn’t quite get my head around his obvious lack of concern for the future. He had next to nothing in the way of a plan, hadn’t really arranged anything, just stuck out his hand and then climbed into a car.

“I sent one of my old school buddies a message on Facebook, but I haven’t heard back yet.” Tugging his phone out of his tight jeans pocket, Cain scrolled through what I assumed was his messages list. “Nah, nothing. Doesn’t mean much, though; he’s a pain in the ass about replying.”

All my focus on Cain, I’d somehow managed to get boxed into traffic. Stuck behind a couple of slow cars and a truck, with the fast lane whipping past me, too swift for me to feel comfortable pulling out.

He watched me peering cautiously into the mirror, waiting for a gap.

“You should just floor it, dude. You know she can handle it.”

I had no doubts that the car could. It just didn’t seem a particularly good idea, given that whole remit of “shepherding it there safely,” a concept I tried to explain.

I could tell from the look on Cain’s face that he was unconvinced. “You think too much, y’know?” he told me. Not something I could really argue with.

The more I thought about it, the more cautious I was getting. It was hard enough to judge exactly what sort of gap there was between cars, even harder when it wasn’t your own car you were driving. My hands were getting twitchy on the wheel.

Cain looked over his shoulder, through the rear window. “Dude, do it. Go. Now.”

I hesitated.

He sighed. “Dude, fucking go!”

His hand was on my knee suddenly; the other grabbed the wheel and gave it a sharp jolt. Pressure forced my leg down, jabbing the gas. I had no choice but to steer into the fast lane—if I didn’t want to hit the car in front of me, the gap narrowing

rapidly – as the engine lit up in a gleeful roar, the sports transmission snicking down a gear and pushing us back into our seats.

Cain eased off the pressure. I caught my breath, unsure when I'd started holding it. Knuckles tight around the leather-clad rim of the wheel. The engine softened to its comfortable purr.

"What the hell!" I was angry, surprised. Heart racing.

His hand was still on my knee; Cain squeezed, more gently this time. "You needed to move," he told me.

I glared at him. "It isn't your fucking head on the block if the car gets totaled, you asshole."

"We didn't crash; we didn't die. We got ahead of the traffic, and we're back on track. You need to stop overthinking things, Jacob."

His fingers shifted around my knee, fingertips tracing tiny circles where my cutoffs ended and bare skin began. The movements were almost an afterthought, somehow.

I swallowed. "Not everything can be so casual, Cain."

"Can't it?"

Infuriating! "We don't all have someone to bail us out if we fuck up, you know?" I knew, as I said it, that I'd probably gone too far.

Cain carefully removed his hand from my leg, the pressure of his fingers a physical memory in the skin. "That was low," he told me. "It doesn't work that way."

"It's probably easier to say that from your side of the fence." I hated myself for being so petty, but the adrenaline and anger were still pumping through me. Still, the sting of Cain's sour expression bit through them both.

"Look, I'm sorry," I muttered, watching as the car swallowed up the clearer road ahead. "I shouldn't have... It was just unexpected. What you did, I mean. I guess I'm not that great with surprises."

He waited before replying. Through the windshield, the afternoon sky was beginning to look heavy, pregnant somehow with a thicker, more golden light. A storm, perhaps. I wondered if I'd be able to smell it if I opened the windows.

"Can you stop the car for a while? Just a minute or two, even," Cain asked, eventually. "I really need to stretch my legs."

I nodded. There was a rest stop coming up anyway, and for a while the metronome of the blinker was the only sound.

Cain was out of his seat as soon as we came to a halt, but I sat for a while, hands still resting lightly on the wheel, listening to my breathing and the ticking of the engine.

When I pushed open the door, the scent of the storm, all charged ions and a sense of anticipation, hit me. I squinted up at the red-hued sun, shaded my eyes with my hand at first before slipping on my sunglasses. I wondered how long it would be before the rain would start and whether we'd be out from underneath it by the time it happened.

I'd overreacted. I knew I had. Cain had given me a surprise—been reckless, even—but we'd probably not been in any real danger. I hadn't needed to jump down his throat about it, and certainly not throw what little I knew about his home life in his face. It'd been a dick move, frankly, and I was mentally kicking myself for it.

Cain himself was walking back over from the restrooms—a drab-looking block of concrete bricks. He glanced up at the ominous sky, presumably taking note of its increasingly rich color, then slipped his arm around my shoulder as he passed me, pulling me along with him.

"Looks like a storm," he observed.

I nodded my agreement. "That's what I was thinking. Don't know if we'll get caught in it."

He glanced at the car, and then beyond it, squinting at the road, his bare forearm still warm against the back of my neck. I thought suddenly of his fingertips pressing into the skin of my knee, the pressure of his palm through the denim of my shorts.

"How long do we have to go?"

I cast my mind back to what the navigation had been saying before I shut the engine off. "Couple of hours, maybe? We made pretty good time so far."

Cain pulled me in against his chest. I thought for one awful moment he was going to ruffle my hair, but he didn't. Just gestured up at the sky.

"Storm chasers, then! Very noble."

Laughing, I shook my head. "More like storm escapers, isn't it?"

He frowned. "Hmm, not so romantic, that."

My eyebrow jolted up before I could stop it. "Romance is dead; didn't you hear?"

Cain placed his hand flat on my stomach; I felt myself tense instinctively. "'I can show you the world...'" he crooned, mock serious.

"Dude, that's *Aladdin*," I pointed out.

"'Shining, shimmering, splendid!'" His singing built in volume until it was a shout, a crazed grin across his face. When he spun me, one hand suddenly on each of my shoulders, I wasn't sure whether to laugh or to push him away.

"If there's a flying carpet, you can count me out," I insisted.

Shaking his head, Cain squeezed my shoulders. "Nah, who needs a carpet when I've got my favorite chauffeur, right?"

"Your favorite chauffeur is considering leaving you in this lot, just to give you due notice."

He grimaced. "You'd miss my sparkling company."

It was true, but I wasn't about to tell him that. I knew it would only make him even more insufferable.

"Get back in the car, sparkles," I ordered him. Cain looked at me, suddenly serious, or at least feigning it well.

"I'm honestly surprised, Jacob," he told me. I must've looked confused, because he started nodding as if imparting some great wisdom. Pulling at my shoulders, he closed the distance between us. I found I was holding my breath. "I just thought..."

Cain's face was a hand's width from mine now, his fingertips pressing gently at the stiff muscles in my upper arms. With a half step forward, his mouth slipped next to my ear.

"I mean, I honestly thought," he whispered, words hot against the side of my face, "that you'd try to take advantage of me in that restroom."

"You fucker," I exclaimed, attempting to pull away as Cain hooted with laughter. He wouldn't let me free, though; he bumped his chest against mine and, before I could move again, dropped his hands to my ass and gave it a tight squeeze.

"Good solid cheeks you've got there, Jacob," he said, finally letting me step back and laughing at my expression. Equal parts horror and indignation.

"Remind me again who's the gay one?" I glowered, but Cain only laughed harder. "Jeez, you're like a child. Get back in the car!"

His lame joke was obviously still entertaining him, but nonetheless he climbed in, and a few seconds later, I followed suit. He was trying to keep a straight face when I glanced across at him, a poor attempt at innocence, but I could see that the laughter was only just under the surface still.

"I might make you sleep outside tonight." He didn't seem to be taking my warning seriously.

Chapter Five

We drove the remaining two hours to the hotel with a soundtrack butchered by Cain's wafer-thin attention span, seldom listening to more than the first verse of most songs, then suddenly fixating on a track and hearing it played over maybe five or six times in a row. I had begun to tune out and watch the developing storm instead.

Prematurely dark and loaded, the sky felt like it had dropped somehow, trapping angry clouds and deepening its red and umber hues in the process. As I peered through the windshield, the first fat drops of rain began to strike the glass.

"Here we go," I muttered. We were about ten minutes out from where we were meant to be staying, but any prayers that we'd outrun the storm had clearly gone unheard.

By the time I pulled into the hotel lot, the rain was a downpour and visibility was cut to a couple of feet. For a moment we both sat in the car, engine cooling, not daring to open the doors.

"We're gonna get soaked, dude," Cain pointed out.

There was a decorative awning stretching from the lot to the main entrance, but it was already looking a little shabby after years of neglect. Peering through the half-obscured glass, I could see where skewers of water were thundering through its holes.

"On the count of three?" I suggested. Cain grimaced but nodded all the same.

"One," I counted. "Two...three!"

We flailed at the doors, Cain grabbing his bag and then slamming the car shut a split second later, and then we were tearing through the rain to the lobby. I saw the reflected amber flash of the locks but didn't turn around to double-check. Already, with

just a few dozen yards to run, I could feel the wetness seeping through my shirt. Shorts clinging to my thighs.

Dodging the gaps in the awning turned the final stretch into a slalom, but then we were through and standing, panting, and watching the vertical flooding we'd just braved, from the drier side of the glass doors. Not that you'd necessarily know from looking at us that it wasn't raining inside too.

I glanced at Cain, then had to stifle a laugh. His hat looked like something had died in a gutter, and he'd decided to stretch it across his head. Cain's T-shirt was clinging to his lean torso, jeans wet through. He caught my eye and chuckled. I guess I must've looked as ridiculous as he did.

"You watch; it'll miraculously clear up now," he predicted, but if anything it got worse. I could hear the drumming on the asphalt, like a thousand angry snares all competing to lead the marching band.

"Shit," I said. Cain looked at me sharply. "I forgot my stuff," I pointed out, thinking of my bag locked up in the trunk. All of a sudden the car seemed very far away; it wasn't helping that I could hardly make it out through the damp haze.

"Leave it, dude," Cain advised. "You can grab it later or in the morning. It can't rain like this forever. Or I can lend you some clean stuff, assuming it's not as soaked through as we are." He nudged his rucksack with the wet toe of his shoe.

It seemed eminently preferable to braving the storm again, and so I turned and made my way to the reception desk. Perhaps the girl behind the counter was all too familiar with dismal weather, because she hardly spared a glance at the windows. Acrylic nails strummed the keyboard.

"Got you in 413," she muttered past a mouthful of gum.

I reached into my pocket for my wallet, then paused. "Is that a double or a twin?"

No eye contact, just more tapping on keys. "It's a double," she confirmed eventually.

I glanced across at Cain, who was standing a few feet away from us. “Can you switch it for a twin?”

The flick of her attention from screen to me and back to the computer again took less than a second but was loaded with an impressive amount of annoyance. I wondered what our arrival—and her having to do some work—had distracted her from.

Tap tap tap. “Sorry, no twins left,” came the bad news, after what seemed like a ridiculous amount of typing. “You still want the double?”

Shit. “Yeah, I guess it’ll have to do.”

Two plastic key cards in hand, I stepped into the elevator with Cain. “So, bad news is that they only had doubles left, no twins.”

If I’d expected him to be annoyed, I was disappointed. In fact it hardly seemed to register with him at all.

“Dude, as long as it has towels, it’s a fucking palace.”

I couldn’t really argue with that, though I did wonder whether he’d be singing the same tune when it came to sharing a bed that night.

The room was another perfect example of the trinity of beige. Some interior designer had obviously decided that sticking with paint the color of oatmeal would be sufficiently generic and homely to make people feel comfortable enough to ignore the cheap nylon carpet and clashing bedspread.

