

Part One

October

Sitting on the stairs of his house, Jackson Pierce stared out blankly at the passing cars, aimlessly bouncing his basketball down and back in his hand. Watching as it rolled out of his grip and towards the bright green grass, he sighed and stood with a stretching yawn. Hopping off of his steps, he went to grab the ball, halting as his eyes caught a form move across the street.

Narrowing his eyes, the lean boy stood up straight to get a closer look, taken aback as he recognized the silhouette of another teen boy. Strange. No other teen boys lived in this neighborhood except for him.

Starting to sneak closer, Jackson approached the fence of his own house, peeking over it in an attempt to get a better look at the other teen.

"Hm..." He mumbled to himself as he thought. *'He's not familiar...but he's...pretty. He doesn't really look like he belongs in the neighborhood, but...'* He stood up completely, opening his fence gate. "He doesn't look like trouble..." Jackson continued out loud, checking the road before crossing over to the adjacent fence, peering over the new one.

The thinner teen headed towards the back door of the other house, peeking into the windows to see if they were empty. Upon seeing they were, he reached for the doorknob, going to enter. Stopping briefly, he turned back to check his surroundings, catching a glance at the other male.

Eyes widening, Jackson attempted to duck down swiftly, gasping and grabbing his chest. Peering through just a crack in the fence, he narrowed his eyes to see if the other male had spotted him.

Approaching slowly, the thinner teen started to walk to the fence with his eyes narrowed, his eye peeking straight into the hole. Once his eyes connected with the other, he stumbled back with a soft gasp, staring up at the fence as he fell on his butt.

"Wait, wait!" Jackson pushed the fence open, sliding in quickly and holding his hands up to stop the other boy from fleeing. "Wait, I'm not here to bust you, I..."

The teen scooted back, his blonde hair falling into his face as he stared up at the other expectantly.

"I, um..." The brunette continued to hold his hands up, kicking the fence gate shut and leaning back against it. "Just...wait..."

Slowly rising to his feet, the other teen continued to back up even more, gaze still connected with Jackson's as he made his way towards the back gate.

"You're...I noticed you're not from around here..." The brunette dropped his hands slightly, still staring him in the eyes. "You're..." He glanced at the house, stepping closer to him. "You definitely don't live there."

Freezing as he stated the last portion, the blonde stopped completely, sighing softly. "Listen...I'll leave now if you don't say anything." He spoke quietly, holding out his hand.

"I had no plans to say anything anyway ..." Jackson looked down at his hand, smiling slightly as he shook it. "I didn't wanna tell on you...I was actually just curious about who you are." He grabbed their hands with his other, enveloping the others with both of his. "What do you say?"

Staring down at their hands, the skinnier teen raised an eyebrow before looking back up at him. "Why is that?"

"I...don't meet many teens...especially not ones who break into houses." Jackson's smile turned into a half-smirk, and he tilted his head.

"Jasper Monroe." The blonde pulled his hand loose from between Jackson's two.

"I'm Jackson. Jackson Rose Pierce." Jackson shoved his hands in his pockets, rocking on his heels as he thought. "So...where are you from?"

"Downtown." Jasper started towards the back gate, glancing back before he started to hop over it. Sitting on it, he turned back to the brunette as he followed him. "Look...I'm not entirely sure that you should follow me, Jackson."

"And why is that?" Jackson crossed his arms and looked up to him.

"I'm not from here..." He turned and slipped over the fence, leaning over it to continue his conversation.

"We had that conversation. Downtown." The brunette leaned back against the fence to slip over it, only to be stopped by the other boy's hands. "What?" He glanced back.

"You shouldn't follow me. You know who I am and my name."

"That's not all I wanted to know, Jasper."

"Well, what else did you wanna know?" Although he spoke softly, the twang of frustration still could be heard in his voice.

"Who you are. You're not just your name and where you're from."

"Alright then. I'm homeless, Jackson." Jasper stared up at him, hands still resting on his back.

Jackson turned to look down at him, gently removing his hands and hopping down. "Figured something like that. What else would you be doing sneaking into houses?"

Jasper raised an eyebrow, taking a step back. "So you should go home."

"But we're friends."

"We are?"

"We are now, yeah."

"And what makes you say that?"

"We shook hands. I'm keeping a secret of yours. And...I'm gonna pay for your food."

