

## Part Six

The hotel doors swung open, and Jasper headed out of them straight towards the truck, exhaling softly before shaking his head. He could feel Jackson's dark eyes on him as he tried to collect his overwhelming mess of thoughts into order. "Okay...we need to cash out on all the money on your card and get this license plate changed."

Jackson nodded as he started the truck up, looking back at him. "Where should we go to do those things?"

"Dollar store for money, and I'm pretty sure I know a guy for the license plate. Just get on the road, and I'll tell you where to stop."

The brunette nodded affirmatively, pulling out of the hotel's parking lot. "So, Jazz...how do you know where we should go?"

"Connections. My friend Leo knows people here. I ask who he knows here; he tells me a couple of different people."

"Oh." The brunette hummed in thought as if charging his next question.

Looking up at him from his phone to confirm his location, he leaned back slightly, "Leo's the guy I used to work with. He paid me a good bit of cash for whatever small jobs he needed me for. He's the one who watched out for me down south."

"Ah. Makes sense to me."

"You also need a new name. And you need a fake ID."

"A new name?"

"A new name. Why do you think I go by Jasper?"

"I'm...not sure."

"It makes tracking down someone who uses multiple names harder. I have five."

"Five?"

"Westley Jeong, Jasper Monroe, Riley Merlin, Justin Dietrich, Kieran Hyland."

"So...is that how many times you've moved cities?"

"Mhm." Jasper nodded, glancing around the plazas and different stores around them.

"Oh...how do you come up with the new ones?"

"What reminds you of a rose?"

"Thorns, the color red...uh, romance?"

"The color red. What are different ways to say red?"

"Uh...rojo, rouge, palgansaek...that's all I got."

"Rouge isn't bad. Your new last name is Rouge...think of a first name?"

Jackson tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, glancing at him upon hitting a stop. "Carter?"

“Carter Rouge.”

“Oh...huh. Are you gonna change your name?”

“Mhm. Joseph Andrews. Everyone I meet can call me Joey.”

“How’d you do that so fast?”

“Not the first time. That corner store up there. Stop us at that one.”

Jackson nodded affirmatively, pulling into the parking lot and looking down at Jasper. “What now?”

“We’re gonna cash out your card, and then we’ll go to the license plate guy. Come on.” He started to get out, going to the door and heading to the back row of the few shelves. Eyeing the ceiling and corners around them, he internally cheered upon seeing the absence of cameras and gently pulled on Jackson’s arm.

Following behind him, Jackson both trailed behind him and watched his actions, momentarily towards another person in the store who nodded at him. Giving her a brief smile, he turned his attention back to Jasper as he tugged on his arm, leaning down once prompted to.

“No cameras,” Jasper whispered. “It’s a Mom-and-Pop type of dollar store, so we’ll be more likely to be able to do what we need to. Pick a hair color for yourself.”

“Uhhh...like what?”

“Nothing too close to your original hair color.”

“But anything too bright will stand out, won’t it?”

“Yeah, but we’re not gonna stand out. Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

Jackson bit his lip and nodded, slowly picking the pink off the shelf. “This?”

“That works.” The blonde nodded, grabbing a blonde and a brown. “Follow.” He started up towards the corner, setting the three boxes on top. Leaning onto it, he looked at the cashier. “Are you the owner?”

The man gave a small nod of his head, scanning the three items. “I always get scared when teenagers ask me that.”

“I don’t want cigs, vapes, or alcohol.” Jasper shook his head. “I need a favor. My friend here needs to cash out his card.”

“I probably have enough for that.”

“But...we need the receipt for this purchase to be destroyed.”

The man sighed softly without looking up from bagging the items, handing him the bag back. “Runaways? Criminals? Am I gonna get in trouble if I do this?”

“Listen, if it comes down to money...”

“It doesn’t. But I need a good excuse that I would delete a receipt of purchase. In the system.”

“Maybe the computer started to glitch, and you had to clear everything on it.”

