

# Part Four

March

Since the two boys had confirmed their relationship, everything Jackson did seemed to be lined with silver and gold and sprinkled with diamonds. Even with his consistent lack of social interaction with the other teens at his school and his current distance from his parents, he and Jasper met up almost every day of the week, the bare minimum just being a quick hug and kiss, which was more than enough for him most days. The days when they were able to hang on, and cuddle and lay in each other's arms were like the rewards for being patient for the past four months. And they paid off.

Except for today. Today, the two couldn't meet because Jackson was taking the responsibility to study before his test that would mark spring break, and he couldn't afford to fail it. So despite his want and, hell, even need to be near Jasper, today was just a day they couldn't.

Jackson sat on the porch with his notebook in his lap, his headphones' volume as loud as they would go. Regardless of his parents saying loud music would not help him consume information, it seemed the only way he could properly remember everything. Sipping his lemonade, he flipped to the next page to continue his studies.

It was roughly an hour before his parents would get home and roughly another 10 minutes before the ice cream truck showed up. He planned to be done before both of those events happened but also wanted to avoid rushing. If time permitted, he could study after dinner.

Humming to himself as he thought, Jackson started skimming over his notes, hoping to finish faster, throwing his sneakers onto the banister. "Ugh..." He muttered to himself, starting to lean back in his chair. "I don't wanna keep skimming, but I need to finish before..." He ran his hands through his hair, glancing at the white SUV pulling in next to him. "Too late."

"Hey, Jackson. You studying?" Mr. Pierce started to make his way up the stairs, ruffling his hair.

"Yeah. Got an exam tomorrow."

"I don't think I've ever seen you study at all." Mrs. Pierce chuckled before pulling a Tupperware container out of a plastic bag. "Mrs. Dell made you some more of that pasta from the last time they came to eat with us. You remember?"

"Mm." Jackson hummed and grabbed it gently from her, examining it. "Yeah, I remember. The charity drive?"

"Yeah. She's doing another soon, so I guess she's getting the recipe back up." Mrs. Pierce chuckled once more.

"Maybe I could actually volunteer this time..."

"That would be a great idea." Mr. Pierce leaned against the banister, crossing his arms. "Getting you involved in the community and out of the house."

"Yeah, I probably should...any new rules since my birthday?"

"Yeah, you've been 16 since Thursday."

"I've got my license now. Are you guys gonna get me a car?" Jackson glanced up from his notes, setting them down on the floor beside him.

"Honestly, we're gonna just give you the truck." Mr. Pierce patted his shoulder, smiling at him. "We were even thinking of getting you a brand new..." Dragging his words to a stop as the police sped by, sirens blasting and lights flashing, he turned back to watch where they were heading, narrowing his eyes. "What in the world?"

Slowly, the teen stood to watch as well, stepping towards the stairs with a concerned expression. "Isn't that the Blanchet's house?"

"Yeah...it sure is." Mrs. Pierce's eyes followed another cop car as it drove by, stepping close to the edge of the porch as well. "I haven't seen emergency lights in this neighborhood since you broke your leg."

"I know..." Jackson squinted his eyes, taking several steps down to observe the scene. "What do you think's happening?"

"I can't quite say...don't go further down." Mr. Pierce set a hand on his shoulder, standing next to him.

The dark-haired boy watched as the police rammed the door down with their shoulder, eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "That's not good...that means it's urgent, yeah?"

"Sure does." Mrs. Pierce joined them on the stairs, wrapping her arm around Jackson.

The three watched as the rest of the cops rushed in, pistols aimed as they did. A few moments later, two of the cops came out with a grip on a hooded individual, starting to wrestle them to the ground. The larger cop pinned them to the ground, pulling their arms back to cuff them.

"Whoa...do you think they tried to-?" Jackson cut his words off as he recognized the old, tattered Jan Sport backpack, trying his hardest not to seem like he knew something he shouldn't have. He squinted his eyes only a little bit and winced as they pulled the hoodie off of Jasper, his own heart racing, probably just as fast as his boyfriend's likely was. Stepping down from under both of them, he walked closer to the yard's edge.

