

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**HATING YOU
IS THE
HARDEST PART
C.C. Jaz**

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

HATING YOU IS THE HARDEST PART

By C.C. Jaz

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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HATING YOU IS THE HARDEST PART

By C.C. Jaz

Photo Description

Two men embrace one another, while one leans his head against the other one's shoulder. They're both smiling, looking happy and content.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This pair had a long road in becoming a couple. From the day they first met as kids they were at each other's throats, either pulling pranks or worse on each other, before coming to blows and starting the process all over again, much to the mixed horror and delight of their friends and the despair of the adults around them. Even after high school/college/adulthood/etc., the pair still did not get along until an authority figure stepped forward to force them to work together. To make matters worse one of the pair is an alpha in waiting and should know better. What are we going to do to get this pair together, safe, sane, and happy?

HEA welcome.

Please, no BDSM, D/s, M/s, etc.

Sincerely,

Lori S.

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: enemies to lovers, family, farm/horse stable, grief, future alpha, MC with a physical disability, personal growth, shifters

Content Warnings: violence, stalking

Word Count: 67,057

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To Dayton, who pointed out the obvious when I was too dazzled to see it myself.

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Last but not least, thank you to the whole team working behind the scenes to give every author a chance to shine. None of this would be possible if it wasn't for the time and dedication you put into this event year after year. Thank you.

HATING YOU IS THE HARDEST PART

By C.C. Jaz

Prologue

Standing by the window of her study, Etta looked out into the backyard. “I really liked that fountain.”

The structure was in pieces now. Light gray marble was splintered into large blocks, the ground beneath the once beautiful adornment muddy and moist where water had welled up a few minutes before someone had turned off the pour.

“Did you know Stanley carved that fountain himself?” Bless his heart, Stanley would be devastated to see the destruction spread over the yard had he still been among them.

Oh well. Etta should’ve seen this coming.

She turned from the window and laid her eyes on the two teens sitting in front of her desk. Both hunched in their seats, staring at the floor stubbornly, while Etta wondered what had roused the fight this time.

“Would either one of you like to tell me what happened?”

Jackson glanced at the young male sitting next to him, his sour face blotched with dried mud. Etta was surprised her grandson hadn’t hurt himself worse, but maybe that budding bruise on his jaw was enough of a reminder. At least for now.

“No?”

Jackson shifted in his seat, glancing up quickly. “He started it.”

“*You* started it!” Ashley spat, glaring furiously at Jackson, who cringed. “You pushed me into the fountain.”

“You called me Rattie.”

“You *do* look like a fat rat when you shift.”

“At least I’ve got fur. You’re all blotchy when *you* shift.”

Holding up her hands, Etta spoke quietly, “That’s enough, boys,” and met eyes with each of the teens.

Jackson chuffed and stared at the wall, while Ashley cradled his still-healing left arm against his chest, biting his lip to keep from showing how much it hurt. Silly boy. He should know better than to risk his arm.

This spring had been hard enough without these two butting heads over every little thing. But, as said, Etta should've seen this coming. They'd barely started getting things sorted after the tragedy that fell upon their pack after Christmas, and while Etta had lost her beloved grandson, her pack had lost a leader. Now looking at the young males sitting before her, she thought about their losses. One had lost a brother, the other a mentor he'd desperately needed.

Maybe it wasn't time yet. Maybe her hopes for a truce were futile this soon after Danny's death.

"I'm running out of ideas," she chatted. "I'm also running out of areas of my land you two haven't destroyed one way or another." She had always thought the pair would leave her beloved garden in peace, but only a few days ago she'd found Jackson throwing dirt on Ashley, who was too slow to get away. Fortunately, her roses were still alive and well. The same couldn't be said about the small greenhouse they'd built for the pups that spring.

This had been an ongoing problem for so long, she admitted sometimes letting things slide when she should've been firmer with these two. Had she known things would escalate to this—that bruise truly looked ugly on Jackson's face—she might've found a way to prevent this from happening. Now, though, it was too late.

"I was hoping you two could be a bit of an example to the rest of the pups."

"I'm exemplary," Jackson pressed. "*He* just doesn't know when to knock it off."