“Home sweet home,” Cain observed, ditching his bag and toeing off his shoes. I ran a hand across my still-wet face, then extracted my phone from my pocket.

“I need to call my boss, let him know I’m here,” I told him.

Cain shook his head. “You can do that after you’ve dried off, okay?”

I hissed my disapproval, then felt my phone being tugged from my fingers.

“Since when did you get so overprotective?” I asked.

“Hey, if you die of pneumonia tonight, I’m the one who’s stuck here in...”

I racked my memory as he trailed off, sentence unfinished. “Um, I guess it’s...”

“See! Stuck here in nowhere land, with a dead body in the bed to explain. So drying first, calling second.”

It was a good point, or at least a tempting one. My shirt was sticking uncomfortably to my chest, cold and clingy, and my shorts weren’t much better.

Cain was already tugging his top off, quickly moving on to unbutton his jeans after that. As I watched, he pushed them down his thighs—with a little effort, the soaked denim sticking to his skin—then dragged them and his socks off in the same rough jerks.

He looked across at me, still clothed. “Hey, I said drying first, perving second.”

Damn, caught again.

Still, it was good to get out of wet things, though I quickly stabbed at the air-conditioning buttons to notch up the heat once I was down to my briefs.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” Cain told me.

I shook my head. “Nah, you go for it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Dude, it’s your room. I’m just crashing the party, remember? Go take a shower.”

I opened my mouth to point out that actually neither of us had paid for the room, but his glare—though clearly less than entirely serious—made me shut it again and head to the bathroom instead.

The warm water did at least leave me feeling more human, and I gradually eased up the temperature on the faucet until the cubicle was billowing with steam, enjoying the heat of it. Hot needles pulsing against my skin. The tiny bottles of hotel shampoo and shower gel were hard to open, but I eventually managed to open them with wet fingers—and without having to resort to prying the lids loose with my teeth—and began to soap myself up.

I probed the knots and aches in my lower back with my fingertips, trying to knead out the discomfort as I let the water rinse the suds from my hair unaided.

The knowledge that Cain was waiting for the same opportunity to shower brought things to a close probably a little sooner than my body would have preferred, but a brisk rub with a surprisingly soft towel stopped it complaining. Finally I wrapped it tightly around my waist, before opening the door.

"That was quick," Cain said, looking over from the bed. He was lying on his stomach, still in his underwear, with the TV remote in one hand and a plastic tumbler in the other. "I poured you a drink."

He nodded at the desk, where I saw another glass, half-full of what I assumed was vodka given the bottle standing next to it. I raised my eyebrow questioningly.

"Don't worry. I didn't raid the minibar. I brought it with me. Thought we deserved it after braving the monsoon."

He raised his glass to his lips while I considered the drink he'd made me.

"I probably shouldn't; I have to drive tomorrow," I pointed out.

Cain gestured with the remote dismissively. "It's early; we made good time. Assuming your boss programmed things the same way for tomorrow, you could probably sleep in, and we'd still get to the next hotel on time. It's one drink, Jacob. It'll warm you up, okay?"

The clock on the nightstand confirmed his point that it was still early in the evening, and I couldn't argue that our route had been well padded for time. I could only guess at how many breaks my manager normally liked to take when he was out driving; from the schedule he'd given me, it seemed like the answer would be at least a dozen in the morning alone.

I took a swig and almost instantly winced.

"Jeez, Cain, this is straight vodka!"

He laughed at my coughing. "Sure is. I'm guessing you don't want to pay eight bucks for a can of soda to mix it with, and I'm happy with it raw."

Another sip; at least my eyes weren't watering anymore. Sure, I wasn't a teetotaler, but I didn't usually go for neat liquor either.

Cain stood up, draining his glass—had it been half-full, like mine, or was that an extra-generous measure for the host?—and then setting it on the nightstand. A quick shove and his underwear was around his ankles. I tried not to watch as he scratched absentmindedly at his junk.

"I'm gonna go shower. Drink up, dude; you really need to take the edge off."

He really did have a good body. Not too big, not too small. Muscles in the right places, but more importantly everything was in proportion. I took another gulp to distract my attention, then regretted it as the fire burned my chest.

Despite having forty-odd channels to choose from, there was nothing on TV. Well, assuming you didn't want to watch arguing couples renovating ugly houses, or cop shows where melodramatic reenactments appeared to be aiming more for an Oscars mention than jogging the memory of potential witnesses. I'd realized after hearing the hiss of the shower starting up that I had no fresh clothes to change into, meaning all I could do was hang out in the towel waiting for Cain to finish up.

I was down to the dregs in the glass by the time that happened, the opening door spilling steam into the bedroom, and Cain holding a towel around his waist. His hair was a tangled mop, though he was undeniably still cute. I raised the empty tumbler to him in a toast.

"Feel better?"

One-handed he managed to unscrew the lid of the bottle and slosh another couple of shots into his glass before doing the same to mine. I frowned but decided complaining wouldn't be much use.

"Much more human," Cain answered eventually. He picked up the glass and took a deep gulp before sitting on the edge of the bed by my feet and then lying back with

the tumbler resting on his chest. I forced myself to look away from the slight bulge at his crotch.

I dropped the remote on the bedspread. Cain turned at the sound and then toward the TV.

"So what are we watching?"

I grimaced. "There's nothing. It's all shit."

"There's always pay-per-view," he teased.

I shook my head. "I'd never get that through expenses. Anyway, I doubt we could agree on it."

A frown. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." I tried to find a delicate way of phrasing it, then realized that Cain certainly wouldn't care if I was blunt. "I don't think we'd be into the same porn."

He laughed, a dirty edge to it. "Oh, I dunno. I can watch most things."

I wasn't sure what to say to that one. Cain filled in the silence.

"So, what sort of stuff are you into, then? Big hairy old men? Guys getting tied up and fists stuck up their ass?"

I spluttered again, and this time it wasn't because of the vodka.

"No!" I knew my vocal protests were just what he'd been hoping to elicit, but couldn't quite stop myself.

"What, then? Skinny little guys who look like they only turned eighteen yesterday? Women with guys' junk? Come on, dude, fess up."

Was I blushing? It wouldn't surprise me if I was. "None of that. Just...regular stuff."

"Man, seriously. You're gonna leave me hanging with whatever the fuck 'regular stuff' is?" Cain lifted his head a little, enough to take a drink without spilling it across his face. "Stop being such a wimp, dude."

I sighed. "I guess I just like guys around my age. In shape, nothing crazy. No weird, extreme stuff."

"That sounds pretty fucking dull," Cain scolded. "Come on, you must have some little kink buried under all that vanilla."

Well, there was...

I swallowed, then gingerly took another sip. "I guess I like, um, facials."

He snorted at that. "Shit, I once gave this chick the best fucking facial you've ever seen. Dude, it was everywhere."

My dick gave a lurch at that. I didn't want it to, didn't particularly like the idea of being aroused by the thought of a straight couple getting it on, but Cain's boyish enthusiasm was contagious. He adjusted himself casually through the towel.

"I like it more when it's the guy...well, doing it to himself," I explained.

He gave me a crafty look. "Haven't done that since I was in my teens," he admitted. I resisted the urge to point out that, technically, it had only been a matter of months since he was a teenager. "Like, when I'd gone a few days without jerking off. It'd be crazy down there."

Was the bulge getting bigger? I was making every effort to keep from looking at it—in fact, to keep from looking anywhere lower than his neck—but my eyes weren't to be trusted.

He sat up on his elbows suddenly, fixed me with a stare.

"So, you do that shit now? Seeing as how you can 'take care of business' yourself, I mean."

My head hit the wooden headboard as I looked up at the ceiling. "Oh man, not that again."

Cain giggled. "Come on, like I said, dude, if I could do that shit, I wouldn't leave the fucking house. It'd be in my mouth 24-7."

He made as if to peer up between my legs, under the towel; I rolled onto my side to avoid it. Cain sat up.

"You need another drink," he instructed, grabbing the bottle and topping off our glasses again. The burn of the alcohol wasn't quite so intense by now, though it still made me cringe a little.

Slumping back down on his side, facing me, Cain balanced the tumbler on the blankets in front of him. Reached down and pulled conspicuously on the obvious thickness of his cock as it lolled against the towel.

"So, you gonna show me or what?"

I shook my head. "Show you what?"

"How you can suck it."

Now it was my turn to snort. "Not fucking likely."

He pouted. "Jeez, stop being such an uptight loser!"

"Oh, right," I replied. I could hear the slight slur in my voice, the alcohol having its effect. "Well, if all I have to do to not be an uptight loser is blow myself, why haven't I been doing that all this time?"

"Exactly!" Cain agreed, missing the sarcasm either naively or purposefully.

"It's not going to happen."

"Come on!" he complained. "Look, I'll let you watch me jerk off if you do it."

I frowned. "Who says I want to watch that?"

Cain rolled his eyes, grinned knowingly. "Come on, 'guys around my own age' and 'in shape,' dude? Remind you of anybody you know?"

Busted. Again.

This was getting to be an embarrassing habit.

"I don't think it's a—"

"You don't think it's a good idea, and you're not sure you're comfortable, and blah blah blah," Cain interrupted. "Man, if I'd known you were going to be such a boring drunk, I would've saved the vodka."

"I'm not boring just because —"

"Oh please. You're completely boring and uptight." He downed another shot's worth. "You've got the perfect opportunity to have some fun, and you can't help but overanalyze it. No, even worse than that, you're not even analyzing. You just say no automatically."

Now it was my turn to swallow angrily. "If you're trying —"

"I'm trying to break you out of your shell, dude," he insisted. "I'm trying to make the most of this buzz, and be the guy who bullshits you since we both know you don't have anyone else to do that."

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly nervous, as he got up on his knees on the bed. His drained glass toppled over.

"I'm taking your towel away," Cain told me. I wasn't sure if he was serious; he didn't really look serious, but at the same time he wasn't moving.

I finished my drink, twisted around, and set the tumbler on the nightstand. "You're taking my towel?"

He reached out, hand poised over my thigh. "Yeah, I am."

And then his fingers were on me, the towel between his hand and my leg, and Cain was pulling and the loose knot I'd tucked was giving way, and for some reason—whether the alcohol or the teasing or some horny part of my lizard brain—I wasn't stopping him, just watching it all happen as if it was someone else whose dick was suddenly out in the open.

Cain whistled quietly, appreciatively. "I said it before, and I'll say it again: that is one fucking impressive cock, dude."

I felt like I was holding my breath again; my vision spun a little. As I watched, I started to thicken, cock stretching across my upper thigh.

"You never did tell me how big it gets," he asked, voice a little quieter than before.

I shrugged. "Been a long time since I measured it."

He rubbed his palm on his towel-covered thigh. Somehow I knew what was coming, but I still jolted when he wrapped his fingers around my half-hard length.

"Cain, what..." I started, but he shook his head.

"You're doing it again."

I buttoned my lips, only watched as he gently stroked me a couple of long, lazy times, my erection growing in his fist. At some point I spread my legs a little, letting my balls sag between my thighs. Cain looked up at me, a weird expression of curiosity and arousal on his face.

"I want to see," he said as my cock throbbed between his fingers. His other hand was resting on his own bulge, mysteriously ill-defined through the fluffy material. I rubbed my hand across my face.

"It feels weird," I told him. Cain shook his head.

"You're horny; I know you are. And I am too. I know you've been looking at me as well. And you've got me interested. So don't think too much about it, okay?"