One of the officers ripped the backpack from his grip, examining what was inside as the Blanchets came out, looking shocked and concerned. "Is this all yours?" He pulled out a box of jewelry, holding it out to them. As they nodded, he turned back to Jasper, the other cop holding him down. "So you're why tiny things have been up and disappearing in this neighborhood, hm?"

"I've been taking little stuff...get off! You're hurting me!" Jasper wriggled underneath the other officer, wincing.

"Little stuff worth hundreds of dollars, boy. Up to a total of maybe 6000 dollars."

"I didn't know it was that much...!"

"What are you even doing with it?" The officer bent to look him in the eyes, scoffing. "You selling it? What is this, teenage boosting or something?"

"I'm not telling you what I'm doing with it."

"You know how much money these poor people have lost?"

"I didn't know..."

"Oh, you knew. You know how long you could be in prison?"

"Prison?" Mrs. Blanchet stepped down from the stairs.

"Yeah...considering that he's likely the perpetrator behind all these other items disappearing..."

"Wait, wait...please. You...you don't have to...we don't wanna press charges against him..." Mrs. Blanchet stepped forward, shaking her head. "It's...all here, just please let him go."

The officer kneeling in front of him stared for a moment, looking around. "Fine, Ms. Blanchet. What's your name, boy?"

"I'm not telling you my name..."

"You're gonna make it hard on me?"

Staying silent, Jasper only winced as the other officer seemed to place more weight on him, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Alright, boy. Tell us your name so we can call your parents and get you out of here."

"I don't have parents...!"

Staring at him for a long moment, the older officer seemed to clench his jaw in an agitated manner before smiling and starting towards the patrol vehicle. "Alright then, young man. We can figure this all out at the station. Get him up."

The other officer stood and picked Jasper up by the cuffs, standing him up and heading to the car.

"You can't arrest me, you-you don't have any proof that I stole the other things!" Jasper exclaimed.

"Yeah, yeah, hush." The older officer started to get in the driver's seat, shaking his head.

Jackson watched in shock, his mouth open in damn-near horror as his love was ushered into the vehicle, stepping back against his dad as it drove away.

"Come on." Mr. Pierce grabbed his arm gently, using his other hand to pat Jackson's shoulder. "Let's get you away from all this..."

Unable to keep his eyes off of the scene behind him, the dark-haired teen stumbled slightly behind his dad, only looking away and facing his parents as the door closed in front of him.

Shaking the shock and confusion off of his face, Jackson attempted to walk past them to the stairs, mumbling, "I'm just gonna head upstairs..."

“Wait, wait.” Mrs. Pierce stopped him by his chest, guiding him towards the dining room table. “Take a seat. We have something we need to talk about.”

Sitting mindlessly, he stared down at his fingers as he twiddled them together, hoping they were concerned about the scene he’d just witnessed. Because there was simply no way it could be about what he feared most. He was a teen who usually attempted to seek out adventure. How abnormal would it be for him to want to see what was going on with the cops in the neighborhood? Not at all.

“Did you hear us? Jackson?”

Looking up, Jackson blinked as both of his parents watched him from their own seats with attentive eyes, wringing his hands together. “No, I’m...I’m sorry.”

The two looked at each other, and Mrs. Pierce let out a soft sigh, looking at her husband.

“You know, Jackson...we know about...your friendship.” Mr. Pierce nodded, crossing his arms.

“With who?”

Mrs. Pierce only gave him a face, shaking her head. “That...boy who just got arrested. The homeless one.”

Jackson looked down at his lap, unsure what to say to the two. Closing his eyes as he thought, he could feel his parents seem to watch him even harder. Finally opening his eyes with an inhale, he turned his eyes back towards them. “I...I thought you guys wouldn’t approve of me hanging out with him because he’s...he’s homeless...”

“Mm...and he just got arrested.” Mr. Pierce nodded at him once more.

