

# Part Seven

May

Head laid against the window, Jasper's arms were crossed tightly against his chest, still sweating profusely despite the air as cool as the truck could allow. His eyes were closed, though he wasn't asleep. In fact, he wished he was asleep. This cold that had been plaguing him for nearly four days now seemed to be coming to its peak, but despite it, he didn't want Jackson going anywhere alone.

Exhaling softly, he placed a hand on his chest in an attempt to ignore the pain his previous action had caused, his other hand attempting to find the knobs for the air. Wasting energy if it wasn't doing him any good. However, keeping his eyes closed wasn't doing him any good at finding the air controls.

Opening his eyes reluctantly, the brunette sighed softly, holding up a hand to block the sun from the window. Turning back to the center console, he turned the air conditioning on his side down to its lowest, sinking back into his seat with his hands over his face. When was Jackson gonna be done? When were they gonna go home? And when was the worst of this cold gonna end?

Hearing a piece of furniture land on the truck's bed, the teenager nearly prayed it was the last piece, his clammy hands gripping each other tightly. Leaning his head against the window, he exhaled with a wheeze, grimacing at both the noise and the discomfort.

As the driver's door popped open, Jasper didn't even bother to open his eyes, maintaining his position but mentally acknowledging his boyfriend entering the truck. However, just mentally recognizing his presence did not do enough, as he could feel his partner's eyes on him.

"Baby?"

"Mm?" He opened his eyes, only able to hum out noise, blinking slowly at the blue-haired teenager.

"Are you...okay? You don't look or sound..." Reaching out to him, Jackson felt his forehead, quickly drawing his hand away. "Or feel good."

"It's just the end of my cold..." The brunette shook his head slightly, wincing at the head pain the sudden movement brought.

"Are you sure, baby? You...I think you need some medicine..."

"We don't have to waste money on medicine...I'll be fine after today..."

Jackson stared at him for a few seconds, listening to his wheezing breaths and scrunching his face up. "You really don't sound good, Jazz. I don't think this is a cold you can just beat. You've been sick since Sunday. It's what, Thursday?" He shook his head, gently placing a hand on his thigh. Leaning forward to examine him, he gently moved his hands off his face, frowning. "How long have you had the air off?"

"A few minutes...it wasn't doing anything, so l...mm..." Jasper waved towards the air, hugging himself and sinking down into his seat even more.

"Alright. We gotta get some medicine and some soup, baby. I'm gonna ignore whatever you have to say about it."

"It's a waste..."

"Mhm..." The blue-haired teen began to drive towards their destinations, shaking his head. "I'm not listening to you."

Sighing at his futile effort to stop him, Jasper closed his eyes, groaning softly as the truck began to move. He considered what could be wrong with himself and, after about five seconds, realized it could be a lot of things. He hadn't received a single vaccine in his life and probably had the poorest diet a 15-year-old could have. Honestly, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a drink of just water.

Jackson eyed him from the driver's seat, the wheezing sound coming from him making him more uncomfortable than any noise he'd ever made in his life. "Jasper?"

"Hm?"

"I'm gonna stop by this store and get you some medicine. You've been sick for too long." The blue-haired teen quickly pulled into a pharmacy's parking lot, shaking his head. "I don't even know what to get..." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, dropping his head against the headrest. Clicking his seatbelt, he opened the door, patting his boyfriend's thigh. "I'll be back, darling..."

"Mm..."

Jackson hopped out, walked into the pharmacy, and immediately headed toward the cold section. Staring at the various medicines and their very large words, he snapped his fingers and walked to the counter, smiling politely towards the woman behind it. "Hi, ma'am...my little brother is sickly right now, and my parents are out of town. He's really stopped up, and he's kinda...wheezing?"

As the woman's eyebrows raised in concern, the teenager held his hand out, waving it slightly. "My aunt is about to come over and take him to the ER, but I just wanted some medicine to hold him down until she gets here."

"Hmm...does he have a cough?" The woman walked around the counter, looking up at him.

"He does. It sounds wet, I guess?"

"Sounds like he's very congested. Likely an upper respiratory. An expectorant should do him some good." She grabbed a bottle of medicine, handing it to him to inspect. "It's \$13.79. Can you afford it?"

Examining the box, Jackson nodded and returned to the counter, pulling his wallet from his pocket. "Anything for him."

"I hope your Aunt gets to you two soon. That expectorant will...well...likely kick the shit out of his lungs." She chuckled, bagging the box. "It should help a lot. He may throw up whatever's gunking up his chest."