Ashley rolled his eyes. "You're an ass, Jackie."

Jackson replied with a snarl. "Takes one to know one, *Lee*."

Ashley was about to bounce off his seat when Etta raised her hand once more. "Sit down, Ashley."

The teen scowled at the other boy, clearly not pleased by the nickname. Yes, those too were an ongoing problem. Etta thought they were adorable, quite frankly. Unfortunately, for the pups, nicknames were just another way to taunt one another.

Maybe she should forbid the boys from ever speaking to one another again.

Looking at the teens glowering at each other, Etta had a feeling they would cause damage whether or not they could utter a word.

"I would like you two to apologize and then shake hands."

Jackson snorted, and Ashley uttered a foul word while staring at the wall stubbornly.

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” Etta corrected. “And then I would like to see you boys work together while you fix the fountain.”

Both teens sat up, Jackson protesting annoyedly, while Ashley remained quiet.

Etta heard none of it.

“You broke it, so you’ll fix it.”

“I don’t know how to fix that thing,” Jackson muttered. He glanced at Ashley sideways. “He can’t do anything, anyways.”

“Do you need to be reminded why he broke his arm in the first place?” Etta asked, watching Jackson firmly. “If I remember correctly, you’re the one who took him out in the woods—against my specific orders, nonetheless—and then you failed to bring him back safely.”

Jackson looked like he wanted to argue, but thankfully he kept his mouth shut. The last thing Etta needed was another round of arguing.

She circled her desk and stood in front of the teens. “Now... Shake hands and apologize.”

She had to repeat the order twice before the boys actually did as they were told. It wasn’t much more than a brief meeting of their hands, and the apologies were muttered grudgingly, but at least they were done.

“See?” Etta smiled. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Maybe there was hope for these boys after all.

Chapter One

Ashley still loved the mornings the most. The air above the field edging the grand yard was dense with dragonflies, like an ever-moving fog spreading over light golden wheat. This early in the day he could hear the creatures sizzling in the air, creating their own symphony since the household hadn't quite woken yet. The view was one of the reasons why Ashley still insisted on staying at the smallest cottage, though Etta had offered one of the other huts built at the outskirts of her estate. She feared Ashley was lonely, that he'd become too detached from the rest of them. He didn't have the heart to tell her he'd leave the place altogether if it weren't for her. Well, her and Fay.

The mare, Fay, welcomed Ashley with a familiar snicker the moment he walked into the stable. With heavy thuds she pawed the ground, tossing her head back and forth as Ashley made his way into her stall. Big, almond eyes gazed down on Ashley, almost asking him to touch, and once he did, Fay continued munching down the first batch of hay tossed into her stall.

Running both hands through her mane, Ashley leaned closer and breathed in the perpetual scent of leather and mud.

"Morning," he murmured into the gruff softness, finding solace from this simple morning ritual he'd been through thousands of times before.

During the next few hours, Ashley went through the motions of cleaning the stalls one by one. Apart from him, a rare few worked at the stable. The pups were generally happy to help during the summer, and Ashley had two older members of the pack working side by side with him. Other than that, people were reluctant to help out. The stable was one of the few places members of the pack were ordered to if they failed to please Jackson in whatever chores he'd told them to do. Years ago, Ashley had been thrilled to see random people enter the stable, and he'd been enthralled by the prospect of having someone to work with. But he'd soon learned no one really wanted to be there. Now his mood dropped instantly if another soul stepped into the stable; it only meant they'd be there for as long as Jackson wanted them to.

Fay was always the last horse Ashley took care of. He gave her extra attention, a few special treatments just because he could and had time to, and even if it meant his days sometimes ended long after dinnertime, he wouldn't have changed a thing. He remembered when Danny had brought Fay home

from one of his travels. Fay had been starved and wounded, looking older than she actually was. She'd followed Danny faithfully, his quiet pace the only one she was brave enough to mimic. Being nothing more than a kid himself, Ashley hadn't understood why she was so terrified. The cruelties had unraveled gradually during the months that had followed, and though the wounds had healed, the scars still remained.

Looking at her now, Ashley missed Danny even more.