“Maybe someone stole his card.” The man turned the card reader towards them, resting his hands on the counter. “But that comes down to money. What’s your name, kid?” He turned to Jackson.

“Carter.” Jackson flicked his card out of his pocket, holding it between his pointer and middle finger.

"Where you from?"

"Doesn't matter," Jasper interjected. "How much?"

"Rich kid? Looks like he's from a well-off family. A family that'll be looking for their kid. And if they know that I let their kid cash out his card here..., it might get me shut down."

"So how much?"

"How much you got, kid?"

Jasper looked up at Jackson, giving him a reassuring nod once he looked down at him.

"\$4000."

"Can't cash out all of it immediately, or the bank will immediately think something's wrong and call your parents. Cash-out \$2000."

"And then?" Jasper leaned against his boyfriend, raising his eyebrow.

"\$700. Deal or no deal."

Jasper inhaled with his eyes closed before nodding. "That works. You think you have 1900 dollars?"

The man nodded as well, watching Jackson select all the options on the screen, and then started to pull the money out of the cash register. "Here you go. \$1900 even."

"Listen...if things go south..." Jasper wrote his # on one of the flaps of the dye boxes, tearing it off and handing it to the store owner. "I'll make up for it somehow."

"Trust your word."

Jasper grabbed Jackson's hand, heading out and returning to the truck, shutting his eyes once more. Feeling his boyfriend reach for his hand, he turned to him, opening his eyes to look at him. "License plate."

"Where am I going?" He started up the truck, starting to back out.

"Down the street. I'll tell you when to turn."

"Are you okay?" Jackson asked softly, gently releasing his hand.

"I'm fine. Just...a lot of thinking." He watched the road for a few silent seconds, biting on his pinky nail. As he practically destroyed what was left of it in his nervous thoughts, he stared blankly, trying to formulate a better plan than whatever they had.

Jasper already knew they would likely be sleeping in the truck no matter what. They couldn't leave any traces or paper trails unless they found the right place. Was there a right place in this town even? Likely, actually. It seemed most of the stores and places here were locally owned; therefore, it was easier to manipulate the system and stay under the radar.

Exiting his thoughts, the blonde's eyes widened at a familiar site, and he frantically pointed toward a motel they were approaching. "There there there!"

"Oh, there?"

"Yes, yes. I know the man who owns this place." Jasper pressed his forehead against the window, nodding with an almost desperate expression as he reread the sign. Rocky Resting Point. "I think he can do most of the things we need!"

Jackson nodded, turning into the lot and parking as close as possible. Before he could even get his seatbelt off, his boyfriend had nearly flown into the building.

"Rocco!" Jasper cried, running up to the front desk and hugging the man behind it. "Rocco, oh my god...you have no idea how good it is to see you."

Blinking, the older man ruffled his hair confusedly, looking down at him. "Why are you up here?"

Pulling away from his chest, he looked up at him. "I almost got arrested by the police...they caught me stealing. And they were gonna get my data and catch me for all the other things I've stolen. So I had to come here to avoid being caught...and I...my boyfriend is with me."

"The...rich boy?" Rocco raised an eyebrow, looking past him and sighing. "Lord have mercy."

The 'rich boy' walked in tentatively, clasping his hands together as he approached the two quietly.

"Yes, Rocky. The rich boy. He left his family to be with me." Jasper let go of him fully, grabbing his boyfriend's hand. "Jackson, this is my old friend, Rocco. Rocco, this is my boyfriend, Jackson."

"Nice to meet you, kid. Heard plenty about you." The older man shook his hand, giving a kind smile.

"You too."

"So...you're up here for a reason. What do you need?" Rocco leaned against the front desk.

"License plate?"

"Free."

"ID Cards?"

Rocco winced hard, tapping his hand against the podium. "I'll lower it. \$700 each. What else?"

"A room." Jasper clasped his hands together, closing his eyes.

"\$50 bucks a night for you two. I'll cover the damage." He patted his chest, opening his arms.

The blonde hugged him tightly, exhaling softly. "Thank you so much, Rocco. You're a lifesaver. I owe you."

