

## CHAPTER THREE

My flight to Albuquerque took off at 7PM, which meant I could have easily asked one of my parents to drive me to the airport. I opted to be stubborn though, and biked my way there. My carry-on bag was small enough that I was able to strap it to Putt-Putt with ease and I really didn't feel like being trapped in a car with my parents. I knew they were brimming with lectures ever since I told them about the trip and I didn't want to have to lie anymore about anything job-related. I hated to admit it but Ada was right. My lies would come back to bite me in the ass one day.

It was a little sad though, as well as nerve-wracking, that I was boarding the plane by myself with no one to see me off. I watched people saying goodbye to their loved ones before they went through security and saw couples waving to each other through the window. It pinched at me, just a little bit, that I didn't have that in my life.

It also reminded me of the last time I was on a plane. Dex had been waving goodbye to me, only to get in his car and go home to his girlfriend.

Ah, yes. Jennifer Rodriguez. The girlfriend. I never met the woman and had no idea what she was like (except from a few rather cryptic comments from Dex), but I didn't like her. I don't even know why she boiled my blood so much, there was just something about her. This wasn't anything new with me – I tended to hate on a lot of people for no apparent reason. But it bothered me more than most.

I thought it was because she was Dex's girlfriend and it alerted some internal competition mode. But lately my feelings toward Dex were more annoyed than lustful and I didn't feel jealous when I thought of them together (thank God, because the last thing I wanted was to be drooling over Dex again). No, I think Jennifer got under my skin because she represented everything that I wasn't. She was a successful host. She was tall, thin, gorgeous, and exuded this glowing sexuality that I couldn't possibly fake in a million years. I had the feeling she was one of those types that never had to work a day in her life and people were always bending over just to wipe her ass. She probably shit gold, too.

So she embodied everything I hated and everything I wasn't – yet in the back of my mind, she was something I strived to be. How sick was that?

Thankfully these thoughts didn't occupy my mind the entire three-hour flight, as obsessive as I was about things. I had given myself plenty of time to get nervous and worked up too.

There was just so much pressure for us to get everything right this time. No one gets things right the first time, so any shortcomings we had with the pilot episode (and there were many) were totally justifiable. But if we messed up this time, we had no excuses. Not only did I need to know what I was talking about, I also had to *look like* I knew what I was talking about. The books would help with that first part, but the real problem came with self-confidence. That would be very hard for me to fake.

Near 10PM the flight made its descent. I stared out the window at the black view and wished we were landing in the daylight so I could at least get a glimpse of what Albuquerque looked like. There was something unsettling about landing in an unknown place in the dark.

After I grabbed my carry-on bag out of the overhead compartment, and made my way into the surprisingly small but delightfully southwestern airport, I became inexplicably weak in the knees.

I ducked into a bathroom and lightly dabbed a wet paper towel on my cheeks, trying to regain my breath that had become increasingly labored and erratic. I nervously put on blush, eyeliner and lipstick, and smeared powder all over my face, then quickly ran a brush through my hair. Looking less like I was on a plane for the last couple of hours, my heart started to calm down and I regained feeling in my legs. It was funny how these wee panic attacks of mine crept up at the strangest times. I don't know why I got so nervous about seeing Dex again. I took a deep breath and emerged from the bathroom.

I walked to the baggage claim and arrivals area, self-conscious, thinking he was somewhere, waiting for me. I scanned the crowd for that face of his. I wanted to say it was a familiar face but for a few split seconds I had forgotten what he looked like.

Despite the fact that the crowd was quickly dwindling, I couldn't spot anyone that jogged my memory. I positioned myself

by the half-empty baggage carousel, trying to look like I was waiting for my bags. After ten minutes had rolled by and all the bags had been taken off, I felt my chest fill with ice and started to wonder what the hell would happen if he didn't show up. How stupid was I to fly down to freaking New Mexico by myself with no back-up plans?

As I tormented myself with "what-if" scenarios and guilt-tripping for not being more responsible, I felt a solid tap on my shoulder.