It was well after noon when Ashley's chores were disturbed. At first he thought another poor soul had failed to obey one of Jackson's insane demands, but it was Etta. She appeared at the open doors with a few apples cradled between her hands and then cautiously approached the feared mare.

"Bribes?" Ashley smiled. "Really?"

She shrugged, keeping her expression casual. "She tried to bite me once. I won't take a chance with her."

Etta entered the box, moving calmly while she got closer to Fay. The mare didn't seem the least bit interested in the female moving into her space; all she had eyes for was the shiny red fruit. She gobbled down the first apple, her teeth grazing Etta's palm but never breaking the skin.

"Why'd she try to bite you?" Ashley asked as he stepped out of the box and rearranged the brushes and quilts he'd taken earlier from the shelf just outside Fay's stall.

"Because I was an idiot," Etta said bluntly. "I tried to saddle her, kept making too much noise, and then yanked on the saddle belt too hard." She murmured quietly at Fay, whatever apprehensions she might still have left never showing while she pampered the mare. "It was a little after Danny brought her here. I should've listened to him, but I didn't. Served me right, I suppose."

It was comforting how easily she could talk about the male. Danny's name was said too rarely in this place, like a curse people feared would bring nothing but bad luck. Etta spoke of him frequently, but others rarely joined the conversation. They listened, breathing in the stories she wove. She'd have this faraway gaze in her gray eyes, her words speaking the tale of her memories. And then, every so often, grief would pass through that gaze, like a long lost friend reminding of its existence.

"That's actually what I came to talk to you about."

Ashley blinked, his sight sharpening on the female now standing in front of him.

Etta smiled. “Did you hear a word I just said?” Wrinkles formed on the corners of her eyes, like tiny butterfly wings spreading along her porcelain skin. She might be the oldest of the pack, and probably the quietest, but the strength of her wolf was vivid in her eyes as she watched Ashley intently. “I said we should’ve moved the cottage next to the stable when Danny first mentioned it.”

The cottage.

Not one of the huts Ashley lived in or one of the private little houses built behind the main house. No... The cottage. Danny’s cottage. The home no one had lived in since he died, and the one Etta had been saving for Jackson. Only Jackson didn’t want the place.

“You lost me,” Ashley said. “You’re planning on moving the cottage next to the stable now?”

Etta laughed, like bubbles streaming from her lips. “No.” She laced her arm with Ashley’s and guided him outside, where sunlight burned much brighter than it had before Ashley arrived earlier that morning.

“I’m going to have the cottage demolished.” She glanced at Ashley, continuing before he managed to utter a word. “It’s an important place for us all, trust me I know, but it is of no use.”

“That’s Danny’s house.”

“Yes, and Danny’s been dead for ten years.”

Even after all this time, Ashley wanted to argue. Not because he thought Danny wasn’t really dead, but because destroying the cottage was just wrong. Still, it wasn’t his place to argue. That was not why Etta had told him. She hadn’t come to hear his opinion or to get his approval. Ashley could throw a proper temper tantrum, and Etta wouldn’t even blink an eye. Her mind was made up.

“So what do you need from me?” Ashley asked, hoping he’d trained his wolf well enough that the turmoil roaring in him wasn’t easily detected.

“I need you to go through Danny’s things.”

They’d made their way from the privacy of the stables to the courtyard of the main house. Younger pack members greeted Etta and glanced warily at

Ashley, his presence a never-ending conundrum among their pack. Etta's request couldn't have been more skillfully timed. They were the center of attention now, eyes on them from every direction. That alone prohibited Ashley from declining whatever she wanted to ask of him.

"I suppose most will have to go. It's been too long since anyone really stayed there, so there probably isn't much we can save, but I'd still like you to make sure nothing important gets destroyed." She hugged Ashley's arm tighter, smoothing her soft palm over the back of Ashley's hand. A soothing gesture before the final plea. "I would really appreciate it if you could do this together with Jackson."

He should've seen that coming.

"It'll be a lot quicker if you just let him do this alone," Ashley muttered sourly. "He'll have everything destroyed."

"That's exactly why I need you to do this with him." The pleading look on her face was fake, but Ashley still let it affect him.

"And what does he say about this?"