"My food where?" A confused expression took over the blonde's face.

"Wherever you want." Jackson shrugged. "That's what friends do, yeah?"

"You're probably gonna get in trouble."

"I don't care. I don't ever meet people my age...nor people at all."

"So why not go find someone else?" Jasper started out towards the highway, walking hastily.

"You think I haven't tried? Besides, what'll happen if I hang out with you for one day? Will the world explode?" Stepping in front of him, Jackson mimicked a bomb dropping. "Will someone call in an airstrike?" Starting to imitate what that would look like as well, the brunette pretended to get shot, stumbling back dramatically before falling to the ground against a tree. "Ugh..."

Staring at him as he moved around and mimicked, Jasper raised his eyebrow before watching him thud to the ground. A small smile creeping up on his face, he walked over, holding his hand out. "No...none of that stuff will happen."

Opening an eye, Jackson smiled widely, grabbing his hand. "Is that a smile I see?"

Unable to hide the smile, the blonde pulled the other teen up, crossing his arms before nodding. "Fine. One day. And then we never see each other again."

"Sounds like a deal to me." The brunette saluted him, giving a closed-eye smile before turning back around. "Where do you wanna eat? My treat."

"I...I don't know. Anywhere's fine." Jasper followed behind him, shrugging softly.

"Oh, come on. Pick a place. How long has it even been since you last ate?" The brunette pulled his wallet out of his pocket, counting the bills in it. Slowing to a stop upon Jasper's silence, he turned to him.

Arms crossed, the blonde stared at the highway above them, shaking his head. "I don't know." He mumbled.

Concern washing over his face, Jackson stared at him for a long silence, breaking it with a nod and shoving his wallet into his pocket. "Let's change that. Why don't we go where I go when I'm really hungry?"

"Where's that?" Jasper turned back to him with a curious expression.

"It's called Orion's." The brunette started down the hill towards the sidewalk, waving for him to follow. "It's a traditional diner. They serve breakfast all day, as well as lunch and dinner."

"Oh...is it...expensive?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm paying." Jackson turned back to him, holding his hand out.

Jasper uncrossed his arms slowly, grabbing his hand with a nod. "If you say so."

"I do. I did." Jackson nodded before looking at the blonde as he chuckled. "What?"

"You're funny."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Jasper Monroe."

"You're welcome, Mr. Jackson Rose Pierce."

"So...how old are you?"

"15. You?"

"Same. But not for long...I turn 16 next March."

"March is nearly six months away."

"Soon enough to start bragging. When's your birthday?"

"August."

"Oh...like two months ago? Wow. You're young."

"We were born in the same year."

"Yeah, but you were both like...five months later. You know how many things can happen in five months?"

"No, but I could take a guess."

"Then you should get it, Jazz."

"...Jazz...?" The blonde looked up from where he was staring at the ground.

"It's a nickname...have you never had one?"

"No."

"Do you like it...?"

"I...mean...I don't know. It's my first time being called Jazz."

"You'll get used to it, Jazz." Jackson flashed him a smile before turning his attention back to the path in front of the two.

"Have you ever had a nickname, Jackson?"

"No."

After the two had walked in silence for about a minute, Jasper nodded to himself. "Jax..."

"Hm?"

"Jax. It's your nickname."

"Hey, look at that."

"Do you like it?"

"I do..." Jackson nodded, slowing to a stop. "I do." He smiled at him briefly, then turned towards the street in front of them. "There it is." He pointed to the red-striped diner, a bright neon light flashing its name. Unable to hide his smile, he tugged on the blonde's arm. "Let's go."

Jasper followed him across the street and into the diner, glancing around at the full seats and various people there. Eyes following basically everyone he saw, he blinked as Jackson pointed to the booth seat, motioning for him to sit. Sitting slowly, he sank down somewhat, watching their surroundings carefully.

Placing a menu in front of him, Jackson glanced around, leaning forward once he noticed the other's behavior. "Jazz...what's up?"

"There's a lot of people here," Jasper mumbled, not even glancing towards him.

“That’s...that’s okay. They’re-they’re not gonna bother us or anything. Trust me.”

“That’s...that’s not why I’m worried, Jackson.”

“Then why?”

“This is a small town. Everybody knows everybody, and everybody owns some stupid dollar store or mom-and-pop store.”

“And...?”