Jackson took a deep breath, mumbling, “Yeah...I-I know. Can...I know it sounds really bad, but can I please explain?”

The two looked at each other before giving a slight nod, leaning back in their seats together.

“Okay...we-we met in maybe October, and he-he didn’t really wanna hang out with me, but I really wanted to hang out with him because I wanted to be friends. When he finally started actually hanging out with me, I was buying him food and stuff because his parents are gone, and he doesn’t have any family, so he doesn’t have any support besides the street jobs he does. I didn’t want him to continue those because they’re dangerous, but I wanted to help him. And I didn’t wanna tell you, guys, because I thought that you guys would send him off to an adoption home, and he really really doesn’t wanna go to one, and I just wanted to make sure he could be comfortable doing whatever he chose. I...I asked him out for Christmas, and we’ve been seeing each other almost every day, and I...I just thought you guys wouldn’t like this, but...can you please...please help us? He’s a good kid, I promise, and he only steals because he needs the money. He’s really a good person. Please, please, please. I’m sorry for lying to you guys, and I’m sorry for keeping such a big secret. Please.” The teen clasped his hands together pleadingly, closing his eyes.

Mrs. Pierce turned to her husband, giving him a silent scoff. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she looked back to her son, shaking her head. "I can't believe this."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"No, it's not the situation I can't believe."

Jackson opened his eyes, blinking and slowly lowering his hands, a worried expression on his face.

"It's you I can't believe. You kept a secret like this from us, and you expect us to help the homeless criminal boy you've been dating for nearly four months?"

"I...He's only a criminal because he doesn't have family, Mom, please."

"I don't care. I've had jewels and precious things turn up lost, and you mean to tell me it's because of your criminal boyfriend? No, Jackson. No. We are not helping him; you will break up with him, and you're grounded." Mrs. Pierce started to stand, shaking her head a second time.

"Wait, no! I-I'm begging; he just needs somewhere to stay and someone to help him. He-he only does things like this because no one will help him. Please, I promise-"

"Have some common sense, Jackson. Look at this situation, and stop pretending that we should have sympathy for this homeless thief."

"He's not just a thief, he's-"

"Jackson, your mother said no. I can't believe you would get involved in a mess like this." Mr. Pierce started to stand as well, sighing. "Everything she said is right."

"He's not...he's a victim here. You saw how those officers treated him." Jackson followed behind them, stopping in front of the stairway.

"A month. Just school and back." Mrs. Pierce moved past him to go up the stairs, waving him away.

Before he could speak a final time, Mr. Pierce stopped before him. "No more arguing. Go to your room." He walked past him and up the stairs, muttering, "Jesus Christ."

Jackson stood at the bottom of the stairs dumbfounded, closing his eyes and trying his hardest to lessen the emotions he was feeling all at once. Slowly, he started to go up to his room, closing his door and locking it.

Resting his forehead against the door, he held back the urge to slam his fists into the solid oak, squeezing his eyes shut and turning to sink against it haltingly. It felt like everything he had built since that fated meeting in October was being wrecked, or rather being crushed.

Looking around his room as if there'd be an answer on the bed or at the nightstand, his eyes went to the window, and he stared at the sun outside, the illusion of a bright and sunny day long gone. Standing slowly, he grabbed his earbuds off the bed and made his way to it, pushing it open.

Climbing out with his phone, he sat on the house's edge, leaning back and holding his phone close to his chest. Turning onto his side, he exhaled softly, awaiting what he hoped would be a call from his love within the next hours.

## An Hour Later

Jackson woke up startled as his phone trilled in his ear, glancing around at the sky as the sun descended and the cricket's trill echoed in the trees. Looking down at his phone, he sat up upon seeing 'Jazz <3' and immediately answered, scratching his head. "Hello? Are you okay?"

"Hey, Jax..." The blonde answered in a soft voice, exhaling quietly. "I'm okay...but I got arrested."

"I saw. That's why I'm asking."

"You did?"

"Yeah...I saw the whole thing. And so did my parents. What...happened after the arrest?"