Etta shrugged nonchalantly and looked ahead while she guided them toward the house. "My grandson needed some time to collect his thoughts after our conversation earlier this morning."

Sighing mockingly, Ashley glanced at the lady of the house. "He's that excited, huh?"

"Oh, you know Jackson." Etta sighed. "He has a quick temper."

Chapter Two

Harvey had the decency to approach him slowly. Two hours after his shift, Jackson could still feel his wolf clawing its way to the surface. He'd taken a run into the woods after talking to Nana, roaming through the greenery in a mad rage for over two hours. Unlike so many times before, letting his wolf out into the wild hadn't helped. Neither had a forty-five-minute session at the small gym. They'd built it above the garage a few years earlier, to give the teens something to do while being denied access to the woods.

"Your technique sucks," Harvey said from the door.

Jackson aimed another strike into the worn and patched-up punching bag, which hung by a chain from the ceiling. "I can live with that." Another strike, then another, and still the burn wouldn't settle.

Harvey's boots squeaked against the floor, and soon he appeared next to Jackson.

"I saw a few pups downstairs," Harvey said. "They looked pretty spooked."

"I didn't kick them out."

"Well you sure as hell don't seem welcoming."

Dropping his arms to his sides, Jackson stepped back from the bag and stared at his friend. "Did you hear what she did?"

"I'm pretty sure everybody's got an idea of that convo. It wasn't like you tried to keep your volume down."

Jackson pulled off his gloves, only now noticing the rapid speed of his breathing. "She's gone insane, right? That's what's going on."

"Or she could still have hope for a big, happy family. Who knows." Hands in the pockets of his jeans, Harvey shrugged. "Why do you let this bother you so much? It'll be a few days, tops."

Chuckling dryly, Jackson tossed the gloves in the shelf where every other pair was neatly placed. "Few days, huh?" he mimicked, glancing sideways at Harvey while he fished a bottle of water from the small fridge by the shelves. "Let me tell you how it's gonna go. He'll find a picture, and then he'll bawl his eyes out because every fucking thing reminds him of Danny, and then I'll be the bad guy 'cause I can't relate."

He took a few hasty sips, barely feeling the water moistening his mouth. “It’s not going to be a few days. Ashley’s going to drag it on forever. We’ll still be sorting towels by this time next year. Trust me; the guy can’t let things go.” Oh no. Ashley was notorious for his talent to turn simple situations into difficult complications. No doubt he’d take full advantage of his sudden ability to make Jackson’s life just a little bit harder.

“Tell your grandmother I’ll do it with you,” Harvey suggested.

“She insisted I let Ashley help.”

Harvey nodded; he knew no one could change Nana’s mind. If she wanted something done, it would get done, and it would get done the way she wanted. This time she apparently wanted Jackson to bond with Ashley over Danny’s old stuff. It should all be burned anyway. Why bother going through any of it?

Ashley had been a bane in Jackson’s existence since the day he arrived. In Jackson’s eyes he’d been nothing but a skinny kid with a curious mind, brought into Nana’s house from a center. There had to have been more-suitable abandoned pups, at least one kid who didn’t look so off. Ashley was an embarrassment just to be around, let alone to have him in the pack. But Nana insisted.

“Are you heading over there now?” Harvey asked.

“Later. In the afternoon.”

Jackson wasn’t prepared to dive back into the past, spread Danny’s belongings out in the open. Those memories were tightly secured, and Jackson liked it that way. The pack didn’t talk about his brother, as it was of no use. Danny was dead, after all. Why waste time talking about something none of them could change?

Ashley probably wasn’t loving this either. Jackson imagined that on a scale from one to ten, where one was the least amount of mental torture and ten was the type of mental torture you’d do anything to get away from, being stuck with him, even for a day, was probably bordering fifteen for Ashley. But Ashley probably hadn’t protested one bit. He never did. Except with Jackson. To everybody else Ashley was sweet and kind. The fraud only came out when Jackson was around.

It felt like an intrusion of privacy.

Ashley hadn't been to the cottage in ten years. Last he'd been there was the day after Danny's death. He'd sneaked inside through an open window and sat in the dark the whole day. It was Jackson who had found him later that day and eventually convinced him he should break the rules just once in his life. But that was a whole other story, one Ashley didn't want to go back to now.