I stared at him, his pupils fat, hand loosely holding my shaft upright. I started to shuffle my body down the bed.

"You'll need to move, then."

"Fucking A!" he muttered, then slipped to the side, watching as I levered my body down so that my back was flat on the bedspread.

"It's been a while; I mean, I might not be flexible enough anymore," I warned him.

Cain shrugged. "Hey, practice makes perfect, right?" He mimed giving a blowjob, tongue pushing out his cheek.

I concentrated on lifting my legs, trying to push them back over my head until my feet hit the wall over the headboard. My lower back was complaining, so I pushed my hands underneath it, used the leverage to angle my hips up some more. Looking up, I could see my dick hanging plumply in front of me, my loose balls splayed on either side.

"Fuck, it's gonna go in, isn't it?" Cain whispered almost reverently. Like until this moment he hadn't actually believed that it was physically possible. The soles of my feet were on the headboard now. I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue, felt it graze the tip of my prick.

"More..." Cain muttered, but I wasn't listening to him now, or only as some background hum, ambient noise. The feeling of being mouth to cock was pulling me back to those mesmerizing days when I'd been at the height of my teenage sex drive, throwing my legs over my head and wrapping my tongue around the head of my dick. Letting the fingers of one hand trail down the widely spread groove of my ass, fingertips caressing the twitching entrance there.

I felt my body shift some more, my thighs lower. My glans, swollen and hard, slipped between my lips, which I brought in tightly around its pronounced ridge. I slurped and saw stars.

"Holy fuck," I heard Cain exclaim, but I was too busy sucking myself to reply. Letting the tip escape from my mouth and then lapping it back in again. Closing my lips and rubbing my dick's leaky fatness across them, smearing precum across my face and then licking it off.

Cain's hand was on my upturned thigh all of a sudden, fingers lightly grazing the sensitive flesh there. "You've gotta take more, dude," he told me, and then I felt the pressure as he gently pushed my legs farther down. Folding my body up on myself some more, but also easing an inch or so of shaft under the knob of my dick into my mouth.

I purred around its thickness, then again as his other hand gripped my left ass cheek, using it to push my lower body so that I was fully upended. Looking up through the V of my thighs, I could see his glazed expression, hungry and eager, staring down at where I was sucking myself.

“So fucking hot...” he observed, voice husky, and then both hands were on my cheeks, pressing harder until my face was impaled on another inch.

I groaned, feeling the hum of it shiver up through my length. I knew Cain could see all of me from his vantage point, my body at its most exposed, but I didn’t care. For once I was so focused on what I was doing, I didn’t have the spare mental capacity to second-guess things.

The jolt when his fingers swept across my hole was uncontrollable, the surprise of it affecting me physically. The second time was less of a shock, but it still left me twitching as Cain began to massage my entrance with his fingertips. Rough pads pulling and tugging at the tightness there.

“What are you doing?” I tried to ask, mouth clogged with my cock, but he shushed me.

“I told you; I’m interested,” he said as if that explained everything.

Cain spit—I felt the sudden slap of wetness against my skin—and then his slicked finger was pushing at me. First the tip of it easing inside, and then more, until he was buried to the knuckle with every stroke. I squeezed my eyes shut, concentrated on massaging the head of my dick where it nudged at my tongue.

The second finger made me grunt and Cain chuckle, but soon I was jerking my hips up, caught between wanting to keep myself buried in my mouth and wanting to impale my ass on his hand. Cain had quickly caught on to that; if he jabbed down inside me with sufficient force, he could effectively cause me to fuck my face. Soon we had a rhythm going that was making me see stars.

“Do you swallow?” he asked me. I opened my eyes, watched him watching my balls bob up and down against my shaft as I sucked greedily. “When you blow, are you gonna swallow it?”

I winked drunkenly at him. Cain grinned lopsidedly.

“That’s fucking intense, dude.”

The bed rocked as he shifted his position, never easing up on working over my hole. I heard the rustle of his towel but couldn’t see past my torso to know what was happening.

The first I felt of Cain’s cock was the wet smack of it as he slapped it against my ass. He was crouched over me now, two fingers of one hand inside me, the other gripping his erection around the base.

“You got me hard,” he told me, voice somehow thick with lust and alcohol and a hint of surprise. He slapped his dick on me again; I could just see it, bobbing in his fist as he jerked off. “I got hard watching another guy give himself head...fuck.”

It sounded like he was talking to himself more than anything, a little bemused maybe, or just plain confused. I could’ve told him about the spur of the moment and pheromones and getting caught up in something unexpected when you really need to get off, but I was too busy bobbing my lips around my shaft and tasting my precum as it oozed across my tongue.

“Harder,” I mumbled, mouth full, and Cain doubled his efforts on my hole, banging his fingers deep inside me. His body was pressed against mine now, my back resting against his thighs, his own hand flailing on his cock only inches away from my spit-slicked ass.

I thought about telling him to fuck me. About begging him to pull out his fingers and jam the head of his prick inside instead. But I was too far into it, too far gone for there to be time for that.

I felt my cock flex, twitch as my orgasm bubbled over. Watched as my balls tugged closer; felt the first hot splashes of juice before my mouth was filled. Cain was

looking down at me, eyes wide, jaw dropped. Face frozen in surprise but hand still eagerly working over his own length.

Suddenly he gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes tightly shut. I heard the hot gasp for breath, deep within his lungs.

Cum lashed across my upturned ass, hot stripes of glistening white that quickly began trickling down my stomach, across my chest. Cain looked almost pained at the overwhelming sensations, fist a blur as he coaxed out the last few drops, flicking them across my face.

He slumped back, bracing himself on his arms. My body fell back with him, weight still resting on his thighs. My hole felt suddenly empty now that his fingers were gone.

Cain looked down at me, a slightly crazed glint in his eyes. "Dude, what fucking happened?"

I tried to shrug but failed given my position on the bed. My cock was still half-hard, hanging thickly across my thigh. I gave it a slow stroke.

"You wanted to watch, I guess."

He shook his head. "I don't know what... I mean, I'm... Shit."

The chuckle set my chest shaking. I had to clamp down on it lest it get out of hand.

"It's not a big deal," I told him, the taste of myself still strong on my tongue. "Don't freak out, okay?"

Cain shook his head mutely. I took a deep breath.

"Look, just because that happened, it doesn't mean —"

"Nah, dude," he interrupted me. "It's nothing like that. I just mean that I'm fucking jealous as all hell that you can do that. You got me wanting to throw my legs over my head and do yoga or something. I dunno."

"Very relaxing, yoga," I observed.

Cain laughed. "Yeah, you looked very relaxed a couple of minutes ago. Not a care in the fucking world."

"Something like that."

He unfolded his legs, splaying them out so that they ran along either side of me. My thighs still draped over his. Gazing down my outstretched torso, I looked at his cock, chubby and glistening.

"You got cum all over me," I pointed out.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Cain replied, not sounding particularly sorry at all. "Wasn't intentional."

I raised an eyebrow dubiously. "Completely coincidental to you jerking off, right?"

A sixty-four-carat grin. "My body is a medical mystery, dude. Law unto itself, y'know?"

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. My chin still felt wet, slick.

"I need to take another shower."

Extricating myself took a little more effort than I'd expected, partly because there was still a fair amount of alcohol sloshing around my system, but also because Cain decided to start playing grab ass as I climbed off him. There was definitely a couple of hardly accidental slips where he wrapped his fingers around my balls too, reaching between my thighs playfully.

Standing by the bathroom door, I scowled at him. "You got hands-on all of a sudden, didn't you?"

He tried what I assumed was an attempt to look innocent, but which came closer to devious. "You didn't mind me touching before."

I stuck out my tongue. "Next time I need my ass fingered, you'll be the first one I call."

Cain bowed his head graciously. “Too kind, dude, too kind. I do my best.” He reached out and grabbed the bottle from the nightstand, then guided it to his lips, and took another swig of vodka. “So do I have to wait or can we pretend it’s just a locker room?”

Postclimax and, even half-drunk, I was feeling a little self-conscious. I wasn’t exactly in the habit of hooking up randomly, particularly not when it was with someone I knew was straight. In fact, I’d tried to give up pining for unobtainable straight boys back when I was in my midteens, after the usual heartache.

Then again, Cain wasn’t proving to be especially unobtainable.

I sighed. “Sure, whatever. Just don’t expect to hog the hot water and get away with it, okay?”

“Scout’s honor,” he replied, pushing himself up off the bed and bounding over to the bathroom. “You’ll hardly know I’m there.”

A sudden cheeky hand on my dick—halfway between a tweak and a tug—and then he was pushing past me before I could yelp in response.

The shower was, if not explicitly designed for two gentlemen sharing, at least not so small as to count it out altogether. Cain turned on the faucet and bowed, inviting me to be first under the spray. I let it thunder down onto my shoulders, then tipped my head back and felt the insistent needles drum across my scalp.

“You want some soap?”

Opening my eyes, blinking away water, I saw Cain had stepped into the cubicle with me. He leaned his shoulders against the wall, staring at where his wet hands were trying to open a diminutive bottle of hotel shower gel.

My gaze slipped down, almost on autopilot, across the lean curves of his body. I forced myself to look back up at his face instead. We were, after all, treating this just like a locker room, and that meant being teammates, not fuck buddies.

Well, I guess that depended on how close a team you were.

"Thanks," I told him, offering my cupped palm and waiting as he squeezed out a healthy amount of gel. I stood to one side in the water. "Want to switch?"

Cain stepped forward, and we did an awkward pivot together, him slipping past me as I ducked out of the spray, trying to avoid letting the soap get washed away in the process. I slicked my hand across my chest, under my arms, and then down across my dick and between my legs, leaving a trail of suds.

"Man, this feels good." He hummed, arms up, fingers trailing back to the nape of his neck. I grinned in response, gently strumming shower gel around my still-tingling ass.

For a while the only sound was the hiss of the shower. Wordlessly we changed places, my slippery arm brushing against his chest momentarily. I used my hands to help rinse away the soap.

"So when did you know?" Cain asked me suddenly.

I frowned at him. "Know what?"

He shrugged. "That you were gay."

Oh, that old question. It's one that straight people—guys and girls—seem to be obsessed with, even though when you ask them when they knew they were attracted to people of the opposite gender, they act like it's a completely bizarre query. It didn't seem the right time for a discussion on heteronormativity, however.

"Early teens, I guess. I mean, I knew for sure then. I always had feelings toward other boys; it just hadn't registered that not everyone else felt the same way."

Cain nodded. "What about your first...y'know."

I fixed him with as serious a look as I could muster. "Still waiting. I'm a virgin, Cain."

He stared at me, perplexed, and then cracked a smile. "Nice try."

"It was just some guy at school. I guess I was sixteen, maybe."

"Was it any good?"

I tried to cast my memory back. I remembered it being exciting and somehow illicit, but “good” seemed like a stretch, perhaps.

“I guess you have to have a first time so that you can have a second try and hopefully get it right.”

Cain scrubbed between his legs with soapy hands. “Man, my first time was a nightmare. I was so nervous I almost came in my pants.” He grinned at the recollection. “Which isn’t to say I haven’t come in my pants since then, of course.”

“That’ll be those skinny jeans,” I pointed out. “They’re obviously rubbing you the wrong way.”

“I’d say it’s the right way,” he said with a sly look.

