

## CHAPTER ONE

It's fucking hot in Texas.

I could barely get by some days in Los Angeles, but Texas has me contemplating throwing my head out the car window like some kind of dog. According to Frank the air conditioning 'consumes too much gas' and we 'aren't allowed to use it.'

"I'm gonna die, dude." Levi's voice calls from the back seat, accompanied by the most dramatic groan in history. "Can we *please* stop at the next gas station? I wanna buy the biggest bottle of water I can find."

I catch a glimpse of myself in the wing mirror, and cringe at what I see. My wavy black hair is completely frizzed up, tanned skin looking dewy from all the sweat. I pat the top to try and push it down to no avail, sighing.

First and last time I let my friends convince me a road trip in the south to 'see new sights' was anything but a horrible idea. It's scorching outside, the car is sticky and smells horrible, and we're all two seconds away from killing each other.

Frank visibly stiffens next to me, his grip on the wheel tightening slightly. I *swear* his tired mossy-green eyes darken just a little. "If I stop, will you shut the hell up about it? You've been asking for an hour."

"I've wanted water for an hour," Levi challenges. His arms are crossed, the baggy green tank top he has on puffing up at the bottom. "Are you gonna stop or not, Frank? Look—there's one coming up."

He points to a sign, and sure enough a gas station is coming up anytime now. A huff leaves Frank's lips but he doesn't say no. His fingers are pinching the front of his white t-shirt, pulling it forward and back to fan himself off.

“Fine. We can stop. Get what you need, because we *aren’t* stopping again.”

“You’re *so* miserable,” Nadine laughs. She’s sat next to Levi in the back, her orangey-red hair looking significantly better than mine despite the fact hers is naturally more curly. “It’s supposed to be a fun road trip. We’re not on a schedule or anything.”

“Don’t get him started, Nade.” Grant mutters, finally looking up from the window. “I’ve had to hear him scream and cry about how dangerous it is out here for the past week.”

“Then why the hell did we come?” Nadine is quick to retort, clearly unamused. “We could’ve just gone to the grand canyon or some stupid shit.”

“He’s probably hoping something happens so he can talk about it on his podcast.” Levi’s joke causes the others to laugh, but it’s clear to me that Frank is about to snap.

“It’s nice out here. It’s different... Not like home at all.” Despite my best efforts to think up another excuse, I just can’t. Texas isn’t bad, of course, it’s just not for me. “Plus he already said we could stop. So just... cut him some slack, okay?”

I immediately hear them making fun of me in the back, mimicking what I said in stupidly obnoxious voices. Whatever. Better me than Frank, since I’m not the one driving and won’t intentionally crash the vehicle into a sign thanks to yet another fit of anger.

The aforementioned gas station finally creeps into view, and the car goes quiet as Frank slows down. He steers right, pulling up into one of the few gas pumps. The entire lot is basically empty, with only one other car parked off to the side. I’ve never been good with cars but it definitely looks like an older one.

It's an older building too, so small and made of wood with chipping beige paint that probably hasn't been maintained in who knows how long. A neon 'open' sign is hanging in the one glass window, the letters flickering—threatening to die any minute. The rusting tin canopy casts the front of the store in shadow, the door swung open to let people know it's okay to come in.

Although I'm not entirely sure I even want to.

"This place is scary," Grant mumbles. He steps out of the car, squinting thanks to the sun beating down on him. There isn't a cloud in the sky, just a vibrant blue. It's nice. *Different*. "And you're sure there isn't like, another gas station somewhere... or...?"

"Grant." Frank's voice is low, almost like a warning. Grant just nods with raised eyebrows. He exhales sharply, running a hand through his brown hair while he waits for his girlfriend to step out.

Once she's out the two disappear into the building, with Grant's hand slowly snaking up the bare skin of her back. The white halter top she has on barely covers anything, and I say that in the best way because she looks amazing in it.

The last thing I wanna do is stick around and watch Levi and Frank argue some more, so I quickly follow suit. It's *slightly* cooler inside the building, and the man behind the wooden counter isn't the scary country stereotype I was expecting. He's the opposite, really.

Charming smile, with a red and flannel shirt that's unbuttoned at the top. Dark denim jeans and a flashy belt to follow. "Welcome in," he says as I step inside. He takes one look at me before chuckling. His ocean eyes sparkle with intrigue. "Y'all... aren't from around here, huh?"

My cheeks go hot. Not even two steps inside the damn building and he's already clocked me as an outsider. I

even tried putting on my cutest Texas outfit today: ripped denim shorts and a loose-fitting white button up. “It’s that obvious, huh?”