I spun around, ducking slightly, my arms poised and ready. Karate instincts.

It was Dex, of course.

He took a quick step back, eyeing my ninja arms, then gave me an apologetic look.

"Sorry, my flight got in late, I was just renting the car."

I barely heard his gruff voice. I was focused on the fact that what used to be a very slight dusting of facial hair on his lip was now a full-on moustache.

"Nice stache!" I couldn't help but exclaim with a laugh. He did somehow look different than he did three weeks ago. Aside from the moustache, which I admit suited him for some reason, his black hair was a bit longer and shaggier, a swoop of it falling across his broad forehead. Even his chin scruff was thicker and covered more territory.

His eyes were still dark and intense though they had that sleepy, heavy-lidded look which I had come to associate with his subdued moods. Thankfully, he did look happy to see me.

He stroked his moustache like a master villain and broke into his very Joker-esque smile. "Thanks. I thought I would get a head start with Movember next month."

Movember, in November, was the month where men decide to grow moustaches. Not many women looked forward to Movember.

"Well, luckily you pull it off," I said brightly, feeling just a little awkward.

He grinned again, shook his head and fished a packet of Nicorette out of his pocket. He popped a square into his mouth and bit down, looking at me the whole time. I had forgotten about the unnerving way he studied people, especially me.

"You got everything?" he asked, eying my bag.

I patted it. "I travel light."

“Huh,” he said. “I didn’t know women could do that.”

He turned and walked off towards the doors. Even though he was already on the thin side and had on a big navy hoodie and black cargo shorts, he looked like he might have dropped some weight recently. His ass still looked good. OK, I shouldn’t have been looking but I couldn’t help it.

I followed him outside where the dry yet surprisingly cold air nipped at my face and seeped through my light jacket. It wasn’t raining like it would have been in Portland, in fact I could already see many stars in the sky despite the city lights, but it wasn’t exactly warm either.

I brought my jacket in closer around me and scuttled after him towards the parking lot. For a guy that was only 5’9” at best, he did cover a lot of ground with his strides. Then again, I was a good five inches shorter than him with stubby legs that didn’t quite move as smoothly as I would have liked. I blamed my flabby thighs for always slowing me down. Damn friction.

As we walked, he spat out his gum, reached into his other pocket, brought out a packet of cigarettes and stuck one in his mouth. He looked behind him at me and stopped, bringing out his gold lighter and igniting it with one quick motion.

I caught up to him with what must have been an incredulous look on my face.

He shrugged at my expression. “At least I’m not smoking and chewing at the same time.”

Yeah. At least. I gave him a disapproving look and we started off for the car again. Funny thing was that Dex wasn’t really a smoker. I remembered he only lit up a few times towards the end of our last “adventure” and that was only after we survived nearly getting blown up in the lighthouse.

Then again, Dex wasn’t normal. He admitted before that he was bi-polar but I wasn’t sure if I believed that. I mean, he was strange and weird and quite manic at times but I had never seen him depressed or anything. Whatever he was, I did know he took medication for it. Whether that medication did him any good, well, I didn’t know him well enough to have an opinion. I hoped that by the end of our trip I would, though. I had forgotten how much this man intrigued me.

We located the car (a Jeep, in case we were headed for rough and tumble lands) and soon we were on our way. Where? I had no idea.

I expected an element of awkwardness while in the car with Dex. It always took me awhile to get into the groove when meeting people again and he wasn't the type of person to ever make things easy for you. But surprisingly, he was acting relaxed and jovial.

"Where are we spending the night?" I asked, watching the lights of the airport disappear in the side mirrors.

"I thought we would camp in the middle of the desert. I told you we were doing this on the cheap."

I looked out at the blackness and felt deathly uncomfortable from the fathomless deserts that it hid. Camping in the desert seemed like a death wish.

I tried to look at him as calmly as possible but I could tell my eyes were raging. He gave me a sleepy grin.

"Relax, stress case. We've got a motel. One we'll probably be sharing with a bunch of hookers, but I take it you're pretty liberal."

