

Flashing lights rolled up behind me and I was beckoned over. But why? I wasn't speeding, hadn't had any beer in a couple hours so wasn't weaving over the road, and I hadn't even passed a traffic light, yet. Plus, this was a rental car; I could be pretty sure all its lights worked. Of course, cops can use a traffic stop as an excuse to get at you, if they feel like it, but why would they be doing that with me? I hadn't been in town twelve hours. Had they been following me? Why? Only Dion really knew me here, and I hadn't messed with anybody ...

Except those two cops at Uncle Owen's. Oh, man, were those two mutts gonna get some back, from me? Prove who's the alpha and who's his pup?

I glanced around. No street lights burned. Huge empty lots sat on both sides of the road. The main drag was another three blocks away. I was alone in a place I didn't know, and I didn't have a safe-recording app on my cell phone to prove what was about to happen. I flashed back to the night I got busted on a bullshit charge, chucked in jail and my life damn near ruined. Shit, I couldn't handle that, again. No way in hell.

Okay, when I got fucked over the first time, I was too dumb to understand what was what. Now? If this was anything but a traffic stop, I'd play nine kinds of hell with these assholes. I speed-dialed Tone's number, hoping to God he wouldn't answer. He did.

"Jake, do you know what time it -- ?"

I cut him off with, "Tone, hang up. I'm callin' back. Let it go to voicemail."

I heard him whisper, "Shit," then say, "Okay."

I redialed and set the phone on the console as I pulled to a stop. The cop stayed behind me, lights still flashing, high beams blasting straight into my mirrors. He got out, slow and easy, and sauntered my way. All I could make out was a half-silhouette of something that looked male.

Then another cop exited the passenger side. And stayed there. As a witness.

Shit, shit, shit. Yes, my calmer side was insisting, *It's just a misunderstanding; it'll be cool, keep calm*, while my paranoid side damn near screamed, *Your uncle vanished, now you're going to, too, dumbass*.

Like hell, motherfuckers; bring it on.

I kept my hands on the steering wheel and said, loud enough for the phone to hear, "It's almost eleven, Wednesday night, California time, and I'm being stopped by two police officers just inside the Palm Springs city limits. Without cause."

The first cop wandered up, his hand twitching to go for whatever torture toy he liked. I didn't move. He stopped by the back door.

"Driver's license and proof of insurance," he snapped.

"It's a rental," I said. He must've already known that. What game was he playing?

"Rental agreement."

I nodded and offered him my Texas driver's license; I'd yanked that from my wallet the second I put the car in park. I hadn't had a chance to shift to a Danish license, yet. "The agreement's in the glove box," I said. "Is it okay if I get it?"

"No," was the snarly reply. "Unlock the doors then keep your hands on the steering wheel. Hey, Roy, come get the rental agreement from this guy's glove compartment."

In case he has a gun in there? What kind of bullshit was this, and why would a cop be so stupid as to -- whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa ... *Roy*? One of the cops connected to my uncle's arrest was named Roy. No ... no, it couldn't be. How would they even know I was here?

I used the rearview mirrors to watch Roy stroll up to the door, a long, lean block of serenity like he knew it was a game.

I kept facing forward as I said, "I don't understand; what's the problem?"

"You ran a stop sign, back there."

There weren't any stop signs on this road. Period. I didn't argue; just take the ticket and fight it in court.

"Shit, Roy, this fag's from Texas."

"Yeah? Nothin' but steers an' queers there."

Okay ... the only way they would have the nerve to make a crack like that was if their body-mikes and the camera in the patrol car were off. Why do cops always think they're flashing a really big dick when all they're proving is their little head is smarter than the one on their shoulders?

"Jacob Blaine?" said the guy by me. "This your license?"

"Yeah."

"You look Mexican, to me. Got proof you're an American?"

"What d'you mean?" I snapped. "I'm black Irish." And half-Persian, but no need to mention that. Assholes like this love to use anything unusual to hang you with.

"Rented the car at L-A-X-ative," said Roy, his voice hard and chuckling, as if he'd made a funny.

"What's a cocksucker like you doin' in California?" said the guy with my license.

"I'm here -- I came to see my uncle!" I almost said, *I'm here for Owen Taylor, asshole* ... but something kept me from it. It couldn't be more obvious that these guys were trying to force an incident, but I wanted to know why before I started howling.

"No shit? Your uncle. How much is he payin' you?"

"Cheap bastard didn't even spring for a decent ride," Roy sneered.

"Hope you got your money up front."

Okay ... that did it. Time to put the pups in their place. So I gasped in an oh-so-surprised voice, "Wait a minute -- Roy? Roy?! Could you be that hot cop he's told me so much about?"

"What the fuck're you talking about, faggot?" Roy was not happy.

"Hey, dude," I said, still not moving, "You can supplement your income any way you want, and from what I hear, you got plenty to supplement it with so -- "

The cop behind me yanked the door open and screeched, "Out on the ground, faggot, face down! Now! NOW!"

I started to do it but he grabbed my jacket to sling me to the asphalt ... so I hooked a finger in his holster and he came down with me. Slammed his face against the edge of the door. By the time Roy had scrambled around from the other side of the car, his taser out, I was lying flat, hands and legs stretched out, not moving an inch and fighting to keep from smiling.

"What the fuck, Chet!?" was all he could think to say.

Chet? CHET?!

Holy fuckin' shit, it was both of the cops Uncle Owen told me about. Paranoid me took over. No way this was a coincidence.

"The son-of-a-bitch grabbed me," Chet snarled.

"What you talkin' 'bout?" I yelled, letting fear tint my voice. "I was gettin' out of the car when you yanked at me, and slipped. It's my fault you can't stand up straight?"

“Motherfucking cocksuckin’ faggot son-of-a-bitch!” Chet bolted to his feet and kicked me in the side.

It hurt, but I really played it up with a scream and howl and cry of, “Why’re you doin’?! What’d I do?!”

“I’m gonna cut your fuckin’ balls off, motherfucker! Fuckin’ faggots!”

He kicked me, again. I coughed and choked, and didn’t need to play that one up; I think he broke a rib. He got ready to kick me again, thinking he was going to make me fight back, but I took worse beatings in prison, so I got ready.

Then Roy shoved Chet back and barked, “Hey, hey, HEY!” His voice gained an octave on each word.

“What the fuck is -- ?!” His voice cut off. I heard some rustling behind me then my phone was shoved in front of my face by fat, bloody fingers, Chet snarling, “You were on the phone?”

I looked at him and spit, “To my boyfriend, asshole. I got his voicemail. This is gonna be some fuckin’ message he finds.”