“Just a bit.” His smile doesn’t fade, watching me roam the store with the grace of a headless chicken. “But it ain’t a bad thing. Nice to see some fresh faces every now n’ then. Name’s Kane.”

“Nico,” I mumble as I step inside properly. The yellowing linoleum underneath my feet is sticky, like someone spilled soda a couple *decades* back and never cleaned it up. The few overhead lights swung around in metal bowls, dimly lighting up the entire store. My attention wanders over to a deer head mounted on the wall, with a wooden brown door underneath it that reads ‘bathroom.’

The shelves aren’t like the ones at home. Instead of thin metal wires holding up cardboard boxes it’s just dusty wooden shelves that could seemingly topple over at the slightest touch. I grab a chocolate bar from the rickety shelf and then three bottles of water from the old fridge near the back, ignoring how loudly the thing is humming. One for me, one for Frank, and one for Levi. Since those two are nowhere to be seen, although if I had to guess they’re probably ‘making up’ in the car.

I take it all back to the counter, before two arms wrap around my waist. When I catch a peek of red hair in the corner of my eye I already know who it is. Nadine smiles at the man, sliding her own drinks—water and a hard lemonade—across the counter.

“Howdy!” She sings, and the stench of alcohol hits me in the face like a brick. I stifle a reaction, just smiling back at her. She slaps down a ten dollar bill and presses her cheek against mine.

Kane says nothing at first, reaching out and grabbing the items on the counter. "So where y'all from?" His tone is casual, the scanner beeping with every item he rings up.

"L.A." Nadine answers instantly, pulling off me to cozy up to Grant when he approaches. Her hand rests flat on his chest, and the ghost of a smile appears on his lips as he kisses her head. With lips drawn so tight I can tell she's really holding back some comment about Frank, probably something about how it's all his fault we're in the middle of nowhere and so on.

"That's a little far, ain't it?" Kane asks, brows raising slightly. He takes the money from my hand, hitting the register so it pops open with a little ring. "Out here... it ain't like there. You oughta be a little careful, you know?"

Grant's face lights up at that, curiously peering over as he takes the water off the counter. "Oh yeah? Why? What's out here? Alligators? Scorpions?" It's clear he's not taking the man's warning seriously, but Kane doesn't seem nearly as amused.

"It ain't the wildlife you gotta worry 'bout," his voice lowers, like he's telling some sort of scary story. "It's the people."

## CHAPTER TWO

“It’s ain’t the wildlife,” Grant repeats in a horrible southern accent, climbing into Frank’s car. Levi has taken my spot in the front seat, and from the way his hair is disheveled I can tell he and Frank definitely worked out their issues—at least for now. “It’s the people.”

Nadine laughs like it’s the funniest thing in the world, even though the whole thing left me sort of unsettled. Kane’s face when he said it didn’t exactly scream ‘joke,’ but my friends could clearly care less about that.

“There’s no way he actually said that.” Frank groans, starting up the car as the engine roars to life. It’s loud, maybe a little louder than it should be. “Dude was just trying to scare you guys into buying some pepper spray or something.”

Levi shakes his head in agreement. “Probably... or maybe he was trying to scare his way into a certain someone’s pants...” His dark brown eyes flicker over to me, and I groan in response.

“It wasn’t like that at all,” I huff. “Drink your water and shut up, Levi.”

“Yeah, Levi.” Nadine adds with a grin.

“I’m just saying! Maybe he thought you were cute. I’ve known you for two years now, and not once have you dated *anyone*.”

It’s true, but it feels weird to hear it said out loud. “It’s just... not what I’m looking for. I don’t know.” A familiar feeling of emptiness builds in my chest. Like some kind of pressure I can’t rid myself of.

Love is... strange. It’s confusing, and scary. It’s even scarier when you’ve been around for twenty-six years and haven’t even held hands with a guy. I’ve basically

sealed away that part of myself, but I guess that makes me weird.

“Nico will find a guy when he’s ready.” Frank says, eyes focused on the road. We’re back into nothingness, a dark tarmac road surrounded by nothing but tawny sand and misshapen boulders. It’s sort of beautiful in its own way, although I doubt anyone else in the car feels the same way right now.

Nadine lets out a hum of approval, nudging me slightly. “Yeah. So leave him alone. When he gets a boyfriend we’ll probably never see him again.”

Grant laughs, glancing down at his girlfriend with a confused look on his face. “Why do you say that?”

His nose crinkles a little, but Nadine beams at him. “Because he is *so* stinking cute that anyone with a brain will keep him all to themselves.”