Pulling a bottle of water from the refrigerator, he handed it to her to scan as well, placing a \$20 bill on the table. "Keep the change." He walked out with his bag and got into the truck. "Baby?"

"Hmmm?"

"Are you...you okay?" Jackson leaned forward to look at him, watching his eyes open. Placing a hand on his face, he winced at him. "Your temperature is really high. Listen. The lady inside told me that taking this should help you with your chest." He pulled the medicine out of the bag and opened the box. "Here. It says a teenager should take 2." He pulled two of the pills out of the aluminum packs, grabbed his hand, and pressed them into it.

Staring down at the pills, Jasper nodded slowly and held his hand out for the water, popping the medicine into his mouth. Taking a swig of the water, he handed it back to his boyfriend, sinking into his seat and hugging himself.

"Let's get back to the motel so you can rest. I can fix these chairs tomorrow."

As the other teen talked, the brunette couldn't help but zone out, staring out the window as his chest tightened. Face scrunching up in pain, he placed a hand on his chest, reaching over and grabbing Jackson's hand.

"Are you okay?"

"My chest hurts so bad..." He mumbled, massaging it with his free hand.

"Do you feel like you can't breathe?"

"No, I just..." Trailing off, the brunette sat up suddenly, shaking his head. "Pull over..." He squeezed his hand, shaking his head as a wave of nausea hit him.

"Pull-are you okay?" Jackson pulled over with one hand on the wheel, glancing at Jasper and yanking his seatbelt off.

Quickly unbuckling his seatbelt, the brunette nearly fell out of the truck, landing on his hands and knees as he unloaded the contents of his stomach onto the grass. Once he finished, he leaned towards his side, collapsing into Jackson's arms.

Looking down at his quaking boyfriend, the blue-haired teen rubbed his chest, sitting back on his knees. "It's okay, you're okay..." He nodded at him, hugging him once he turned into his chest. "You're okay. You're okay." He continued to massage his back, resting his chin on top of his head.

As the two teens hugged each other on the side of the road, the brunette slowly sat up from the other's arms, shaking his head slightly.

"You feel any better?" Jackson pushed his hair out of his face, using his other hand to cup his face.

Placing his hand on top of his, Jasper only wheezed out, laying his head back on his chest.

"Let's get back to the motel." He started to stand with him, helping him up. "Come on, baby. You gotta get back in the truck."

Slowly climbing back in, the brunette pulled his seatbelt back on, curling up into himself.

Jackson shut the door, running back around to the driver's seat. Hopping in, he shut his door and clicked his seatbelt into place at the same time, pulling off back toward the motel. "The medicine's supposed to do that, okay, Jazz?" Noticing that the other seemed short of breath, he clenched his fist and stared at the road in an attempt to make a new decision. "No. We have to go to the hospital, baby. You're gonna die if I don't take you now." He u-turned into the other lane, shaking his head to himself.

Despite his near inability to breathe, the brunette shook his head, murmuring, "We'll get caught..."

"You're gonna die. You can't breathe."

"Jackson...you're speeding..." He mumbled, reaching over for his arm.

"Jasper, we need to get to the hospital."

"We shouldn't go..."

Jackson looked up in his rearview as the blue and red lights flashed behind him, muttering, "Fuck, fuck, fuck..." He winced as the sirens turned over, looking for a spot to pull over. "Please don't be for me..." He pulled onto the side of the road, clasping his hands together and mumbling a quiet prayer.

Looking up as the cops pulled up behind him, the blue-haired teen pulled his wallet out of his pocket, staring at the two IDs in his hand. Pulling his real permit out, he rolled down his window, exhaling softly as the two cops approached.

"Hey, sir? Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know you were going 20 miles over in a municipal area?"

Jackson sighed softly, nodding and turning to look up at him. "Yes, sir, I'm really sorry, but my boyfriend is really sick, and I'm trying to get him to the hospital." He gestured to Jasper.

The officer leaned down and stared over at the other teenager, sucking his teeth. "Turn your hazards on and follow us." Turning to the other officer, he nodded and started backing toward his cop car. "We're gonna escort you and talk to you at the hospital, sir!" He practically jumped back into his car, pulling ahead of them.

Doing exactly as the officer said, Jackson drove behind them and matched their speed, trailing the officer and stopping at the ER exit. Getting out quickly, he yanked open the passenger door, unbuckling Jasper's seatbelt, and picked him up.