Jasper leaned forward, lowering his voice to a sharp whisper, “I’ve stolen from a lot of people—all types of things, like money, wallets, jewelry. And the last thing I want is for someone to recognize me. And then I’ll get arrested, and you’ll probably be grounded forever.”

Jackson stared at him for a while, leaning back and tapping his menu against the table.

Sinking down again, Jasper stared back at him for a moment, watching as the brunette turned his attention to the other strangers in the diner.

Placing his menu down, Jackson started to pull his hoodie off, holding it out once he finished. “Take it.”

“What?”

“Don’t want anyone to recognize you? Take it.”

Jasper grabbed it from him hesitantly, pulling it on and over his head slowly, glancing up at the other male.

“And keep it. It’s getting cold.” Jackson started to look through his menu, seemingly unbothered.

Shaking his head in confusion, the blonde pulled his menu up, starting to look through it as well. Peeking over it slowly, he set it down once he connected his eyes with the brunette. “What do you usually get?”

“The All-American is usually pretty good. And the Morning Rise is also nice.” He set his menu down, tapping his fingers against the table and watching as the blonde examined both of them on the menu. “Which do you like?”

“Both look good. Which do you like more?” Jasper’s eyes shifted between the two items.

“Why not just get both?”

Eyeing the price, the blonde looked up and down from the menu to Jackson. “Are you sure?”

“My treat. Oh, and...why not get a shake? They’re amazing.”

“A shake?” He flipped the menu to the desserts, squinting his eyes at them. “Are you sure that’s not too much?”

“Positive.”

Jasper read through the menu a few seconds longer before setting it down. “Well, that’s all then.”

"I can order for us." Jackson grabbed the menu from him, setting it back into the holder. Claspng his hands together, he leaned out of the booth and smiled. "There he is."

Watching as an older male with longish hair approached, Jasper leaned back in his seat slightly, tapping his fingers on the table.

"He won't recognize you, I promise." Jackson patted his hand gently, turning out as the man walked up to the table. "Hey, Orion!"

"Hello, Jackson. What are you doing here without your parents?" Orion pulled out his notepad, lowering himself to a crouch.

"I'm here with my new friend."

"Ahh..." Nodding understandingly, the older man turned to the teen. "Hi. Your name is...?" He held his hand out to him.

"Jasper." Shaking it gently, the blonde nodded with a small smile.

"Well, Jasper, I'm Orion J, owner of this diner and Jackson's self-appointed godfather. Lovely to meet you, dear."

"You as well."

"Besides who we all are, got any idea of what you want?"

"Yep." Jackson sat back with a confident smile. "Two Morning Rises, two All-Americans, a Chocolate shake, a Strawberry shake, a Banana Split, and a Raindrop Pancake."

Scribbling it all down onto his notepad, Orion smiled at the two brightly. "Sounds like we're eating good today. How about I bring out two Sprites while you wait on your shakes? Sound good?"

"Oh yeah. Definitely."

"Alright then, Jackson." He ruffled Jackson's hair, standing up straight. "I'll get that all to you as soon as I can."

Leaning out of the booth as Orion walked away, the brunette turned back to Jasper, watching him tap his fingers against the table. Slowly resting his chin on the table, he did the same with his own fingers for a moment. "So...where are your parents?"

Jasper stared down at him for a moment, finally turning his gaze out the window at the passing cars. "Gone."

"Did...did you ever have them?"

"Mhm."

"Do you remember anything about them?"

"Mhm."

"Maybe they lost you? Were you kidnapped?"

"No, and no."

"So, what happened?"

Jasper's head followed an 18-wheeler as it passed by loudly, resting his chin in his hand and continuing to tap his fingers.

"Jazz..."

“Yes?”

“Too personal?” Jackson lifted his head, a look of empathy washing over his face. Upon the other boy’s silence, he nodded to himself and looked down at his hands as he thought. Eyes lighting up as an idea struck him, he snapped and spoke once again, “Maybe you should go into the adoption system? You know, I’ve-”

“No.” Speaking firmly out of nowhere, Jasper turned his head to him.

“I...why not? It’s not that bad, it’s-”

“No.”

“Listen...I was adopted. And I wouldn’t say I’m doing bad.”

“You got lucky.”

“Whoa, whoa, I wouldn’t say I got lucky, okay?” Jackson shook his head, hair shaking with it. “It’s not ideal. I’m not exactly the happiest 15-year-old.”