I whine at that, wishing I could throw myself out of the car. She says it like it’s true—like people didn’t tease me for how I looked all my life. I know she’s saying it with love but good god it’s embarrassing, and it’s not even true anyway.

“Can we talk about something else, please?” My voice is quieter than intended. I sort of sound pathetic but hey, if it gets them off my back it’s not the end of the world.

“Okayyyy, sorry.” Levi says, offering up a smile before he turns his attention to the road. He glances down at the paper map Frank insisted we bring, before crumpling it up and setting it aside.

I shut my eyes and focus on the music playing through my earbuds. I don’t really know how much time has passed until I hear Levi speak again. “Frank, sweetheart... I don’t wanna be annoying, but... How much longer?”

Frank's attention shifts to his phone. "Uh... An hour and a half? Two hours? ...Maybe three?" Levi's shoulders drop at that, but he doesn't say anything else. He just shrinks into his seat, boredly scrolling through his photos app.

Obviously there's no service out here. Frank made sure to download five different maps on different apps, and brought the paper one just in case. It's smart. It's good to be prepared, and for all the crap everyone's been giving him about the trip at least he did everything right.

"You know," Nadine starts, "that guy didn't even ask me for my ID at the gas station." She giggles after, taking a sip of her lemonade. Condensation drips from the side, my water not really helping me cool down at all.

"That's how you know we're literally in the middle of nowhere." Grant says, arm wrapped around her. "Or maybe you just look really old, babe."

Nadine scoffs. "Mm... Well, if that's true, he must've thought we were a nice old married couple. All wrinkly and gross together."

Grant just rolls his eyes, smiling widely as he kisses her head again. Levi shifts in the front seat, and it looks like he's about to say something when there's a loud *pop* sound followed by low, strained, sputtering. The vehicle goes quiet as we all sit there, and I immediately pick up on the fact that the car is rolling to a slow stop.

"What's going on?" Levi's voice cuts through the silence, although Frank doesn't seem to have an answer for him. We come to a stop, and my stomach feels hollow. "Frank, what's going on?"

"Hell if I know..." Frank mutters while undoing his seatbelt. He steps out, and we all watch as he goes to the front and pops it open. A cloud of dark gray smoke rushes out, dissipating into little wisps. He looks at us through the

windshield, and his face makes one thing clear: this is not good at all.

Grant pulls away from Nadine, joining Frank near the hood. They both just stare at it, and after a good few minutes of them just pacing and probably arguing, all five of us are standing on the road.

“Can’t you just call someone!?” Grant asks with crossed arms, staring at Frank with a bewildered expression. “Can’t you fucking do something? I mean come on! You didn’t get this piece of shit checked out before deciding to drag it across the damn country!?”

Something on Frank’s face shifts, and the way his fists are clenched to his side tells me I can’t talk us out of this one. “You think I didn’t fucking do that!? Huh!?” He shoves Grant back, rage lighting up his eyes. “It’s not my fucking fault, dude! I just—fuck! Come on!”

“Frank...” Levi tugs on his arm, causing him to take a moment. He takes in a heavy breath of air, stepping away from everyone as Levi seemingly consoles him. It’s hot, it’s tense, and now we really are trapped in the middle of nowhere.

A literal nightmare.

“There’s no signal...” Nadine holds up her phone, waving it around to try and find a bar. I pull out my own phone to be greeted by my lockscreen: a cute drawing of a tabby cat. Like she said, there isn’t any signal, and I don’t imagine we’re going to find any.

Grant sighs in defeat, kneeling down to lean against the front of the car. “This is so fucked,” he mutters just loud enough for me to hear. “So, so, fucked. We’re gonna have to walk, aren’t we? The gas station was like... an hour back. I mean, how long is that even gonna take?”

“Babe, calm down...” Nadine kneels down next to him, hand on his shoulder. “Maybe it won’t be that bad.

It... shouldn't it get dark soon? I mean... at least it'll cool down a little, right?"

That doesn't look like it helps at all, since Grant opts to just lean in and rest his head against her chest wordlessly. Nothing I can say will help, so I go to turn and sit in the car. Then I see it: an old black van complete with a spare wheel on the front.

Part of me wants to wave my hands up and see if they can help, but I just stand there like some kind of deer in headlights instead. Still, they slow to a stop, and when the tinted window rolls down I'm face to face with a grinning man.

"Car troubles?" His voice is deep, but he speaks loudly—with confidence. I don't have to turn to tell everyone is looking at him. "That ain't no good. Y'all need some help?"