It was funny how everything looked the same. He knew Etta had made sure the cottage was taken care of, but it looked like someone was actually still living there. No dust covering the shelves, no dirt on the windows. Books and magazines were still placed on the shelves and piled on the countertop next to the small kitchen table. All the appliances had been removed, but apart from that, everything looked exactly how Ashley remembered it. Except Danny wasn't there.

A pair of glasses were placed on a small shelf, a few feet from the door. One of the lenses looked spotless, while the other was cracked. Ashley picked them up, smoothing his fingers over the broken glass as the memories flooded his mind. The argument he and Jackson had had over something petty and Danny scolding them both. Then a call a few hours later, some stranger, whose name they'd all forgotten by now, telling them there had been an accident. The look on Etta's face when she'd clutched her hand around the phone as she'd sank onto the couch in the living room. Her voice, the broken look in her eyes, and then the whirlwind of sorrow swirling round and round the room when her words had sank in. Newspapers and magazine pages tearing like someone was shredding them by force, flower petals and straws shaking and bursting into small pieces when too many emotions clashed and exploded.

Ashley had been numb. He'd sat cross-legged in the armchair by the window, a book spread open in his lap and an empty bag of chips crumbled on the floor next to the chair. He still remembered the thoughts circling his head. Why wasn't he crying? Was this what grief felt like? Would it ever stop feeling this empty?

The tears had come eventually. He'd hugged a pillow in his hospital bed for hours and hours on the day of Danny's burial, angry and saddened by his inability to join the others. Jackson had taken that from him, his last chance to say good-bye.

"Have you started?"

Snapping back into reality, Ashley turned toward the voice and saw Jackson standing on the porch just outside the door. "What?"

“Did you start sorting?”

He walked right in, looking around impatiently. Ashley glanced down at the glasses now clutched inside his palm and lowered the frames back to the shelf.

“No. I just got here.”

He couldn't move from where he stood close by the door. Jackson didn't have such problems. He walked from one room to the other, opening closet doors and drawers, spreading someone's life out in the open like they were in the home of a stranger. Even in his dark attire he looked like Danny, painfully so, and Ashley was more and more apprehensive about doing this. He couldn't look at Jackson without hoping it was Danny. Couldn't see Jackson's shadow cross over the round coffee table in the small living room without hoping it was Danny's instead.

“Why don't you want this place?” he wanted to ask but bit his tongue. It wasn't his business, and he didn't really even care.

It's only bricks and a few floorboards, he told himself as he moved into the living room. A house was just a house.

Jackson appeared from the kitchen. “Nana said we should take whatever we want before all this gets smashed.” The way he said it, with that completely indifferent tone, was aimed solely at Ashley. It was like he twisted that knife in Ashley's gut, digging deeper and deeper by the second.

Ashley wouldn't take anything. There might be something of Danny's he'd like to keep, but if he ever asked to have a single thing, Jackson would argue. Jackson would bring back old scorns, repeating the same things he'd been chanting for the past seventeen years.

After fighting Jackson ever since he was eight years old, Ashley felt he had finally reached a point where he just didn't care.

“I won't take anything.” Again he glanced at the glasses, but then Jackson stepped right up to him, that congenital superiority beaming off him in steady, strong waves.

“You sure?” he asked. “How about a picture? One of those family portraits Nana insisted we have every year?”

Now Ashley realized he'd been wrong. There was no chance he'd mistake this male for Danny. Apart from their height and solid frame, they looked nothing alike. Instead of warm gray eyes, Ashley saw the cold steely stare he hated.

“No,” Ashley retorted dryly. “Not even a picture.”

He wouldn't look away, wouldn't be the one to give in. If they were in their wolf forms, Ashley wouldn't have any other choice. However, here, the way they were now? He wouldn't give Jackson the satisfaction.

There was such loathing in Jackson's eyes, it would've been terrifying coming from anyone else. Now all Ashley felt was peace for knowing this wouldn't go any further. Jackson couldn't let his temper get the best of him, because then Ashley would win.

Jackson never allowed Ashley to win.