“It’s not ideal?” Jasper scoffed.

“I...it’s not what I wanted. I wanted something else.”

“I wanted something else too. Like not to be homeless.”

“You’re creating a problem that doesn’t exist. This could all be solved if you would just go into the adoption system or the foster system.”

“No, it wouldn’t. You don’t get it, Jax.”

“Listen, you’re not gonna get exactly what you want from the system. That’s just facts, Jazz.”

“I’m not gonna get what I want at all. We’re different.”

“Like how? Explain.”

“Like you were adopted by rich white people as a child. No complications, no bullshit. No one’s gonna adopt a 15-year-old with a criminal record. And no one’s gonna adopt a 15-year-old who’s known for stealing. No one wants a teen or a troublemaker.” Jasper stated firmly. “That’s why we’re different.”

Jackson sank down into his booth seat slightly, crossing his arms over his chest. In the aching silence between the two, only the taps of Jasper’s fingers occasionally broke it before he finally spoke. “You know...I wasn’t exactly a perfect little kid. I was sick and expensive. I needed new lungs. Entirely new lungs. Who knows how much those are?”

Jasper’s fingers stopped their rapping, and the blonde looked over at him, his voice softer, “Pity.” He pointed to the other boy, then himself, “Disgust.”

“What?”

“People feel pity for a sickly child. People feel disgusted for a criminal teen.” He looked back out of the window, exhaling softly.

“I just wanna help.” Jackson huffed in frustration, plopping his head into his hands dejectedly.

Turning back to the brunette, Jasper grabbed his head out of his hands, holding it up to look at him. “I know. But the adoption system isn’t for me. I did it once and hated it. Never again.”

“So, how can I help?”

"I thought we were limiting this to one meeting."

"Doesn't mean I don't wanna help you." Jackson looked at his hands, grabbing Jasper's off his face. "Besides...since when do friends only hang out once?" He smiled brightly, bumping him. "Right?"

"You...really wanna be friends with me?"

"Mhm." The brunette nodded hard with his eyes closed, squeezing his hands.

"And I can't stop you?"

"No. You can't." Jackson squeezed his hands again before lifting one to his mouth and kissing it gently.

Staring at him for a moment, Jasper tried to ignore the smile that crawled onto his face. "You're odd."

"So are you. We make a perfect fit."

Gaze locked on the brunette for a long few seconds; the blonde only turned away as Orion walked back up with their sodas, nearly pulling his hand away from the others.

"Here you are, darlings. Your food will be out shortly."

"Thanks, Orion." Jackson smiled as the man headed off once more, looking back at Jasper. "You know, you, uh...have soft hands."

Pulling them loose from his, the blonde nodded. "Thanks, I try."

"Well, you...execute."

Jasper stared at him for a moment, quietly starting to laugh a second later.

"What?" Jackson bit back a smile, grabbing his hands back. "What's so funny?"

"You...you're...you're very funny."

"I try."

"You execute." Jasper giggled as he repeated his own words back to him, dropping his head on the table as he started back laughing.

Smiling at him as he laughed, Jackson started to laugh quietly as well, shaking his head. "I think you're just giggly."

Finally stopping a minute, the blonde raised his head. "Sorry...you're just...you're funny, Jax."

"Feels like it's been a minute since you laughed like that."

"It's been a while, yeah."

"Well...I'm glad I'm funny enough to help bring a smile like that onto your face."

"A smile like what?" The other teen leaned back, a smirk still on his face.

"Like that." Jackson reached his hand to his face, gently cupping his cheek.

Jasper stared at him for a moment, his smile growing just a tiny bit bigger while his cheeks blushed a light pink. Placing his hand on top of Jackson's, he rested it there for a moment before pulling it off of his cheek. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have a nice smile."

"Why say that out of nowhere?"

"Why not?"

"Well...you have nice hair. I like it."

"It's overgrown." Jackson pushed it out of his face.

"It looks nice...."

"You think so?"

"I do." Jasper nodded before looking down at their hands. "I guess...we can hang out more than just once. But...you have to be careful."

"Why do I have to be careful?"

"Because I don't want you to get in trouble. Your parents don't look like the type to want you hanging out with a dirty homeless kid."

"How do you know what my parents look like?"

"Um..."

"How do you know they're white...?"