His accent is strong. Even stronger than the gas station guy's. His smile doesn't fade, and he runs a hand through his slick-backed hair. It's jet black, and it looks like it might be a little wavy if it weren't for the copious amounts of product in it.

I'm not the best judge of character but he doesn't come off all that bad to me. Maybe a little overcompensating, but that's all. The grin he wears seems superficial, like he's mimicking the cover of a magazine. It's not like we have any other choice right now, anyway.

"Something's wrong, uh, with our car." Frank says, pointing at the open hood. "You know anything to help? We'd... really appreciate it."

"Ah... y'all are city folk, huh?" He pushes the van door open, stepping out to come take a closer look. The first thing I note is that he's taller than the rest of us. His baggy blue overalls are dirty at the bottom, covering what I

presume are black boots. "I can prolly help y'all. But... I don't think I can get to it tonight."

Frank purses his lips, exhaling through his nose. "So you want us to just stay here all night? It's scorching hot, and—"

"Relax," the stranger shakes his head. "Y'all can come back to the farm. Have something to eat, rest for a bit, and we'll come back tomorrow."

Levi's brow furrows at the offer. "Won't somebody just steal the car? Then we'll be even more stuck..."

The stranger smirks, eyeing Levi up and down. "Now who's gonna want to take some busted ol' thing? I promise y'all it's gonna be fine for one night."

"Sorry, what's your name?" My words leave my lips before I can process them. The stranger's attention turns to me, the wolfish grin he has only growing wider.

"Damien." He steps closer, and I feel a sense of unease. "You?" A large hand shoots out, hanging in the air as he looks down at me. His brows are slightly arched, jawline strong.

I blink, clearing my throat. "Nico! I'm Nico. It's... nice to meet you." I offer up my friendliest smile, taking the hand and giving it a shake. His skin is rough, calloused—the hands of someone who must do a lot of physical work.

"Nico," he repeats while turning to the others, "nice to meet you." There's a beat of silence as he looks at the group expectantly, chuckling a little. "And y'all?"

## CHAPTER THREE

Nothing about this seems like a good idea. Every single safety ad can usually be reduced to ‘don’t talk to strangers’ or ‘don’t go places with strangers.’ Yet here we are, piled into the back of a stranger’s van that smells like a farm and a butcher shop at the same time.

“I can *not* believe y’all are from Los Angeles. Ain’t that where they shoot all the movies and whatnot?” Damien asks, one hand on the wheel while the other taps at the dashboard.

Frank groans awkwardly, tugging at the collar of his shirt. “Yeah. Uh, sorta. I don’t know if it’s really as big as it was in the past, and whatever.”

“Any of y’all actors?”

Nadine laughs dryly at that. “God, I wish. I’ve been trying ever since I moved away from home.” A frown tugs at her lips, eyes turning to stare out the window. “Guess it really isn’t for everyone.”

“You never know...” Damien hums, the vehicle veering left as he turns onto a beaten dirt road. The grass becomes more prominent, a sickly green color that almost looks yellow in the right light. “Might get your big break real soon.”

“Maybe,” Nadine replies wistfully. “Hopefully one day.”

Levi peers out the window, taking in everything there is to see. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to a farm before. It’s kinda cool.”

“Farm life ain’t for everyone.” The van begins slowing down as we approach what I assume is the main house. There’s a few trees scattered about, but the entire area looks very dead. It’s desolate, I wouldn’t even guess that anyone lived here

The house itself is nice enough. Two stories, white wooden walls, and a black slate roof. The front porch is sort of sweet looking, with warm yellow lights cutting through the evening dark to keep it all lit up. Not even the broken fence or the ancient looking rocking chair out front can take away from how homely it all is.

“Welcome, welcome...” Damien smiles from ear to ear as he turns the key in the ignition and the low rumble of the van slowly dies down. “Uh, listen y’all, before we head in... My family ain’t gonna be what you expect. So please—*please*—treat ‘em kindly. They’re good people. Honest.”

I speak up before one of my friends can make a stupid comment. “We’re nice people. I promise we won’t do anything. We’re guests. You’re doing us a huge favor, so...”

“Glad we have an understandin’ then.” His tone seems off, but then he steps outside and pulls open the door for us. It’s still excruciatingly hot, and the sky is darkening pretty quickly. Cotton candy pink fading into a vivid purple, like something out of a movie.

Damien steps up the front door, painted red with a four pane window. With a tug of the golden handle it opens, and he basically kicks it. The door slams against the wall, rattling the old family photos inside.