“What about guys?” I pushed, suddenly curious. Cain frowned at me.

“What about them?”

“Ever been with a guy? I mean, before tonight.”

He reached out his hands, either side of my head, letting the water wash them clean. Suddenly his face was closer to mine.

“Well, I fooled around when I was in high school, like you did,” he conceded, brow furrowed in concentration. “Nothing serious.”

“Oh.” I laughed. “So you’re the virgin, then.”

Cain gave me a haughty look. “In that respect, yes.” I made a show of looking around his body at his ass; he tilted his hips so that I could get a better view of his bubble cheeks.

“How much of this is the vodka?” I asked, almost an aside, as I ran my fingertip down his wet, slippery flank toward the curve of his butt. He rested his palm flat on the tiles behind my shoulder, leaning into me so that our faces were inches apart.

“I could ask you the same,” he replied, voice low and husky. At the last moment, as my finger traced the high skate of his ass, I let my hand close around his cheek and squeeze gently. There was that smirk again.

The breath caught in my chest.

"We should..." I started. Words failed me. I swallowed as Cain looked at me expectantly. "We should go to bed. Early start in the morning."

Was that disappointment in his expression? With a final brush of my fingers, I pulled my hand away, the memory of the taut, springy flesh there still spinning in my head.

Used once already, the towel was rough but in a welcome, sobering way. I pulled it around my waist as I brushed my teeth, trying not to watch in the mirror as Cain dried himself behind me. Managed to walk out of the bathroom without looking at him directly.

"Which side do you want?" I called out, raising my voice so he'd hear me over the extractor fan.

"Doesn't matter; you choose," Cain replied.

I picked the side closest to the window, plugged in my phone charger, and made sure the alarm on my phone was set. The vodka buzz had simmered down to a comfortable wooziness that left me in no confusion about whether I'd sleep.

If I'd feel especially great in the morning was another matter, but I had decided to delay thinking about that until the sun came up.

Cool, fresh sheets. I pushed my legs down to the bottom, shuffled a little to loosen them from the tight tuck housekeeping had achieved. Underwear seemed a little affected after everything that had transpired, and I couldn't quite bring myself to embrace the unusual discomfort anyway.

Cain stepped out of the bathroom, clicked off the light. I glanced across at him, still flicking at my phone.

"You going straight to sleep?" he asked me. I tried to shrug, made difficult by the fact that I was horizontal.

"Probably. Feels like it's been a long day."

He nodded. "All that driving and then the gymnastics—you must be tired."

I smiled at him, knowing he was expecting at least a feigned indignant reaction. "You were the one doing all the work, I think. I just had to let myself get folded up like a garden chair."

Cain made a show of rubbing his arms as if they were aching.

"Yeah, you probably owe me a massage or something."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll get back to you on that, yeah?"

He grinned, pulled back the sheets, and slipped into bed. He clearly hadn't even considered putting underwear back on.

"So I don't want to wake up with your hands all over me, okay?" he cautioned, tongue in cheek.

I gave him a pious look. "I'll try my very best, but you know how us gay guys are...insatiable when there's a full moon."

Cain stared at the window even though the drapes were closed. "I'm pretty sure that's werewolves, Jacob."

Frowning, I played dumb. "What, gay guys can't get enough of werewolves when there's a full moon? I think there's a porn film about that, actually."

He laughed. "I'll take your word for it, yeah?"

I gave my awkward shrug again, dropped my phone on the nightstand, and hit the light switch. He clicked off his lamp too.

For a moment we lay there, silent, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dim light coming from the hallway, under the door, and from the digital clock on the TV. When Cain finally spoke, there was a serious note to his voice that I hadn't heard before.

"I really appreciate you giving me a ride, dude," he said, low and thoughtful. "I needed to get out of there."

I resisted the urge to turn to him. "It's no problem," I said eventually. "I'm glad of the company." I expected him to make a joke about it, tell me how lucky I was to have found him rather than the other way around, but he didn't.

Instead, I felt his hand reach out and carefully take hold of my wrist, fingers wrapping gently around it. Just gripping it as I held my breath.

"Seriously, it means a lot, okay?"

I nodded, knowing he probably couldn't see me, but guessing he'd feel the movement and understand all the same. After a half minute, he let go. The mattress shifted as he turned to lie on his side.

"G'night, Jacob," he whispered.

I swallowed, wrist tingling from where he'd touched me. I didn't understand why, after all we'd done over the past hour or so, it was that innocent contact that truly left me floundering.

"Night, Cain."

Chapter Six

Even with an hour's grace, it still felt like the alarm was going off far, far too early for my liking. Cain made a noise somewhere between a groan and a whimper, rolling himself in the sheets and burying his head. I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to figure out how much of the nausea I was feeling was a hangover and how much was just lack of sleep and the hour.

Eventually I decided that it was some combination of both. Putting my face under the faucet, I gulped down cold water until my stomach complained and I thought trickles might run out of my ears.

I thought back over the events of the previous night as I waited for the shower to warm up.

It was, rationally speaking, a clusterfuck. Should never have been allowed to happen. I'd had my share of falling for straight guys, flirting with them, even having them flirt back, but I'd grown up and moved on to guys that, well, I actually stood a chance with.

And yet, this didn't feel quite like that. Not the same hopeless longing I could remember gnawing at my stomach when I was a lonely teenager and the only guys around me were all unobtainable.

Cain had been willing; that was the key. Not just willing, in fact; eager and aggressive. Things would never have happened in the first place if it hadn't been for his prompting. I'd not had to persuade him or coerce him or appeal to his pity to get him into bed.

But where did that leave us? If I'd expected him to freak out about it, that had been settled the night before. It didn't seem like he was going to have some grand

existential crisis of sexuality, either; indeed, if anyone was having trouble with it, that person was me.

The shower was, if not rousing, then at least sufficiently different from being in bed that my body was forced to wake up to acknowledge the fact. I didn't linger, though, slipping out and then toweling off as I peered into the mirror and examined the bags forming under my eyes.

Cain had the pillow over his face when I stepped out of the bathroom; when he heard the click of the door, he let out a groan.

"Please tell me it's not time to get up," he muttered, voice sounding both pained and thick with hangover. I threw the wet towel onto his bed.

"Regretting the night before?" I asked him.

He groaned again. "Never regrets, just drinks I might have drunk differently."

I sat on the edge of the bed, fighting the urge to either put my head in my hands or just lie back and allow myself to slip off to sleep again. Cain shifted under the blankets.

"Can't we just stay here and drive tomorrow?"

I laughed and wished I hadn't as my brain instantly complained with a slug of nausea.

"No, not unless you plan on explaining to my boss why I missed the delivery date, and then finding me a new job."

I got nothing but a low moan in response.

I felt a little better once I was dressed, even if it was in yesterday's damp clothes, so that I could run out to the parking lot and rescue my bag from the trunk. As I was leaving, a naked Cain dragged himself out of bed and cringed his way to the bathroom. The shower was still running when I got back. I changed into fresh boxer briefs, a T-shirt, and a dry pair of jeans.

After a while I got bored with waiting for him. Glancing down into his bag, I noticed the tight bundle of his clothes. It was a matter of seconds to tug out his

underwear and hide them in my own rucksack, then replace them with a single pair of my own briefs. I chuckled to myself, thinking about his reaction.

I didn't have long to wait. Only a few minutes or so after I'd made the switch, Cain emerged looking a little more human, though that could've been the masking effects of the billowing cloud of steam that accompanied him.

"Better?" I asked him.

That lopsided grin in reply. He ditched the towel, showing as little self-consciousness about his body as he had the previous night when we'd showered together. Knelt down to his bag. Not looking up, he raised his hand with my underwear dangling from his finger. Bright red.

"I think you mispacked," he said sarcastically, other hand still rummaging. "Hmm, looks like there's been a robbery around here; I should tell the manager."

Chuckling, I did my best to look innocent. All for show, of course.

"So, do I get my boxers back?"

I shrugged as if to say *I don't know what you mean, Cain.*

He glanced at the briefs dubiously. "Been a long time since I was in tighty-whities."

I resisted the temptation to point out that they weren't white. Instead I pointed at my watch. "We need to get going."

He glared at me, then threw a T-shirt onto the bed and stood again, leaning down to step into the briefs.

To say they suited him was an understatement. The red cotton clung smoothly to his hips, albeit stretched for the moment as he dug around the pouch, trying to adjust his junk.

"Jeez, how do you wear these things, dude?" he complained, finally getting himself tucked comfortably. He ran his fingers under the elastic where it pulled across his cheeks. I watched, spellbound, as he yanked on his jeans. "Earth to Jacob?"

I threw his hat at him, slung my bag over my shoulder, and opened the door. “Coming?”

Cain spent most of the first few miles wriggling in the passenger seat, the combination of tight briefs and his taste in skinny jeans apparently adding up to some degree of discomfort. I managed to stifle the entertainment I was feeling.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he asked. I guess I wasn’t quite as discreet as I’d thought. “My fucking dick in a vise.”

“Oh come on, talk about exaggerating.” I laughed, pushing him in the arm. “You make it sound like a chastity cage.”

He shook his head, disbelieving. “Dude, I’m not even going to ask how you know about those.”

I gave him a toothy grin.

I’d strummed my way through the day’s driving, the navigation system promising to lead us straight through some interesting landscape in Nevada as we headed the last of the way to the West Coast. The thought of baking sun after the snow of Chicago was incongruous, but I couldn’t say I missed the cold. We made good time. Cain for once settled on a radio station that met his strict and unflinching standards.

What we didn’t do was talk. Oh, we chatted about movies, and where we’d grown up, and dumb stories about the things our families had done to embarrass us, and what our favorite foods were, and the books we’d read. We just didn’t talk about what had happened between us and what—if I hadn’t sent us both to bed—might have happened next.

In a way I was happy with that. I wasn’t so much regretting what we’d done as struggling to process it, my brain refusing to accept that it had been a mistake as much as an unexpected misstep. If there was really a difference to be drawn between the two.

It was midafternoon when the scenery began to fall away, the uninspiring scrub opening up to broader expanses and increasingly dramatic outcrops of red rock. Even Cain was silent, as mesmerized as I was by the stark beauty of the landscape.

"Can you pull over?" he said eventually, voice low. We'd been driving for thirty minutes or so, little in the way of other traffic, and the light had somehow taken on a warmer, honeyed glow distinctive from anywhere else I'd been.

I let the car slow to a halt at the side of the road, just outside the shade of a monstrous red stone outcrop that loomed like some misshapen egg against the brilliant blue sky. Cain pushed open the door.

I watched him through the windshield, hands jammed into his back pockets, walking away from the car and staring into the distance. The engine stopped with a final shudder, more of a shrug than anything else.

When I clambered out, the sun on my back, across my shoulders, was like a close embrace, gentle arms enveloping me. For a moment, I stood still with my eyes closed, feeling the warmth seep through my shirt.

"It's incredible," Cain said, an edge of awe in his tone. I nodded, suddenly mute. "I wonder how old these rocks are?"

Squinting, I peered at the densely packed strata that lined them, imagining the amount of time it would take for each to be layered down, compressed, fused, and then covered again. It was unfathomable.

Cain sat against a rock, his head lolling. I gently lowered myself next to him.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said, not looking at me but instead gazing with narrowed eyes across the expanse. I glanced at my hands, loosely clasped in the space between my thighs.