"You don't owe me anything, Jazz." He patted his back, releasing him and tossing him a key. "Nothing but a smile."

Smiling brightly, Jasper caught the key in one hand. "Let's go get our stuff." He grabbed his boyfriend's hand and out toward the front door at the speed of light.

"Wait, whoa!" Nearly being dragged behind him, Jackson stumbled out, reaching into his pocket and pressing the unlock button on the truck. "Who is...that guy to you?"

“Rocco used to live near me when I was in Regina. He was my source of food and, overall, my comfort. If I weren’t practically feral, I would have let him take me in. Starting to regret my choices.” He mumbled the last part of his sentence, grabbing the bags.

“So...how old were you when you lived in Regina, then?” The dark-haired teen shook his head, holding his arms out for a couple of the bags.

“12.” Jasper dropped the bags in his arms, smiling brightly. “Then the police caught me selling meth in an alley, and I had to run.”

“So you ran to...?”

“Kurtley. And I became Riley.” He grabbed the remainder, placing the gun in the pocket of his backpack.

“Oh...”

“Mhm. It wasn’t very long before I almost got caught again yada yada. That’s my life, Jackson. It’s not fun.” The blonde teen started to walk back into the motel, holding the door for his boyfriend.

“I know.” Jackson nodded softly, trailing behind him.

“We’re going to A124. Come on.”

Following behind his boyfriend, the dark-haired teen peeked over the bags, inspecting the rooms at a glance. Nearly running into Jasper, he skidded to a stop, waiting for the creak of the door to unlock.

“Yep. Good ole Rocco room.” Jasper walked in, setting the bag on the bed carefully. “Shut that door behind you.” He paused, watching his boyfriend kick it closed with his foot. “So...” He sat on the bed, laying back. “You know this is gonna be really hard, right, Jackson?”

Setting the bags down, the brunette sat beside him, nodding slightly. “I know.”

“Not just because of me. Your parents are gonna be looking for you come Tuesday.”

Jackson lay next to him, continuing to nod as he listened attentively. “Yeah...”

“The police are looking for me. And soon, they’ll be looking for you. So if either of us slips up...”

“You’re going to jail, and I’m going to boarding school?”

Jasper bit back a smile, shaking his head. “Yeah. Probably.”

“So, what’s the best way to keep them off of us?”

“Destroy your phone. They can ping your location off of the cell towers. Turn it off for now.” The blonde sat back up, leaning against the headboard. “And we need to dye our hair. I especially do. They’re looking for a blonde Asian kid right now. I’ll go brunette and turn you blonde. I’m gonna do whatever jobs Rocco has...” He began to grab the hair dye, ripping open the box of blonde dye.

Jackson watched him for a few moments, getting up slowly. Grabbing a towel from the bag, he wrapped it around his neck, sitting closer to him. “Jasper...?”

“Hm?” The blonde looked through the instructions, eyes locked onto it. He held the bottles from the box in his free hand, momentarily glancing up. “Yes, Jax?”

“Now that I’m a part of this whole thing with you...”

“No, you can’t do the jobs with me.” Jasper began to mix the bleaching components together, shaking his head as he stood.

“No, no, that’s not what I was gonna ask. I was gonna ask...what do you do on these jobs?”

Finishing the mixture, the blonde pulled the gloves on, massaging the dye through his boyfriend’s hands. “Sell drugs, run messages to people. Whatever will get me money, Jax.”

“What will I do while you’re gone?”

“I’m not sure...” Jasper sat behind him, tilting his head around him with a small smile. “We’ll figure it out...after we get this done, I’ll go ask Rocco.”

Jackson stared at him for a moment, smiling back. “That’s the first time you’ve genuinely smiled at me all day.”

“Too much thinking.” The blonde patted his hair, eyeing it for a second. “You’re going blonde already. In a few minutes, you’ll rinse. In the meantime, I’m gonna start on my hair.” He sat on the floor with his own box, tossing his gloves in the trash. Beginning to go through his own instructions, he leaned back against the bed, exhaling softly.