Inside the walls are a gnarly looking cream color with a dark oak trim that matches the floor. The first thing that hits me is the smell. Like decay and something oddly sweet. Vanilla, maybe?

“We got guests, y’all!” Damien shouts, and at first there’s no response. He brings us into the living room, and I catch a glimpse of Levi and Frank clinging to each other like they’re in some haunted house.

The living room isn't much different from the rest of the house. An intricate red and gold rug sits underneath a beat up coffee table, covered in dust and lord knows what else.

But the first thing that catches my eye is an older man sitting on a rocking chair. He's facing away from us, attention focused on an even older TV set that looks like it's from the eighties. Uneven blinds are kept shut, and the room is pretty dark save for a few lamps tucked on the side tables.

Damien approaches him, kneeling down to put a hand on the man's shoulder. "We have some guests, gramps. You want me to get Toro to take you up to your room? Might get a lil' noisy down here."

At first the man has seemingly no reaction, but then I catch the slightest bob of his head. With that Damien tilts his head down, smiling at him. "Toro!" He hollers, voice echoing throughout the entire house. "Toro! Get your ass down here, boy!"

It's not that crazy to care for an elderly family member, at least not to me. Taking care of my grandma was like a pretty big thing in my parents divorce. These people have opened their home to us, we're guests, and we have to be respectful. Which is exactly why I die a little inside when Frank opens his big mouth.

"This is too fucking weird..." He grumbles with an eye roll. "I think we should just go, dude."

Something faint approaches. Slower, heavier steps that feel too horror-esque for my liking. Damien just looks over at Frank with a slight tilt of his head. "What's so weird 'bout it? Y'all don't love your grandparents?"

I can tell Frank doesn't have a valid response to that, but it doesn't matter. The heavy footsteps now louder, commanding attention as a man enters the room. He's even

taller than Damien, head grazing the top of the doorway when he comes in.

“Carry gramps up to his room,” Damien barks at him. The taller man doesn’t say anything, head hung low as he kneels down to effortlessly scoop up his grandfather. The man is *huge*, built strong and sturdy with a broad chest and big arms. His overalls are just like his brother’s, but the denim is darker and fits him much tighter. The beat up state of them almost makes me wonder if this is some kind of hand-me-down situation.

His dark hair is messy. Thick and full as it flows down his neck, bangs pulled down to cover his forehead and most of his eyes. He turns to the rest of us, although he doesn’t say anything. Without a word he leaves, stomping up the stairs with an uneven pace.

“That’s Toro. My lil’ brother,” Damien explains. “He’s a little, uh... *Simple*. Don’t expect much outta him. You’ll meet the others soon, I’m sure.” He begins walking to the doorway that presumably leads to the kitchen. “I’mma check on dinner. Y’all rest easy now.”

He disappears into the other room, leaving the five of us all alone in the living room. I take a seat on the tattered couch. All things considered it’s pretty comfy, the cushion sinking under my weight.

“We should just leave, right?” Levi asks in a hushed tone, still holding on tight to Frank. “This is... I don’t like this. The vibes are totally off.”

Nadine and I exchange a glance, but I can tell she isn’t on my side this time around. “Yeah...” She starts, lips pulled to the side. “I don’t really like this place. I’m sure they’re great people, but...”

“You guys are being really... judgy.” I finally speak up, trying to keep my temper at bay. “They’re *helping* us.

We don't have a *car*, remember? Not only are they gonna feed us, but they're gonna fix it for us."

"Oh, so what, Nico?" Frank snaps, arms crossed after he pulls away from Levi. "You think I wanna waste any more time in this shithole? I don't give a fuck if they're helping us. It's weird. *This* is weird."

What's so weird about it? The fact they live differently from us? The fact they don't have granite countertops and a weird need to make sure every part of their life appeals to other people? My jaw clenches, but I can't bring myself to start an argument.

Levi nods, nuzzling against Frank. "I'm not eating anything they serve, so... Sorry."

Nadine comes to sit next to me on the couch, wrapping her arm around my side to pull me close. "Come on, Nico, I know you wanna pretend you're the boy with the heart of gold or whatever, but do you *seriously* think this is a good idea?"

"Yes," I say through grit teeth. "You guys are just being dramatic." They don't understand. They just don't. They don't know what it's like to be different—to be the one people judge without so much as a second thought.

Nadine sighs, pulling away but staying seated. Grant joins us, and despite how tense the air is nobody wants to say anything. I'm kind of glad, since I don't wanna argue. Not now.

"Alrighty..." Damien hums as he peeks back inside the living room. "Y'all ready for supper?"