"Hardy har har." I glared at him, enjoying our sparring. He gave me a wink and turned his attention back to the road.

"So, how are you?" he asked. The sincerity in his voice made me suspicious.

"I'm fine."

"You're a terrible liar."

I cocked my head at him. "What? I'm fine. I didn't say I was great."

"You should be great, Perry. You should be jazzed as shit. New Mexico, man. Just look at this place." He gestured at the darkness then took a quick peek at me.

"Something's different with you."

I shrugged. "To be fair, you don't know me all that well."

"This is true. But there's something you're not telling me."

It was my turn to laugh. "There are many things I'm not telling you."

He peered at me, his brown eyes glinted like black stones. A flicker of intensity ran across them. "I'll get to the bottom of you before this is all over."

I held his gaze while an impulsive smile gently tugged at the corner of my mouth. There was a current of tension in the car, but of what kind I didn't know. It was wishful thinking on my part to think it was sexual in any way.

I looked away first and just in time to see a car parked up ahead in the middle of the road. We were seconds from colliding with it.

“Dex!” I screamed and thrust my hands out on the dash, bracing for certain impact.

The rest was a blur. The high pitched squeal of brakes filled my ears as Dex slammed on them and whipped the wheel around. The Jeep slid and lurched beneath us but thanks to his fancy maneuvering, we came to a stop on the shoulder, a few yards past the car. The road was dark and devoid of traffic at that moment, which probably saved our life.

But alive and well or not, I could barely breathe and my poor heart was skipping loudly. Dex was leaning forward, clutching the wheel desperately. He slowly loosened his grip and looked over at me. He looked absolutely stunned.

“Are you OK?”

I nodded, trying to regain my breath.

He nodded too, as if to say he was OK. He looked behind us. “What the fuck was that?”

I turned around in my seat. The car was a small compact and was parked at a diagonal across both lanes of the highway. The lights outside and inside the car were on and all four doors were open wide. There was no one in the car at all. It was like they all ran out and vanished into the darkness. That thought made me very ill and very afraid.

“What happened?” I whispered. He shook his head and then unbuckled his seat belt. I immediately put my hand on his to stop him.

“What are you doing, you can’t go out there!” I hissed.

He unbuckled it anyway and opened the door.

“You stay here. People might be hurt.”

And with that he shut the door on me and left me in the car. Fuck that!

I quickly unbuckled mine, leaped out of the car and ran over to Dex. I expected him to tell me to go back but it’s like he knew I would join him anyway.

There were still no other cars around, which I thought was eerie considering we weren’t that far from the city. The lights from the abandoned car and our Jeep were the only lights we could see.

The car wasn't running. We saw no tire marks on the road to indicate they had to stop quickly (unlike our Jeep which left hefty marks in its wake). It was like someone calmly decided to park it there and leave.

"I don't like this," I started but Dex quickly threw his arm back at me and held me in place, finger to his lips. He stopped and peered intently at the car. We were only a few feet away. I wanted to grab on to him for dear life.

I also wanted to ask him what he was looking at but didn't dare speak. Or breathe.

He took a tentative step forward.

Then I saw it.

Something popped up in the backseat and then disappeared. I didn't know what it was but I can tell you it wasn't human.

Dex slowly turned and looked at me, the whites of his eyes glowing madly in the sparse light.

"We better leave," he said quickly, turning around and yanking me towards our car.

"What is it?" I cried out, still wanting to see despite the thick fear in my throat. I looked back as Dex dragged me forward, his grip on my arm strong.

Something shadowy moved in the backseat again. The car rocked back and forth for a few seconds...

The head of a coyote poked out of the car. Seeing us, it jumped out of the backseat and onto the road.

I gasped. Dex turned to look and stopped.

The coyote held us in its gaze, its eyes strangely familiar. I'd seen coyotes before; they were a nuisance in the countryside around Portland. But there was something strangely terrifying about this one. Maybe it was the circumstances...had that coyote just eaten everyone in the car?