"They jailed me at the station, but they couldn't actually send me to juvie. I had to tell them my real name, and they brought me back to some 'family' if you get me. I'm back at my place, but...they're collecting evidence to try to arrest me."

"So...they're planning to arrest you?"

"When they collect evidence that I've stolen all those things, yeah."

Jackson sat on the roof in silence for a few moments, checking the time and huffing. "So what are you even gonna do?"

"I don't know...Jackson, I'm not even sure if I can stay here. I might have to leave the city."

Once again, the dark-haired boy found himself unable to find the right words, and his stomach suddenly ached. Placing a hand on his stomach, he closed his eyes to think, knowing that the other boy had nothing to say as well.

"Jackson?" Jasper finally spoke, a tinge of worry in his voice.

"My parents know we've been hanging out. And they know we're a couple. I asked them for help."

"They said no?"

"Yeah. And they said I'm grounded, and we must break up."

"I have to leave."

"I know."

"What...are we gonna do?"

"I don't know."

"Can you wait until you turn 17? You can move out, and we could just live together..."

"I don't think we have a choice, Jasper."

"Are you upset at me?"

"When are you leaving?"

"Probably in the next few days. I don't know how long it'll take them to find evidence."

Jackson sighed softly, running his hands through his hair and groaning to himself. "What are we gonna do?"

"I mean...what are you gonna do? About everything your parents said..."

"I don't care. They don't understand, and they never have. I don't need them. We don't need them or their help. Don't worry about it. I'm gonna figure something out for you. I promise I will. Do you think three days is enough?"

"I hope so. I'm probably leaving by then if we don't figure things out."

"Just...stay out of any trouble, try not to get noticed, and...if you need anything, ask me. Okay?"

"Jackson, you're grounded."

"If you need anything, ask me. I'll get it to you, I promise."

"Be careful. You don't get in any more trouble, either. Okay?"

"I won't. I promise. I love you."

"I love you too..."

"And Jasper?"

"It's Wesley Jeong. If that's what you were asking..."

Chuckling softly, a small smile spread across his face, and the teen shook his head. "Still predictable?"

"Always will be."

"Stay safe, Wesley."

"You too, Rose."

And just like that, the phone hung up, leaving Jackson alone with his thoughts, the moon and the crickets.

## Two Days Later

Jackson glanced up at his dad through the mirror as he stopped on the side of the road, and he grabbed his backpack, starting to get out. "See ya, Dad."

"Hey, wait." Mr. Pierce let the passenger window down, sighing and holding the keys to the truck out to him. "You can go get some groceries if you need some. We won't be back until Monday. Just...don't do anything else your Mom wouldn't like...okay?"

The dark haired boy only nodded, grabbing the keys and starting to head up the stairs. "Thanks, Dad." He called out, opening the door to the house.

As he walked in, he glanced around the empty living room, jingling the keys in his hand. Dropping his backpack on the couch, he made his way up the stairs, grabbing his duffle bag from underneath his bed.

Jackson held it between his hands, unzipping it slowly and starting to throw his clothes in. Glancing over at some of his other important items, he started to toss them in, slowly down once he grabbed his Nike shoebox. Opening it, he pulled out the cash inside, pushing it into the pocket of the duffle bag, finally grabbing pairs of shoes and shoving them in.

Heading down the stairs, the teen slowed as he glanced around again, tapping his foot before grabbing his backpack and emptying out the school content, leaving only his hoodies and wallet.

Pushing the garage door open, he threw it into the back seat of the truck, getting in and gripping the steering wheel tightly. Squeezing it tightly and watching his knuckles turn white, he started the truck and pressed the garage opener, throwing the tiny device out of the window as he pulled out of the garage, heading straight towards downtown.

Pulling up to what he thought was the apartment complex he stayed in, Jackson glanced over the names on the mailboxes, reading the blank ones' room numbers and immediately starting to head up. Knocking on the door, he stood back with his hands shoved in his pockets, looking down at his feet.