"Okay..." I prompted. He sounded serious.

"These fucking briefs are like handcuffs round my balls, dude."

So much for serious and awestruck.

I shrugged. "I didn't think you'd notice, what with those spray-on jeans you like."

He let his head slip sideways until it was resting gently against mine. Like taking my hand the previous night, it felt strangely intimate.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" I asked, joking in the hope of lightening the moment. Cain's thigh pushed against mine in response.

"Are you hoping I say yes?"

I found I was holding my breath.

"I have a rule about not mooning over straight guys; it's not good for my mental health," I told him eventually. "Or my love life, for that matter."

His head shifted, tipping back but turning to keep gently touching mine. I let my eyes close.

For a few minutes there was only the sound of the wind stirring the dust, the occasional *tick* and *snap* of the car as it cooled a little. I wondered what the time was, how far behind schedule I was. Decided in the next moment that I didn't really care.

"It's difficult," Cain said finally. "Not...what I had in mind, y'know?"

"Well, you can make it easy," I replied, even though I knew that I was oversimplifying in a way that, had someone else suggested it, I probably wouldn't have let them get away with. "I thought you had a girlfriend, no?"

I couldn't see Cain's shrug, but I could feel it. "There was someone. On and off. But it made more sense to be off, what with, well, moving and all."

I let my eyes gradually open; the sunlight was still bright despite its golden hue. Cain was slumped next to me, arms tightly folded, legs splayed.

Part of me wanted to bolt for the car, to get back to what I was familiar and comfortable with. It was the part of me that was saying to put my hand on Cain's knee that won, though.

If I'd expected a comment or even a flinch, I was disappointed. There was just the heat of his leg through the clinging denim, the bone of his kneecap sharp and angular.

It felt natural to let my hand slip down. Not so much to slide it along his inner thigh, but more to let the weight of my arm pull it down, fingers clasped loosely around

Cain's leg, until they rested high only inches away from his crotch. I resisted the urge to squeeze.

"I would never have called you uptight," I told him quietly. I felt his head turn to me, moved myself to look at him. Cain's face was close, his forehead resting against my temple.

I shifted my hand an inch; Cain licked his bottom lip carefully. His leg tilted a little more into me, spreading wider. It felt like an invitation.

I pushed my chin forward, let my lips brush gingerly against his. No big reaction, just the rhythmic swell of his breathing and the wideness of his pupils. His eyes shut when I leaned in and kissed him.

Mouth closed at first, tentative and cautious. Cain's lips firm but smooth. I found myself wondering if the feel of my mouth was strange to him, different from what he knew from girls.

He sat back, eyes slowly opening. I grinned, a little awkwardly maybe, and after a beat he returned it.

"You kissed me," he said, smile still twitching the corners of his mouth. He didn't sound angry. I felt the urge to lean in again.

"It's not a big deal," I told him instead.

Cain's eyebrow rose. "It kinda feels like a big deal, Jacob. I just made out with a guy for the first time in my life."

I snorted. "That wasn't making out."

I slipped my fingers behind his neck, gently pulled him into me again. This time I was expecting the feel of him, of his mouth as it smudged against my own, but then I let my lips part, allowed my tongue to trace across until he did the same.

And then we were kissing—properly kissing—with a growing sense of urgency as Cain gripped my side and turned me to him, while I slid my hand back up along his inner thigh until the edge of my finger was pressed against the fullness of his crotch.

His hips pushed against my hand, and I slipped my palm up until it covered his bulge. Cain kissed me harder, teeth catching at my bottom lip. He tasted of spearmint gum and, fainter, of cheap gas-station coffee.

It was the first time I'd felt his cock, even through the tightness of his jeans, and I let myself trace the shape of it. Thick and jerking, trapped by the skinny-fit denim and the borrowed red briefs.

"Dude..." he whispered, our mouths parting for a moment and then crushing back together.

I knew what he wanted. He'd been complaining about it enough all day. I slipped my fingertips to the button of his jeans, eased it undone, and then pulled down the zip. Heat radiated out from his groin as he pushed himself into my palm.

Without looking down, I ran my hand along his length. Squeezing the flared end of it, I could feel the sticky wetness oozing through the cotton. Cain grunted into my mouth.

It was tough going, the tightness of his jeans and the hunch of his body leaving little room to maneuver, but I managed to ease his cock free. It throbbed in my fist as I idly slipped my hand down it, smearing Cain's precum across the taut flesh.

"Please..." His request was a groan, only half-audible; if my lips hadn't been against his, I would never have heard it.

I pulled back so I could look at him: pupils huge and chest heaving. Knew I probably looked the same. When I dipped my head into his lap, Cain gasped.

His crotch was a glossy mess, precum smeared across his abdomen, his T-shirt. My hand was slick with it.

I let the head of his cock nudge against my closed lips, plump and firm. I could smell the sharp tang of him, had to force myself not to run my tongue across. Cain jolted in my grip when I finally took him into my mouth, gripping him just beneath the pronounced swell.

A hand on the back of my neck urged me down, feeding his prick into my face until my throat was impaled on it. Cain's muttering had degenerated into a single string of "fuck, fuck fuck..." and I could sense the tension in his hips, the urge to buck up and give in to the sensations I was causing.

With one hand I kneaded his balls, alternating between squeezing them gently in my palm and tugging them away from his body. The other I snaked up, underneath his shirt and across the skate of his muscles, reveling in the heat washing off him in waves.

When I started to suck him in earnest, I thought he was going to come in seconds. Toby had always said I gave great head, and there was probably some degree of personal pride in wanting to show Cain exactly what I could do.

While I worked on his cock, I eased my hand underneath him. Gripped his ass while I nudged my fingers up against his hole through his briefs. It only took a moment to slip one digit past the tight elastic and let it trace tiny circles across his tightness. Cain flinched but showed no signs of bolting from the foreign sensations.

I knew he was nearing the point of no return, focused my attentions on the sensitive ridge underneath his dick. When I felt the first splashes of cum against my tongue, I jammed my fingertip inside of him, only to the first knuckle but enough to make him yelp and flood my mouth.

The yelps turned to squeals as I nuzzled my lips across him, sensitive in the postcum haze. Cain pulled me up, half sprawling across his chest. Stared at my swollen lips, slippery with his cream.

It was a surprise when he pulled me into him for another kiss, but one I got over quickly. I soon found myself dueling in a cum-laced makeout before I could even get a chance to swallow properly. For all that straight guys seemed invariably horrified by the thought of even catching a vague taste of themselves, Cain seemed to have no such qualms.

Finally, he jerked back, gasping, pupils still iris eclipsing in their hugeness, but now with two slashes of red across his cheekbones where the blush was rising. His mouth was wet, lips half parted.

"Fuck," he said after a moment. I stared at him, waiting for the first inkling of a freak-out. Instead he just continued to stare at me. "I mean...fuck."

He licked his lips, grimaced. I stifled a laugh.

"That the sort of 'dumb teenage shit' you did with guys, then?"

Cain shook his head, wearing a half smile. "No, sir."

"And" — I knew it was a needy question, playing to stereotype, but I had to ask — "did your girlfriend ever suck you like that?"

He rolled his eyes at me, the smile spreading. The color was flaring across his cheeks now.

"Are you really asking me that?" he joked. I shrugged, self-conscious. Didn't tell him not to answer, though.

Cain grimaced. "No, she never sucked me like that. No girl has ever got me off like that." He fixed me with a steely gaze. "Now, don't go telling the gay community that means you're better than any woman on the planet" — he winked — "because it's not like I've been blown by every single one."

"It's just between you and me, then," I assured him; I knew there was a goofy expression on my face.

"Our secret," he agreed quietly.

For a moment we simply stared at each other. Normally, I'd be the first to look away — Toby always accused me of being so coy that it bordered on offensive — but the expression on Cain's face kept me fixed.

"So what happened?" I asked him eventually.

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "Why did you leave?"

His expression was pained, and for a moment I regretted asking. Mentally kicked myself for taking what had been a good mood and souring it. After a minute or so, though, he spoke.

"I told you my parents expected me to do the whole law thing."

I nodded.

"Well, they had everything mapped out. My dad made it pretty clear that the only way he was going to cough up for school was if I went to the place he picked and took the classes he picked. And my mom..." He ran a hand through his unruly hair, took a deep breath, then another.

"Look, you don't have to—" I started, but he interrupted.

"Turns out, she'd been talking with my girl at the time. Guess she 'approved' of us more than she was letting on, because she was basically coaching her on how to get me to propose." Cain shook his head, a look of bemused wonder on his face. "I mean, jeez...the pair of us only just twenty, and they wanted us to settle down. Pick out matching rings, and write some vows."

There was an edge to his tone now, a hardness that had crept in as he played back old conversations or relived arguments in his head.

He scowled, stared off at the distant hills as the red light of the evening lapped across them. "I couldn't take it, dude. I told them I needed some space, and that I wasn't ready to settle down—on school or on a girl or anything—and they laughed. I could've handled it if they'd shouted or got pissed at me. But they just laughed, like I was some misguided little kid who didn't have a fucking clue what was best for him."

I wasn't sure what to say, could only watch as he rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. A voice in the back of my mind was asking what it might feel like to have parents—or anybody, really—so invested in your future that they tried to write it for you. I'd always assumed my own family's apathy was the worst thing possible, but Cain was doing a good job of making me wonder otherwise.

"So I said fuck 'em," he rasped, suddenly looking at me, venom in his gaze. "I'm not gonna put on a tuxedo or take the fucking bar exam just because they tell me to."

He nodded at the road. "And sure, maybe I'm not going to end up driving a fucking fancy car like that, but at least it'll be my decision, one way or the other. If I fuck it all up" —he stared at me with a crazed grin— "then I only have myself to blame."

The sound of my phone ringing in the car broke the moment; glancing at my watch, I realized we'd been sitting in the shadow of the rock for much longer than I'd assumed.

"Shit, we need to get going," I told him. "I need to get the car to the dealership before everyone goes home."

We scrambled to our feet, brushed off dust as we went.

"How long do we have?" Cain asked.

I frowned. "If the roads are clear and we push it? Maybe four and a half, five hours?" I double-checked my cutoffs before sitting down in the car, wary of harsh desert grit scouring its way through the covers and messing up the leather. Sure enough, it had been my boss calling. "No more impromptu breaks, I'm afraid."

Cain smiled knowingly as he sat too. "Damn, just as I was getting used to the idea."

I punched him in the shoulder.

Chapter Seven

I'll confess, I didn't stick exactly to the speed limit for the next few hundred miles. The unwelcoming scrubland rushed past the windows, arid and simmering, as Cain and I sat in our air-conditioned bubble. As for the car itself, if it had been a person, I'd have said it was actively eager to race faster, the warm gurgle of the engine breaking out in a throatier growl as it surged along the sweeping, featureless roads.

It was as the low, humble sculptures of the suburbs began to spread around us that I started to wonder what would happen when we reached the city.

I knew what was supposed to happen, at least. I would sign over the car at the dealership—where it would be cleaned, detailed, and presented with a flourish to its rightful owner, who would hopefully drive it with the enthusiasm it both deserved and enjoyed—and then spend a long weekend in San Francisco before catching a flight on Monday morning and returning to Chicago.