Dashing in towards the desk, the blue-haired teen glimpsed around the room at the nurses with wide eyes, glancing down at Jasper. "He's sick, and he can't-he can't breathe." As one of the nurses rushed up with a bed, he laid him down on it, following behind them.

"What were his symptoms, sir?" A blonde nurse, holding a clipboard, began to walk alongside him.

"He's been wheezing and sick and just threw up mucus. He's been sick since Monday night and just took Mucinex, the expectorant."

"Does he have any allergies or medical history?"

"No, no, he doesn't have any allergies, and he's-he's not vaccinated?"

The blonde nurse looked up at him as Jasper was pushed into the back, stopping him at the double doors. "Where are his parents?"

"They're-they're on the way, ma'am...do you know how long he'll be back there?" He watched him through the windows, glancing down at her.

"I'm not sure, sir, but we'll call you and his parents when he's got the okay to be seen. If you could please take a seat..." She gestured to the sitting area and walked past him.

Turning around, Jackson went to take a seat, stopping as he felt the eyes of the officers on him.

The officer who pulled him over gestured for him to follow. He then walked into a conference room with a nurse holding open the door.

Trailing behind them once more, he placed his hands in his pockets, sitting across from the two men as the door shut behind him. Trapped.

"So, I'm Officer Bale, and this is Officer Thomas." One of the officers held his hand out, firmly shaking the teen's hand. "Can I get your name, young man?"

"Jackson Pierce." He gave a brief smile and dropped his hand on the table afterward. Did his body language really give him away, like Jasper once said?

"Alright, now, Jackson. We've got a dilemma here. Your license plate and your father's vehicle permit on the truck do not match."

"Right, sir."

"See what we're seeing?" Officer Bale sympathetically shrugged and clasped his hands together.

"Yes, sir. I changed the license plate on my dad's truck after I ran away."

"And why did you do that?"

"So I wouldn't get caught, sir."

"I assumed it was something like that. So you realize we'll have to call your parents, right, Jackson?"

Jackson looked down at the table and nodded, folding his hands together in his lap.

"We have to tell them you're here."

"It's your job. I understand..." He laid his chin on the table as he waited for the officers to leave, closing his eyes.

"Listen, man. It sounds like you've got good parents and good stuff waiting for you back home. Don't you think it'd be better to go back?"

"It's whatever." He raised a hand in defeat, shaking his head softly.

"Why did you run away, even?"

"I'm stupid and in love. With a homeless criminal."

"Nothing was going on at home? Nothing at all, right?"

"No, sir. Just...me being different...or difficult."

"Well, listen, kid. I can't argue with you on whatever you're saying. We gotta go call your parents. We'll be right outside."

Jackson only nodded, dropping his face onto the table once they exited. Like he'd said, being difficult. Being difficult was really the cause of all of this. If he hadn't avoided everyone and forced himself to pave his own way, maybe he wouldn't be here. Would being 'accepted' at school be worth never meeting Jasper? What would even happen to Jasper? Would the police come to arrest him?

Would all of this have been avoided if he had never run away? But what would he have done without Jasper? Would his life be better or worse without him? Maybe he wouldn't be here if he hadn't diagnosed himself as clinically odd. Yet, here he was.

Lifting his head, he looked toward the door, closing his eyes and sighing softly. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he texted his love a final message, laying his head atop his phone and closing his eyes in hopes he would see it before their world crashed down.

Jasper sat up abruptly to the beeping sounds of the hospital's machines, looking around the room frantically. Nearly yanking the IV from his arm, he attempted to stand, feeling the oxygen plugs going into his nose.

Glimpsing around the room, he stared at the door as it opened, eyes locking with a nurse.

"Oh...you're supposed to sit..." The woman smiled softly, gesturing for him to sit.

"Where...where is...he?" The brunette sat back down slowly, peering up at her. "My boyfriend?"

"The one who brought you in..." The nurse stood across from him, nodding slightly. "I'm sure he'll be up to see you at some point. So, I'm Nurse Lisa. I'm your nurse until 7 p.m. tonight. We've diagnosed you with pneumonia. Here's an X-ray." She showed him a picture on her clipboard with the infection circled.

Nodding slowly, Jasper sat back into the bed, hugging himself. "Right..." He muttered, glancing around the room. "So...what does that mean?"

"Well, Jasper...it means you'll be here a little longer. Probably after your parents show up." Lisa smiled softly, her ponytail swinging as she nodded. "Can I get you anything else? You look a little...frazzled, dear."