I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. It just stood there, as still as the air around us, but I had this feeling like it already had its teeth in me. Its eyes were the strangest green color. They sparkled with intelligence. Did coyotes even have green eyes?

Suddenly, I felt a hard pull on my arm again. Dex dragged me towards the Jeep. I looked back and the coyote was gone.

It was like some heavy fog lifted from my eyes, as if the last few seconds had been a dream and I was finally coming to. We quickly got in our vehicle and without saying a word to me, he

thrust it into gear and we sprinted down the highway at an alarming speed.

I stared at him. His hands were back to holding the steering wheel with a Kung-Fu grip, his mouth was set in a firm line and his eyes...well, his eyes weren't fearful but they were lost in thought.

I wanted to ask him what had just happened...where did the occupants of the car go? Why was there a coyote in the car? Why did we have to leave so fast? But I could see I wouldn't be getting anything out of him tonight. I had to come up with the answers by myself. I turned my attention to the blackness sweeping past us, made more mysterious now knowing a party of people could be out there, just wandering the desert.

I didn't know what had happened to the people in the car, but I knew they weren't attacked by a coyote. Coyotes wouldn't dare attack a party of humans, no matter how hungry they were. If anything, the car was abandoned and the coyote was scavenging for any...leftovers. I shuddered at the thought of rogue body parts in the backseat.

I wasn't quite satisfied with that conclusion but it had to do for the remainder of the drive. Within an hour we were pulling up to a nondescript motel perched at the edge of a deadbeat town. We hadn't said a word to each other the whole time.

~~

My room looked straight out of a bad 70's porn. The wallpaper was peeling in the corners, there were nicotine stains on the walls, and the bed was one of those coin-operated models. The only thing missing was the shag carpeting.

I plunked my bag on the lone chair, not willing to trust the patchy ground, and carefully sat on the corner of the bed. I had a bad experience with bedbugs once and that was in a quality hotel. I didn't want to think of what could be hiding in the scratchy sheets here.

I sighed and took stock. Had my life really come to this? Staying in a gross motel in New Mexico on some crazy ghost hunting expedition? Things always sounded cooler before you actually lived them. We hadn't even seen any ghosts and already I had the creeps, which explained why I jumped out of my skin a bit when there was a sudden knock at the door.



I got up and peered through the peephole. My heart eased as I saw Dex, though I wasn't quite sure who else it would have been.

I opened the door. He leaned against the frame, not moving. He looked a bit stoned; his eyes were glazed and looking past me at some blank spot on the bed. A toothpick jutted about lazily in his mouth.

"Um, hey. Good hotel pick, by the way," I joked. "I was thinking we could put our beds beside each other and race down the hallway...might cost a couple of bucks extra though."

He grinned. "Are you coming on to me?"

I wasn't but I felt heat come to my cheeks anyway. I rolled my eyes. "What do you want?"

"Just checking up on you," he said defensively.

"That's...considerate. What's wrong with you?"

The glaze left his eyes for a second before he laughed it away. "OK, suit yourself. Thought you may have wanted some company."

Was he coming on to *me*? I narrowed my eyes, studying him. I can't say the thought didn't entice me. But aside from his languid gaze, I couldn't pick up on anything different. It was just Dex. Standing seductively in the doorway of my seedy motel room (OK, so you can see why I would naturally jump to such conclusions).

And suddenly, while this dialogue was going on inside my head, I realized the situation had become awkward. At least for me, anyway. Dex didn't seem disturbed in the slightest.

Regardless, he said, "Anyway, we'll be setting off at 8AM tomorrow. The town of Red Fox is about a two or three hour drive from here. Just be ready and primed and all that before then."

"Do you think I'm gonna get much sleep...or primping...done in this place?"

He laughed. "Princess, I don't care. See you in the morning."

And with that he spun around and walked to his room next door. I heard his door close. I slowly shut mine and felt incredibly alone. And miffed. Princess? Who did he think he was?

I turned and nervously eyed the bed. I decided to sleep on top of the sheets that night.