Cain would...well, on that one I wasn't so sure. He'd talked of friends in the area but given little in the way of specifics. There was no clear path he planned on taking; we'd not discussed where I'd drop him off or when or what he might do next. He could well have been making plans with those friends on his phone, but I'd never been privy to them and had never heard him talk to anyone.

You could argue that it was still too soon for us to even be considered friends. Some of the people I knew in Chicago, those more comfortable with the gay scene there, at least, had boasted of hookups that had lasted longer—and undoubtedly involved more debauchery—than the time Cain and I had spent traveling together.

So why did I feel this split sense of responsibility and sadness about going our separate ways?

The mood in the car grew increasingly tense as the shrinking window of time for me to get to the dealership anywhere within schedule forced me to accelerate toward the end of our companionship. Cain, at least, didn't ask to pull over or take a restroom break or grab a coffee, simply sat quietly, fingers toying with his phone but not turning on the screen.

We were three blocks away, the last of the rush-hour traffic dwindling, when he spoke.

"Dude, I can't thank you enough for driving me here. You've been a lifesaver."

I nodded, glanced at him with a smile.

"And, I mean, thanks for not being a crazy guy and killing me on the side of the road, y'know?"

I couldn't help but laugh at that. Our time at the side of the road had been otherwise engaged, after all.

"I was glad of the company," I told him after a pause. "I...I hope you have a good time here. I mean, get on okay with living here now."

Neither of us quite seemed to know what to say after that; the awkward moment was broken by pulling up outside the dealership. Cain's hand was on the door handle, my fingers tight on the wheel.

"So yeah...thanks, Jacob."

I looked at him, took in the broad, genuine smile.

"Have a safe trip home."

One foot on the pavement, he paused, before turning back into the car, hand outstretched.

"Gimme your phone." I handed it over; he punched a few buttons, and then his own started buzzing. "Hit me up if you're ever, y'know, in the area and short on distractions, okay?"

I nodded, and then the door was closing and I watched him walking briskly away toward the corner in the side mirror until he turned it and was gone.

It was as I was tapping Save on a new contact called, simply, *Cain* that the knock on the window surprised me.

“You’ve got to be Jacob?” a middle-aged man with a clipboard said. I pulled the car into the gleaming workshop, before signing away my responsibility for it with, I had to admit, a little regret.

My hotel was a couple of blocks off, not fazed by a late check-in, and efficient in a cool, anodyne way. The room had a better view than the places I’d stayed on the drive across but was probably smaller. City economics at work.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I wondered about where I should eat, what I should plan to do over the coming weekend. Free time always seemed like a great idea in theory, but somehow I inevitably struggled to make the most of it. Found myself either idling it away on minutia—and then beating myself up for it later—or obsessing over the confines of my narrow social circle. Sometimes, the structure of the workweek, for all its many frustrations, could be preferable simply for its predictability of purpose.

In the end, the Internet told me there was a good burger place a five-minute walk away, and that segued into a circuitous stroll. San Francisco’s hills were a slight shock to the system in comparison to Chicago’s flatness, but it was a pleasantly warm night, and walking with my own thoughts felt somehow more acceptable than thinking the same things only alone in a hotel room.

When I got back, though it wasn’t especially late, the days of driving caught up with me. I slipped into a dreamless sleep within minutes of lying down.

Waking up alone in my bed shouldn’t have been unusual, and yet it was still somehow a surprise—or perhaps just a disappointment—not to find Cain there next to me. I reached for my phone, realized from the clock on the nightstand that I’d slept into the morning. Lazy, and wasteful of a holiday, my parents would probably have called it, but I’d learned to value sleep just as much as leisure.

No missed calls, no messages. I flipped into the contact list and stared at Cain's number for a half minute, finger poised over the Dial button, but in the end I forced myself to set it back down.

The shower was all black-and-white tiles, glass doors, a rainfall head, and after a while I simply sat on the cool floor and allowed the water to wash over me. White noise thundered and hissed around my ears. I wasn't sure where the feelings of dissatisfaction were coming from—usually I had a pretty high tolerance for routine, even uninspiring ones—but I was struggling to look forward to anything about my return on Monday.

It wasn't Cain. Well, not Cain per se. He might have been a catalyst for how I was feeling, the sense of apathy toward my everyday life, but I was pretty sure I could honestly tell myself that it wasn't down to some puppy-dog fawning over a cute straight guy.

I levered myself out of the shower, then briskly toweled off, watching myself in the mirror in the flattering light. I dressed and, slipping the key card to the room into my wallet, took the quick ride down in the elevator and walked out onto the street.

My day was aimless. It was getting on lunchtime before I was out of the hotel, and so I skipped breakfast and opted for brunch instead, the coffee helping wake me up completely. I walked along the length of the pier afterward, weaving through crowds of slow-moving tourists and homeless people pushing carts.

Eventually, I got to a short length of beach overlooking a harbor filled with bobbing boats, and found a quiet area to sit in. My feet were aching after the walk, and so I shucked my shoes and socks and flexed my toes in the dry sand, twisted my heels until they were half-submerged in the warm, slippery grit.

Still no calls or messages. It was, I knew, stupid to expect anything different. Cain would be busy with his friends, trying to settle into a new life. I'd been a convenient ride and a playful distraction, but we were very different people, and I had a structure

to go back to in Chicago that was many miles away—physically and mentally—from where Cain was.

As an argument it made perfect sense. It was also profoundly disappointing to think about.

Lying back, my forearm resting across my eyes and shading them from the early afternoon sun, I allowed myself to doze a little. The cloudless sky had matured into a deep cerulean blue, the sound of the waves and little children gleefully dashing in and out of them only faintly intruding on my thoughts.

If I was going to change something, where would I start? Jobs were certainly tough enough to find, and ever since Toby had left, I wasn't sure I was quite up to another relationship. Going back to school was, financially anyway, out of the question.

I continued my walk up the hill, inland, finishing at a park with a panoramic view across the peninsula. A patchwork of buildings spread across the contours of the land, for all as if they'd been rolled out sinuously from a single sheet. I perched on the edge of a bench, my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands.

Somehow my phone found its way back into my hands, its sharp corner pressed against my bottom lip. I'd thought a break would be just the distraction from the status quo of Chicago that I needed, but I was discovering that in fact it only served to emphasize how ill-equipped I was to handle anything beyond ticking the most basic boxes in life.

I stared at his number again for a while, finger itching to hit the Message button.

You settling in okay? I typed out eventually. Regretted it as soon as I hit Send. It was patronizing and mothering, implying Cain might in fact be struggling to do just that.

Sitting back, I felt the heat of the sun-warmed bench through my shirt. For all the people who'd been walking along the waterfront, the park was surprisingly quiet. Just a few people engrossed in their newspapers.

The buzz of a new message vibrated against my fingertips, and I gingerly looked at the screen.

Not bad, best laid plans, y'know, Cain's reply read. That somehow didn't sound encouraging.

You have somewhere to stay, right? I stared at the phone until his response came through.

Sorta.

Shit.

I couldn't sweep in and try to come to the "rescue." It wasn't my place, and it wasn't even in my power. I knew I couldn't treat Cain as some sort of stray that I might scoop up and take care of. We were thousands of miles away from where I lived; I was here for a couple of days at most, and I didn't even know that he wanted or really needed my help.

You can crash with me if you need to tonight.

It was dumb and went against everything my mind had been shouting at me to accept for the whole day, but I still felt a sense of serene inevitability once the message was sent. A feeling that morphed into happiness when Cain's reply came through, accepting the invitation.

We agreed to meet at the hotel at around six, and I spent the rest of the afternoon in a contented, distracted daze of sorts, stopping by tourist spots but not really paying attention to each. Even though it had been less than twenty-four hours since I'd seen him last, there was still the tight clench of excitement in my chest.

I walked into the lobby to find him slumped in a chair, rucksack propped between his legs on the floor. We grinned at each other; suddenly I felt shy, somehow, fighting the urge to look away.

He followed me to the elevator. Standing against opposite walls inside the car, we stared at each other. I sensed him close behind me, nearer than he needed to be, as I walked him to my door.

Cain was impressed by the view, the setting sun casting the city in a reddish hue that swept lazily between buildings and set the glass towers glowing. I watched him from across the room. He was still wearing the same outfit as when he'd got out of the car the day before, I noticed.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him, already guessing the answer. Cain didn't turn around; instead he leaned his forehead on the window.

"I think I've probably taken advantage of your hospitality too much already this week."

That was a "yes" laced with the reticence of pride, I knew. Shrugging, I grabbed the room-service menu from the writing desk.

"Don't be dumb. I was going to order something myself." I tossed the folder onto the armchair next to him. "It's not exactly inspiring, but there are a few things that sound okay."

He glanced down at the menu, then back over at me. The smile seemed a little forced, but the expression in his eyes looked genuine. After a few moments he picked, and I called room service with our choices.

"You didn't have to..." he started. Petered out.

I shook my head, smiled ruefully. "There are lots of things we didn't have to do this week that happened all the same. I think this is a pretty minor one, don't you?"

His eyebrow rose a half inch knowingly. I tried to keep my expression innocent.

A beat. And then...

"So, what happened?" I'd told myself I wasn't going to ask, that it would be prying, plain and simple, and that if Cain wanted me to know the details, he'd offer them up himself. That clearly wasn't how it worked out.

He sat on the chair, hands clasped between his knees. "I guess it was all too ambitious, y'know?" he started, looking up at me and then back at the floor. "Turns out

I could crash with my friend for a night, but they weren't really set up to have me stay any longer than that."

I frowned. "But I thought you said —"

"Yeah, I know," Cain interrupted. "I thought so too, but like I said, overambitious."

Nodding, I tried to think back to what he'd told me was his actual plan once he got here. The explanation had always been vague, but it was getting even vaguer in the retelling. Perhaps Cain's friends didn't value quite the same degree of spontaneity that he himself enjoyed.

"Well, look, I'm here a couple of nights, and you're welcome to stay," I told him finally. He nodded at me.

"Appreciate that, you know I do."

The moment was broken by a knock on the door, with the room-service guy swiftly wheeling in the trolley on which two covered place settings were arranged.

"Just going to wash my hands," I said after he'd left, stepping into the bathroom. I could see him standing in the doorway in the reflection of the mirror.

"Good idea." Cain moved over to the basin, and I stood to one side rubbing my fingers on a towel. When he was done with the soap and water, I clasped his hands with mine, the toweling between them.

I squeezed his fingers, easing the cloth into the gaps between his digits, and then traced careful circles across his palms.

"The food is probably getting cold," Cain said eventually.

I reluctantly let go of his hands and instead lifted the metal lids with a waiter's flourish. Whether they were each worth the inflated price tag the hotel had put on them was debatable, but ignore the cost and the taste certainly hit the spot. Cain practically inhaled everything that was on his plate and was looking enviously at my fries until I pushed them into the middle of the table and invited him to finish them off.

For a while after that he lay back on the bed quietly. I sipped what was left of my drink, now mostly melted ice. Figured he'd talk when he wanted to.

Suddenly, he sat up on his elbows. "So, is this when we get drunk?" Cain asked with a grin.

I grimaced. "Oh man, I can't," I told him, shaking my head. "Not after that last hangover. I don't think I'll ever drink again."

He gave me a "sure, okay" look, and I shrugged.

"Well, maybe not 'never again,' but no, I can't do it now. It'd be a death sentence to making anything out of tomorrow."

"Dude, I can't believe you're doing this to me," he teased.