"Um...I...I don't exactly have parents..." The brunette spoke in a small voice, clearing his throat. "Can I please just see...my boyfriend?"

"Listen, Jasper..." Lisa glanced towards the door, sitting across from him on the bed. "I can't do...nearly as much as you think. I'm supposed to care for you until your parents show up."

"I don't have any parents." He reiterated, shaking his head.

"Jasper, a guardian already told me they'll be up here soon for you." The nurse stood and patted his thigh, moving towards the door. "How about I come back with some soup and water?"

Once the door shut behind her, the teenager sat in thought, clasping his hands over his lap. What did she mean she couldn't do as much as he thought? Wait a minute. Who was the guardian coming to see him?

Eyebrows furrowing, Jasper stared towards the door with a confused expression, slowly getting up from the bed. Walking to the clipboard, he began to flip through it in an attempt to find any information, tossing it aside when his results were undesired.

Who could even show up as his guardian? His one cousin who was alive was a drug addict and definitely would not pick up the phone. His parents were dead. Plus, she had called him Jasper. He didn't even have any information in the system as Jasper Monroe. It was all under his birth name.

Hiccuping, he placed a hand on his chest, cluelessly sitting back on the bed. Turning to the door as he heard footsteps, he stood in preparation for any strange adults, the cops or Jackson, fearing the worst.

Gazing wide-eyed at a long-haired man, Jasper stepped back and narrowed his eyes, staring blankly at him. Was this a person he knew?

"Jasper...Jasper, it's me. Orion...from you and Jackson's first date." The man approached slowly, arms held up in innocence.

"O...Orion?" A perplexed expression spread across his face, and his tenseness dissipated. "What are you doing here?"

"Sit. You look like you've been going through it." Orion gently sat him on the bed, crouching in front of him. "I'm here to help."

"How...did you know we were here?"

"I usually know when Jackson's in trouble. I have good instincts. So, I know you're sick. And if they figure out who you really are..."

"They're gonna arrest me."

"Exactly. The cops are down there with Jackson talking to him and his parents."

"His parents?"

"Hey, listen. I've got this under control. But I need you to trust me." The older man stared up at him, holding his hand out. "I know...I'm 89% positive I can get you out of this." He held up a finger, cutting him off before he could start. "Both of you."

"What about the 11% you're not positive about?"

"Will you hear out my plan?" Orion held his other hand out, his expression softening.

Jasper stared at his hands, looking from them to his eyes, and slowly set his hands into them. "I'm listening."

"Jackson told me about everything with the whole police coming after you, and for why, right? I've looked into it myself a bit to see if I could find any holes in the case. And I did." The long-haired man nodded enthusiastically. "All of these people have only reported a few pieces of jewelry missing from their houses. And unless you've just happened to make multiple hits at other houses with the same jewelry, it doesn't make any sense how you could have stolen 10 of the same items."

"Right..."

"How were you obtaining...multiples of these items, Jasper?"

"I...need your necklace."

The man leaned his head down for him to take the necklace, watching him from the tilted angle.

Jasper took the necklace from Orion's neck, staring down at the glistening sun charm. Closing his hands around it momentarily, he glanced up at him, opening his hands to reveal two of the same necklaces. Down to the rust in the center and the missing ray in the right corner.

"So...this is how." Orion took the two necklaces, holding them away from himself and staring at them. "Alright. I think we can lower your crimes to a reasonable number...but there's only one real way I can get you out of this. And back



with Jackson.”

“I’m listening...”

The older man pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to the teenager. On the front, the card read “Bask—Orion J. EME & AHT Recruiter.” At the bottom was a blank name and date spot.

“What does this mean?” Jasper stared at the card, his eyebrows furrowing slowly.

“If you sign this...I can get you into this organization. I can turn you from a street kid to a hero.”

“I don’t wanna be adopted.”

“You don’t have to be. But I can make these legal issues go away. And I can get you and Jackson together. Do you trust promises?”

“I don’t make them often...” He glanced up from the card.

“Then I swear on my life, Jasper...I can put this situation together and get things where they belong.” Orion held the other sun necklace out to him, looking up at him and bending a knee.

“On your life...?” The teenager took the necklace with a raised eyebrow.

“On my life.” Orion now held his empty hand out for him to hold, slowly standing. “So what do you say?” He gave a friendly smile, hand still outstretched for the teen to make a decision.

Staring at his hand, Jasper only looked at it, his decision already made.