Most of his stress from earlier had dissipated, though he still felt quite anxious and tense about the entire situation. Maybe the seriousness hadn’t sunken into Jackson yet, or it could have been possible he wasn’t nearly as worried about it as Jasper was. How would they avoid the cops for both of them? And if they were caught, could Jasper be labeled as a kidnapper?

Sitting in thought, the blonde (now turning brunette) looked down at his gloved hands, turning back around to face Jackson. “Jax...is the dye on every part of my hair?”

Looking down at him, Jackson gently moved his head around, nodding softly. “Yeah. You’re all clear.”

Jasper nodded back at him, tapping his fingers against the bed frame and staring out the window. Which practically faced nothing. Much different from the hotel they’d be staying at. In fact, closing that window would probably benefit them more than leaving it open. He scoffed at it audibly, hugging his knees and resting his chin on top.

“You okay?” Jackson slid down next to him, tilting his head.

“Mhm...how long has it been?”

“Probably long enough to rinse.”

“Go ahead...” Jasper rested his chin on his knees, continuing to tap his own fingers against his thigh. Hearing the water turn on, he closed his eyes, resting his forehead against his hand. So much to do. So little time.

After remaining in that position for a few minutes, he stood slowly and walked into the bathroom, sitting on the counter as Jackson dried his hair. “Wow...you look...very different blonde.”

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's interesting..." The now-brunette snorted, covering his mouth. "Don't dry your hair too much. We still gotta dye it again." He rinsed his hair in the sink, hip-bumping his boyfriend out of the way. "Once I finish this, I'm gonna go talk to Rocco and see if he has any work."

"That's a really pretty brown..."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Mhm."

Lifting his head, Jasper grabbed a towel and began to dry his hair, looking at Jackson through the window. "You...you're a mess. A blonde mess now."

"And you're a brunette. Funny how we've swapped." Jackson crossed his arms, stepping up behind him. "We don't look bad swapped."

"I don't look bad swapped. You, on the other hand...?"

Smacking his arm, the now-blonde Jackson walked out of the bathroom, grabbing his other box of dye. "Guess I can get started on this."

"Have fun. I'll be back." Jasper dropped the towel on the counter, shaking his slightly damp hair. Walking out of the door and beginning down the hall, he navigated up to the front, tilting his head at the empty front counter. Sliding past it to the office behind it, he knocked twice before entering. "Evening."

"Jeez. Couldn't even wait for me to let you-...brown? When's the last time you had brown hair, Jasper?" Rocco kicked his feet onto his desk, tapping his cigarette against it.

"Probably back when I was 13." Sitting across from him, he crossed his arms, eyes locking onto the flip phone on the table. "Still running that thing?" He gestured towards it with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. Makes more than this thing does." The older man chuckled as he gestured to the building, shaking his head. "Why do you ask?"

"I need some work. We need some work." The brunette nodded, spinning back and forth in his chair.

"We? You and the rich kid?"

"Yes, us. I know what I'm doing, Rocco."

"That's the plan, Rocky."

"So what's he gonna do? Hm? Hey, how'd you and this kid meet anyways? I thought I told you not to date on the streets."

"None of that matters. Jobs, money, hello?"

"What happened to your moral compass? What are you gonna do if you get in a rut and he's in trouble? You gonna forfeit your own life to save a rich kid who ran away by choice?"

Sighing, Jasper reached over the table while the man was talking, grabbed the cigar from him, and flicked the ashes off the end. Examining it, he took a small puff, blowing out smoke rings and watching them float through the air. Once they began to dissipate, he turned back to him. "You done?"

“You’re really gonna take him with you?”

“If you tell me what jobs you have, I will.” Jasper kicked his own feet onto his desk, relaxing back into his chair. “So...what do you have?” He tilted his head with an innocent smile, cupping his hands around his face.

“I’m sure I have...something.” Rocco sighed and shook his head, standing slowly. “I’m sure I have something.”