I knew Cain wasn't being serious, but I still faked a pained look. Then again, things had gotten interesting when we'd both been wasted the other night. Could that be what Cain was really looking for – an excuse to let his inhibitions down again?

Bluntness seemed the easiest approach, somehow. "Trying to build up some Dutch courage?" I needled him. He gave me a confused look. "If you wanted to get me into bed again, you only had to ask."

Cain stared at me, expression unreadable. I took another sip of my drink, suddenly self-conscious, but there was nothing left but dwindling ice cubes to clink around the bottom of the straw.

As I watched, he stood up and carefully pushed the cart to one side. Plates chimed as the uneven wheels knocked them together. I tried to keep looking at his face but couldn't stop my gaze from flicking to his chest as he pulled off his shirt.

The jeans were a little tougher, but Cain still managed to slide them down. And then it was the boxer briefs, until he was standing naked in front of me as my mouth went dry and my chest tight.

Chapter Eight

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice half a whisper. I'd invited it, I knew that, but at the same time I'd not expected to have my bluff called.

Cain took a step forward, his bare legs coming to press against my knees. "I'm asking."

I let one hand catch the back of his thigh, the hairs there soft against my palm. Traced its curve up until his ass filled my grip, all the time watching as his cock thickened in front of me. Familiar from the days before, and yet still new enough to mesmerize me.

Cain reached down. Cupping the side of my head, his fingers gently stroked at the short fuzz behind my ear. I eased my hand down his groin, traced the length of his dick, and then slipped behind it, weighing it as it swelled to my touch.

Glancing up, I expected to see half-hooded, lust-filled eyes, but he was simply smiling. Expression open.

He stepped forward, letting his knees push up onto the chair. I leaned back to give him space as he sat on my lap, the heat of his ass hot through my jeans and his hardness bobbing between our bodies.

"Kiss me again," he told me, voice low. I brought my lips close to his, tentatively brushing them first. Cain's fingers were still in my hair; he pulled me in farther, no longer waiting for me to initiate but slipping his tongue between my lips, eager and hungry.

Our mouths only split apart when he tugged off my shirt, sending it pinwheeling across the room as he hugged our chests together, an arm braced against my shoulder blades. I could feel the dampness of his cock as it left slick traces on my stomach.

"I want to suck it," I told him between kisses as I wrapped my fist around his length. He bucked in my grasp.

"I want to suck it too," Cain replied. I wasn't sure whether he was talking about me or some sort of wishful thinking about being able to get himself off; I focused instead on making him twist and shudder as I grazed the sensitive tip of his erection.

My palm was wet when I lifted it to his face, presenting a precum-smeared hand to him. Cain ran his tongue across my tingling skin, eyes fixed on mine as he tasted himself.

"Fuck..." I felt his lips curve against mine, as he smiled in satisfaction at my outburst.

"I taste pretty good. How about you?"

I grinned back at him. "Why don't you find out?"

He slipped off the chair then, pulling me after him as he stepped back to the bed, hands on the waistband of my jeans as we went, pushing them down my thighs and my underwear with them. A brief pause to kick them off and I was naked by the time I crawled on top of him, Cain lying back as I straddled his body.

He reached between us, and I felt his grip close around my shaft, his other hand massaging my balls.

"Don't you want to try it right from the source?" I teased him. Cain swallowed, and for a moment I wondered if I'd pushed him too far, but then the mischievous smirk reappeared, and he slid his body underneath me.

I peered down, watching as the top of his head eased past my stomach, until I could feel the warmth of his breath on my crotch.

"Oh fuck." I couldn't stop the gasp as his tongue gently rasped across the head of my cock, couldn't prevent my hips from twitching and shuddering as I felt the hot wetness of his mouth as he sucked on me, cautiously at first and then more eagerly as my jolting body telegraphed the incredible feelings surging through it.

Cain pulled off me with an audible *pop*, then chuckled. "Yeah, that probably tastes better," he called up. I felt myself blushing, then gasped again as he wrapped his deft fingers around my shaft and hooked me back into his mouth.

The careful touch of his other hand between my cheeks started out teasing, the occasional light stroke across my hole as Cain corkscrewed his head on my dick. Gradually, though, he got more aggressive, fingers pawing at my entrance.

In my mind's eye I pictured him kneeling above me, pushing me to suck more of my own cock as he slapped his hardness against my ass. Remembered the urge to tell him to fuck me as the waves of orgasmic pleasure surged through me.

I sat up and looked to where Cain's lips were stretched taut around my thick length. He had a couple of inches in his mouth, the rest of me shining with spit and precum from where his hand worked me over. His pupils were huge when he returned my gaze.

I reached behind me, searching for his dick. Let it slap heavily into my grip. It was awkward, trying to jerk him off from that angle, but Cain seemed to get into it quickly enough, his pace increasing on me as he simultaneously bucked beneath me.

Eventually he turned his head, a dazed expression on his face. My cock lay across his cheek, his lips red and puffy.

"I never thought..." he started, before giving up midsentence. I ran my thumb across his swollen bottom lip.

"You suck cock well," I teased. A flash of canines as he grinned wickedly.

"I want to watch you do it again," Cain said suddenly. "Suck yourself, I mean."

I rolled my eyes, tilted my hips so that my cock slipped across his mouth. His tongue lapped against me.

"Please..."

Swinging my leg over his body, I let myself fall next to him on the bed. He turned to look at me.

"Seeing as you asked so nicely," I told him.

It took an attempt or two to lift my legs up and back, to get one foot hooked into the headboard as I guided my dick into my mouth. Cain's eyes locked on me as I hunched down some more, let another inch or two dip in.

The bed shifted as he sat up, running his hand against my curved spine all the way down to my ass. The pressure was careful and yet firm and insistent, twisting me over even farther. His hand was on my balls now, squeezing them rhythmically; from the view between my thighs, I watched the thin line of spit that trailed from his mouth and landed on my hole.

"You like having your ass played with?" Cain asked, voice deep and husky. I grunted my approval around my shaft. "You wanna guess how many fingers I can get inside?"

I felt the first make its cautious circles around the flinching muscle, the spit and my own eagerness making it easy for it to eventually slip inside to the second knuckle. Cain held it there for a second and then picked up the rhythm of my own self-sucking, jabbing his digit deep into me.

The second slipped in almost before I realized it, Cain first alternating between forefinger and middle finger, then spitting in his palm and easing in both. I could feel the tip of his cock where it nudged against the middle of my back.

I knew what was coming when he crouched over me. Heard the rustle of a condom. Cain took his dick in hand and slapped it playfully against my cheeks, his fingers still grinding. There was a look of intense concentration on his face, almost frowning with its intensity.

With his thumbs he pulled at either side of my hole, let his blunt head rest there. Reaching between my thighs, he slipped his fingers down my length and then used that wetness to slick up his shaft.

Again, I knew what was coming. Tried to telegraph my own eagerness with my eyes, my tongue busy tracing the stiffened flare of my glans.

Cain leaned over, pushed down, and the head of his cock stretched its way inside me. My groan sent shivers through me.

“Oh fuck, it’s so tight,” he muttered, eyes flicking between my face and where our bodies were joined. “I just want to bury myself in you, dude.”

I squeezed myself around him, and he hissed through clenched teeth and slipped down another inch or three. Cain glared at me hungrily.

“I need to fuck you, Jacob.”

Gradually he pulled himself back before letting gravity pull him down into me. Slow, careful movements, his cock impaling me deeper on each, until I could feel the fur of his pelvis against my balls. He reached out with one hand, using it to steady himself on the headboard.

I nodded, and he grimaced at me, allowing his body to rock and his dick to shift inside me. Cain alternated between that and short strokes, his lean body framed between my thighs. I reached up and gripped the back of his neck.

“Yeah, you look so fucking dirty, sucking your own fucking cock while I fuck your hole. Jesus, I could blow in you right now.”

His thrusts were more aggressive now, more eager, the momentum of our sex overcoming whatever his caution had been. His balls slapped against my tailbone, each thrust stabbing my cock deeper into my mouth as I slurped and lapped around it.

“You’re gonna blow in your mouth, and I’m gonna blow in your ass, dude,” Cain was saying, frowning as the close grip of my hole dragged along his length. “Shit, I’m so fucking close.”

I knew how he felt, could sense the oncoming rush of my climax. The sensations radiating from my well-stretched hole merged and blended with my handiwork, and I knew it would only be a matter of moments before I flooded my mouth.

Maybe it was knowing that too that finally tipped Cain over the edge, or the flutter of my ass around him as my balls unloaded and my tongue was splashed with

cream. He buried himself deep into me, eyes screwed up and jaw tight as the shudders of his orgasm washed through him.

My cock slipped from between my lips, trailing a thin line of cum across my cheek. I swallowed.

Cain gradually opened his eyes, watching me as I stared up at him. "I'm not going to freak," he said eventually, after drawing a breath.

"You just came while fucking my ass. I think we're well past freaking out about doing gay shit."

He grinned at that, winked at me. I tensed my legs a little, hoping he'd get the message that I wanted to unfold, and sure enough he sat back, pulling his cock out of me as he went.

I let my feet land on either side of his thighs; Cain moved up between them so that my ass was touching his knees.

"Did I do okay?" he asked finally.

I chuckled, then stopped when I saw he was looking serious. "You were incredible." He didn't look convinced. "Nobody has fucked me like that before."

His mouth twisted in dissatisfaction. "I don't normally...get there so quickly."

I made a conspicuous show of wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I could still taste myself on my tongue.

"It was long enough for me to get off too," I reminded him. "Anyway, any longer than that and I might've cramped up and got stuck that way."

Cain sniggered. "Locked in the perfect position to get fucked."

I punched him in the leg halfheartedly; he pretended to be hurt.

"So do I give a good blowjob?"

He sounded distracted, hands preoccupied with snapping a knot in the condom. Rolling my eyes, I let my head fall back onto the bedspread. "Am I going to have to rate you on a one-to-ten scale or something?"

Cain sniffed, sounding annoyed. "It's just, well...it's my first proper time with another guy. I wanted to make sure I was doing it right."

I smiled broadly. The warm, full feelings were still radiating out from my ass. "How about I just say that I'd definitely come back for seconds?"

Even with all our intimacy, I still felt myself blushing as he ran his fingers down my inner thigh. My lips parting as he brushed against my hole again. When he slipped his fingertip inside me, I lifted my head and peered down the length of my body at him.

"Don't tell me you're ready to go again?"

His smile was half-bashful, half-licentious. "Just playing."

Groaning, I felt him press deeper, probing into the depths he'd just left behind. Cain's fingertips trailed the length of my cock, lying against my abdomen.

"Like that?" he teased me. My thighs spread a little more, almost subconsciously, inviting him in. The second finger was an easy admission but still made me throb and swell to his touch.

"I never thought of how a guy's body would look, turned on like this," Cain said quietly. His hands continued their sly ministrations, fist now casually wrapped around my length and slowly jerking. "I like being able to see the effect I'm having on you."

I pressed my cheek into the cool sheets, felt my lower back arch as his fingertips nudged my prostate. I was rigid in his grip now, hips twitching as he ran the rough pad of his thumb across my sensitive tip.

Cain leaned forward, hand still busy between my cheeks. "You want me to suck it again?"

I nodded, hands gripping at the covers.

"Ask me for it."

"Please, suck me," I whimpered as he brushed the underside of my glans against his bottom lip, breath hot on me. "Please, Cain."