Slowly, the door creaked open, and Jasper peeked out, blinking confusedly and pulling him in. "I...Jackson..." He pushed the door shut behind him, a pistol in his non-dominant hand. "What are you doing here, Jackson?"

As the door shut behind him, Jackson looked down at the pistol and then at him, shaking the confusion out of his head. "Why do you have that?"

"Protection. Why are you here? How do you know where I live?"

"Intuition."

"I..." Jasper sighed softly, going back to his backpack that sat on the couch, not even glancing back. "You shouldn't be here, Jackson. I'm about to leave."

"I know. But you're leaving today and..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I wanted to take you wherever before I don't see you again."



The blonde slowed down as he threw things into the open bag, zipping it up and turning to Jackson. "It's not gonna be that long."

"It's a long time to me." The dark-haired teen grabbed the other's hands, pulling him closer.

Avoiding looking at him, Jasper sighed softly and rested his head against his shoulder, humming softly.

"Do you know where you're going?"

"About an hour away, up to Franklin."

"That's like an hour and a half. Do you know anyone from there?"

The blonde shook his head, huffing into his chest. "Mm-mm...not at all."

"You're gonna be alone."

"I always have been, Jackson."

"Look...can I at least take you?"

The blonde grabbed Jackson's face, looking at him finally and nodding. "Yes, you can."

Smiling slightly, the other teen kissed Jasper's cheek, grabbing his closed bag. "I'll grab this for you."

Jasper dropped his pistol in the other bag, buttoning it closed and slinging it onto his back.

"You ready?"

"I'm ready."

Jackson started to head out, going down the stairs towards the truck. Opening the backseat, he started to pack Jasper's things into them, grabbing the other bag from him. "Go ahead and hop into the passenger's, Jazz."

Jasper went around the back end of the truck, getting in the passenger's seat and buckling himself up. Looking back at the black duffle bag under his own seat, he stared at it for a moment before shaking his head and turning back to the front as his boyfriend got in.

"You ready?" Jackson held his hand out to Jasper.

"Yep." The blonde nodded, grabbing it and intertwining their fingers.

Squeezing his hand, the dark-haired teen nodded back before starting up the truck and placing both hands on the wheel. Adjusting his seat, he placed the city into the truck's navigation system, eyeing how long the trip would be. "It's two hours with the current traffic. You could catch some rest if you'd really like, Jazzy."

"What makes you think I haven't been resting?"

"You got bags the size of Mount Rushmore, Jazz."

Jasper stared up at him from where he was slumped in the passenger's seat, a tiny smirk creeping onto his face.

Making the hold-on sign, Jackson reached into the back seats, grabbed a blanket, and draped it over him. "Take a nap, seriously. I'll wake you up when we're in Franklin."

"Nearing Franklin."

"In Franklin." He booped his nose and chuckled at him. "Okay?"

"Okay..." Jasper sunk a little more, resting his head against the window to get comfortable.

Jackson nodded to himself and started to drive, glancing over the first few minutes to see if he could spot when his boyfriend fell asleep. He was tense still, mostly because his mind was racing, and he was still partially undecided. He knew if Jasper knew he had even an inkling of not returning, he would be able to talk him down over the two-hour ride.

And while Jasper may have truly needed the sleep, Jackson truly needed his silence to finalize his decision.

"Jackson?" Jasper mumbled with his eyes closed.

"Hm?" He raised his eyebrows without looking over, glancing for only a brief moment.

"Everything's really gonna be alright, right?" He spoke up.

"It is. I promise." Jackson gently patted his shoulder, taking the opportunity to look at him during a red light. Smiling at him warmly, maybe a little too warmly, he slid his hand to meet his, squeezing it. "I promise."

Giving him a tired smile back, Jasper nodded. "Love you, Jackson."

"I love you too, Jasper." And like before, even though it was maybe minutes later, and he could hear the soft snore of the blonde, he confirmed it to himself. "Everything is gonna be alright." He muttered, a small grin marking a decision finalized. "Love you, Jazz." He kissed the sleeping teen's hand, his grin widening.