"Um...I...look, I scoped your house out for stealing quite a few times, but I never could because you were always there."

"Oh...so I was the reason my house never got robbed?"

"Don't say it like that. I only steal food or jewelry from houses."

"Oh...hm. fair enough." Jackson swung their hands back and forth for a moment, glancing up as Orion brought them their food. "Thank you very much."

"Of course, darlings. If you need anything else..." He set a bell on the table, smiling. "Just give me a ring."

"Thanks so much, you're the best, Mr. O."

"Anything for my best customer." Orion ruffled the brunette's hair, turning to Jasper. "And my new favorite customer."

"Thank you, Mr. Orion." Jasper nodded, looking down at the different platters. Gently tugging his hand from Jackson's, he picked up a fork as if considering where to start.

"Don't just stare at it...it'll get cold." Jackson nudged him after a few seconds, chuckling softly.

Glancing up at him, Jasper sat up, starting to eat from the two different meals he'd ordered, clearing them in a mere four, maybe even five minutes.

Barely paying attention as he devoured his own food, the brunette glanced over at the blonde, watching him for a few moments before starting on his banana split. *'He probably barely gets food, hm...'* He eyed him for a few moments longer before pushing the pancakes over.

Once he finished, the blonde glanced up at the chocolate syrup pancakes, looking between them and Jackson. "Hm?"

"You have them. I'm getting full on my banana split."

"Are...you sure?"

"Positive." Jackson nodded without looking up, only peeking up when the other teen started to eat the pancakes. Smiling to himself, he finished his banana split, sitting back and crossing his arms.

Once he'd finished, Jasper sat back himself, glancing up at the other. "Thank you, Jackson..."

"No worries. That's what friends do."

Jasper started to wring his hands in and out, staring out the window once again as thoughts started to overcome him. His eyes connected with the large 'POLICE' letters on the side of a black car, and his hand dropped to the table, fingers lightly rapping against it.

"Jasper?"

"Police."

"They're not here for you." Jackson patted his hand, starting to pull his wallet out of his pocket. Noticing that his gesture brought the other teen no comfort, he stopped his hand from tapping, grabbing, and squeezing it. "Look. I'll go pay now, and we can head out, okay?" He started to stand, nodding briefly before walking to the counter. "Hey, Orion!"

The long-haired man peeked back out of the kitchen, starting to ring him up. "So...was it a date?"

"I wouldn't say so."

"You don't hold hands with a friend normally."

"He's not...he's not normal." Jackson handed him the wad of cash, shaking his head. "Keep the change, Mr. O." He turned around and waved for Jasper to join him.

"You know..." Orion leaned against the counter. "He may not be normal...but I think that's part of the charm, yeah?"

"What do you mean?"

"Since when have you ever liked something that was just normal, Jackson?" He tilted his head with a knowing smile, standing up straight and patting his shoulder. "Have a good rest of your day."

"You too..." Jackson watched as Jasper approached, starting to head out of the diner. "Have you ever been caught by them?"

"The...police?" The blonde glanced back at the two officers who sat inside, placing his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. "No...but I fear they may recognize me. So many people have probably described what I looked like to them. But that's beside the point...I should probably get out of town so no one sees us." He started to walk towards the off-path, nodding. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"I...can walk you home at least. It's not safe for you to walk alone." Jackson started to follow him, nodding.

"I've walked alone for years...I don't think much has changed."

"Yeah, something has. We're friends now. And I don't want you to walk alone." Jasper turned back to look at him, shrugging and turning back front. "You won't listen even if I say no, yeah?"

"No...not really."

"Listen. I don't know if I want you to know where I live just yet." Jasper turned around and stopped, crossing his arms.

“Fair.” Jackson slowed to a stop as well, tapping his foot against the ground. “So, how will we meet again? If I don’t know where you live, and you’re so hell-bent on not being seen with me.”

“I’ll find you.”

“Kind of creepy sounding.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“Sorry...but we will see each other again?”

“Yeah. We will.”

Jackson started to step back, nodding. “See you, Jasper.”

“See you, Jackson.”

Jackson watched the blonde head down the path for a few seconds before turning around and starting to walk towards his own house, sliding his hands into his pockets. As the wind blew, he looked down at his arms as goosebumps formed, rubbing them confusedly. “Oh...yeah. Hoodie.” He snapped and shrugged, a little bounce in his step as he headed home.