Gently he let me slip between his lips, the pressure a soft, wet sleeve around the top half of my dick. Fingers wrapped loosely now around the base as his tongue lapped eagerly. For a beginner he was doing an excellent job of learning which parts of me provoked the biggest reaction and focusing on them, all the time plying my ass.

"I don't think you should go back," he said suddenly, taking his mouth off me but still working his hand on my cock. Smearing his spit and my precum.

"What?" I gasped, trying to process what he was saying. I whimpered when he lapped firmly across the very end of my dick.

"You should stay here longer, stick around in San Francisco. We could hang out some more."

His fingers had slipped free of my ass, only for him to unexpectedly jab them back inside, as deep as he could push. My pelvis bucked and twisted at the sensations.

"Cain, I..." My voice couldn't be trusted, wouldn't be controlled, cracking as he worked my uptight body over.

"Come on, Jacob," he wheedled. "You know you'd have more fun here. Don't tell me you miss that shitty Chicago weather."

I grunted as he ran his lips in long, wet strokes down my shaft. Burying his face in the sensitive join between groin and leg. Letting his tongue trace the contours of my inner thigh. My cock pressed against his cheek, looking almost obscenely hard and swollen against his smooth skin.

"Just think how much better I could get with regular practice," Cain whispered, taking me back into his mouth and redoubling his efforts.

I gasped at the suction around me, at the feeling of his fingers inside me. Knew I should warn him that I was about to climax but having no voice to do it. My body tensed, stomach creasing as I folded around his head, hands in his soft unruly hair, hurtling into an orgasm that made me see stars.

Cain pulled off me, lips careful around my achingly sensitive head. His lips glistened, swollen and wet, and there was a look of playful satisfaction in his eyes that I could only smile at. He beamed at me.

"So what do you say?"

I wasn't sure whether he meant about the blowjob or the invitation. I bit my lip, preoccupied. Things that had seemed possible while in the throes of our intimacy all of a sudden felt a lot less realistic afterward.

"You did great," I told him eventually, hedging my bets and taking the coward's way out. Cain looked proud but at the same time frustrated.

"That's not what I was asking, and you know it wasn't."

I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was getting late.

"Look, can we talk about this in the morning?" Yes, it was avoidance, but I didn't have a clue what I could say to him if Cain decided to make the invitation to stick around in San Francisco more official.

Why the uncertainty? Well, mainly because there was a considerable part of me that wanted to take him up on his offer. Wanted to ditch the idea of returning to Chicago anytime soon and instead revel in the good weather and the company of a hot guy.

I had no real idea as to what Cain and I would be to each other if I were to stay. He may have just screwed me and let me come down his throat, but there was a league of difference between doing that and calling yourself another guy's boyfriend.

It didn't feel like he was ready for that sort of commitment. And by not being put in that position, it also meant I didn't have to consider the idea that I myself might not be ready for a relationship either. That I might still have my own unfair share of hang-ups after Toby left.

He slipped off the edge of the bed, then walked to the bathroom without looking back. "Sure, that's fine," he told me.

Was I imagining the slight coldness in his tone? I heard the water running, the sound of him brushing his teeth. I guess I should've been marveling at the fact that I'd just come in his mouth and, as far as I could tell, he'd swallowed it, but all I could keep replaying was his suggestion that I should stay, and my own awkward response to it.

When Cain came back out, I was already under the covers, the light on my side turned off. Hoping he'd get the message but at the same time wishing he'd put me on the spot and force me to make a decision. He didn't, though.

Instead, he eased himself into the bed next to me, half whispered a quiet "Goodnight, Jacob," and then clicked off his light.

I fell asleep with thoughts of cold Chicago in my mind. And woke to an empty bed.

Chapter Nine

Cain was gone. There was no sound of running water from the bathroom, no pile of untidy clothes on the floor. His bag was missing from the chair he'd dumped it on the night before.

I didn't need to rack my brain to figure out how I'd fucked up. I'd steeled myself not to fall for him on the assumption that he was straight and that it would only lead to pain on my part and discomfort on his. Yet Cain had demonstrated himself more than open to change, and in the end it had been my own inflexibility that drove him away.

Reaching for my phone, I found I was holding my breath, hoping for a message. I hissed it out when I saw there was something from Cain.

I know you said we'd talk, but I didn't want to pressure you. Safe trip home and thanks again.

The phone made a sharp cracking sound when it hit the floor, but my frustration was too consuming to question whether I'd broken it. He didn't want to "pressure" me, but why was I feeling pressured? Sure, because he was straight and everything I knew told me that there was no such thing as a relationship—a fully rounded one, at least—between a straight guy and a gay guy. Yet that was based on the idea that Cain was a regular, 100-percent straight guy.

Was that actually true?

Was I actually just pigeonholing him into a shape that wasn't necessarily accurate? I wasn't counting the sex; that was a different type of intimacy. Kissing was another level again, sure, but perhaps the most telling thing had been how we were with each other, how he'd opened up to me, and how I'd opened up to him. Had Cain self-

identified as gay or even bi, I'd not have doubted we were making a connection for a second.

Him, with his spontaneity. Me, with my need to slap a safe, knowable label onto everything. No surprise, then, that while I'd been freaking out over someone I presumed to be straight—against most of the evidence, for that matter—he'd been three steps ahead and wondering whether the two of us could have a future together, labels be damned.

I had to explain all that to him, show him that my reservations weren't because of pressure but because of preconceptions.

No, first I had to find him.

I jumped out of the bed and grabbed a T-shirt from my bag. Stepped into boxer briefs and then my jeans and sneakers. A couple of wet hands run through my hair was enough to at least temper the bed head for the moment, though I didn't dare think about what it might look like after the city winds had their way. I'd probably look like an old scarecrow by midmorning.

It didn't matter, though. Not when I needed to find Cain.

Jamming my key card into my wallet, I speed walked to the elevator, then found myself switching impatiently from foot to foot as I waited for it to descend. The numbers seemed to slow as it gradually reached my floor. I realized I was gritting my teeth, my jaw clamped painfully shut.

The old woman in the elevator car started looking at me strangely when I punched the button for the ground floor a few more times and then stabbed repeatedly at the button to close the doors when they took their time. I had to force my hands into my pockets just to stop them from fidgeting.

When we finally made it to the lobby, I only just managed to hold back and let her walk out first, some semblance of politeness lingering through my urgency. She slowly started to walk around the coffee table and chairs in the center of the hallway in one

direction; I cut through on the other, walking as close as I could to a mild jog without looking suspicious.

Where would he be? I still didn't know the names of any of his friends, and now it seemed like they'd left him hanging too. Would Cain go back to them, or did he have some other grand scheme he hadn't told me about? San Francisco wasn't a huge city, sure, but it was big enough to get lost in, and Cain had shown no reluctance to throw caution to the wind and jump in a stranger's car.

I was breathless with near panic when I reached the revolving doors, slammed through them, and was rubbing my sore wrist when I emerged, blinking, into the morning sun. Which way should I go, up the road and into the city, or down it and head to the waterfront first?

I glanced up the street, then back in the other direction, trying to decide. And then froze.

It was the hat. I'd recognize the damn hat anywhere, just from the back, even if I'd feared I'd have to search an entire city—an entire state, maybe—to stand a hope of finding it.

Cain sat on the bench in front of the hotel, outside the entrance, his back to the short, curved driveway. It looked like he was leaning forward, chin on his hands. Very still.

I felt my stomach tense as I slowly walked around the sidewalk, over to where he was sitting. He didn't look up as I carefully sat at the other end of the bench from him.

"Cain?"

He still wasn't turning around, just staring straight ahead. Face expressionless from what I could see in profile.

"You didn't get very far," I ventured.

He glanced down, let out a sigh. "Story of my life, really. Come all this way, and I'm not really any further than when I started out."

I wanted to move up the bench to him, to put my arm around his shoulders, but I was frozen in place.

"Why did you..." I stopped myself. I knew why. "I wish you hadn't left."

Cain looked over at me. His eyes seemed sad, the only emotion leaking through his blankness.

"You don't have to rescue me, Jacob."

I frowned as he spoke.

"You gave me a ride, and we had fun. It's okay that that's all there is. You don't have to feel obligated to me."

I started shaking my head before I had the words to explain. "I'm dumb, and I got scared, and it was easier to keep you...to keep you at arm's length than it was to accept how I was feeling." It wasn't much of an explanation, but I was hoping Cain would understand me all the same.

"So what are you saying, then?" he asked. I racked my brain for an answer.

"I'm saying..." *Pause, Jacob. Take a breath.* "I'm saying that I needed to be put on the spot, that I needed to be pressured. Because otherwise I'd have stayed in my little shell and just got older and more disappointed in life. I'm saying that I don't really understand everything that's happening here, but I'm okay with that." I rubbed my knuckle against my eye, hard enough to see colored blotches in my vision. "And I want you to come back inside with me."

His fingers played with the strap of his bag, carefully twisting and untwisting the material as I waited for his response.

"Okay," Cain said eventually. "I'd like that."

The ride back up in the elevator felt like I was climbing through rarified air. I fought the urge to take his hand, then wondered why I was being so precious about it. The back and forth of my thoughts occupied me until we were at the room and I was slotting the door key into the lock.

Cain followed me in, only to pull up short as I stopped in the entranceway. His chest was close to me as I turned, slipped my arms around his shoulders, and drew him into me. His lips parted slightly as I brought them to mine, soft and yielding as our kiss began tenderly.

I heard his bag slump to the floor, felt his hands on my shoulder blades as he squeezed me closer. Our mouths moved with more urgency now, increasingly eager as the hunger we both felt rose and amplified. He pulled his head back for a moment, eyes wide, and stared at me wordlessly.

"I didn't understand," I told him.

He half bit at his lip. "You don't always have to."

The T-shirt, jeans, underwear I'd put on just a few minutes earlier came off quickly; I tugged at his jacket, his shirt. Let him help me skin off his jeans, taking his underwear with them. When we fell back onto the bed, Cain on top of me, I felt his hardness jut against my own.

My fingers in his hair were enough to start our kissing again, his hand snaking between our bodies and gripping our cocks together as we ground against each other.

My thoughts were reeling but at the same time strangely clear. Body twitching as Cain's thumb grazed across both our tips.

I pushed him up by his shoulders. He looked down at me, confused, a questioning expression on his face.

"You're going to have to help me find somewhere to live," I told him. Cain rolled his eyes, leaned back down to me, and kissed me again.

I levered him off me once more, suppressing a grin at the sight of his frown.

"And a job. Shit, I'm going to need a new job."

Supporting himself on one arm, he put his other hand on my mouth, brought his lips close to my ear.

“You’re overthinking again,” he whispered. I knew he’d be able to feel the twist of my grin against his palm. “Let’s be practical tomorrow, instead.”

∪ The End ∪

Loose Id Titles by Alex Pendragon

Jock Auction
The Hitchhiker

Alex Pendragon

Early on in life, Alex Pendragon realized that while looking at cute guys is hot, stories about them are even hotter. A filthy imagination, not to mention the discovery that others would be just as interested in reading about the mischief his characters get up to as he was in writing about it, propelled him down the path to Loose Id.

In Alex's world, the guys don't always get off easily, but they generally get off. British-born, he currently lives in California.

Find out more about Alex's world at <http://www.alexpendragon.com>.