“You wanna have a pissing contest, or are we actually going to get some work done?” Ashley asked calmly. He poked at Jackson's inner beast by inching closer to the male, who was already standing too close for comfort. “If you want to play alpha extraordinaire, I could just run up to the house and get Harvey for you. This little macho act isn't really working for me.”

“I'd watch that attitude if I were you,” Jackson threatened.

Standing at eye level, Ashley didn't feel nearly as intimidated as he had felt when he was a scrawny eight-year-old being brought into a house full of strangers. This scenario looked a lot like the one he'd found himself in that very day.

“Or what?” he asked, stepping right into Jackson's space. “You'll leave me in the woods again?”

If they were to get physical, which they thankfully no longer did, Ashley wouldn't stand a chance. Jackson could break him in half like a dried strand of hay. But this? Running their mouths and tossing a few poorly hidden threats back and forth? Ashley would win any given day.

He had the truth on his side.

His wolf reacted to the sudden challenge tossed by the feral creature held prisoner barely inches from him. Ashley's wolf skittered, cowering away from danger and willingly accepting its inferiority, and Ashley hated knowing he could never beat Jackson at his own game.

With a lazy, self-satisfied grin painted across his sharp features, Jackson leaned closer still and sniffed the air right next to Ashley's ear.

“Did you know you still smell like roadkill when you're scared?” Jackson whispered. Shudders ran along Ashley's back, his system helpless against the involuntary reactions his body resigned to.

Jackson cocked a brow and stepped back. “I’d say this macho act is working pretty good for you, too.” He then turned and disappeared from sight as he went into the bedroom.

With his hands fisted and his wolf slowly easing back from the darkest corners of his mind, Ashley hoped he’d have ammo strong enough to fight back with.

Chapter Three

The place had looked different the moment Ashley had walked through the door. Jackson had spent hours here since Danny's death, hours on the porch and in the privacy of the backyard, and somehow he'd managed to evict the worst memories. Now they all came storming back.

Ashley stalled just inside the living room door, looking around the small space. He'd fiddled with the glasses the day before when he thought no one would see, but Jackson had stood out on the porch for long enough to realize the rendezvous had already started. One look and Jackson knew Ashley couldn't let go.

"I'm giving this a week, tops."

Ashley looked at him sharply. "We can't put a deadline on something like this. We don't even know what's in here." He cocked a brow as he continued further inside. He took off his jacket and tossed it over the couch carelessly as he passed the furniture and headed into the bedroom.

Jackson remained by the door, still unable to believe this was his future now: walking down memory lane with the mutt.

"You're loving this, aren't you?"

"Of course I am." Ashley returned from the bedroom and eyed the shelves on the walls. "What could be better than spending my time with someone who detests me?" he goaded. "It's all I ever wanted."

"You could've said no."

"And miss an opportunity of quality time with you? Now would I ever do that?" Ashley stood by the couch, smiling stupidly like the airhead Jackson sometimes thought he was. Jackson had managed to crack through that bold surface the day before, but the sadness was gone, and what he had staring back was ridicule and mock. This was the side of Ashley Nana never saw. All she got was the friendly, polite, sweet Ashley, Ashley who wouldn't say a bad word about anyone and who always went the extra mile to help out anyone in need. This Ashley staring back at Jackson was the persistent fraud, a mutt who just got lucky in life and found his way into the right family. The stray Danny picked up along the way. A futile cripple even his parents hadn't wanted.

And Nana thought they could work side by side without any bloodshed?

She was even crazier than Jackson had thought.

Ashley began to investigate the room like he was alone. Light blond hair curled into messy waves, strands falling over Ashley's amber eyes every time he turned his head. He brushed them aside, over and over again, while moving around the room. Every time he picked a book from the shelf or opened a drawer, Jackson wanted to rush over and throw him aside. Maybe throw him out of the room. He had no place here: not in this cottage, not on this land, and definitely not in this pack. Still, here he was, now smiling at something he'd found from the drawer. Jackson wanted to snatch away whatever Ashley had found. Just by being here, he made the room look tainted and spoiled.

"Why don't you want this place?" Ashley asked, never taking his eyes off the book he was skimming through. "It's bigger than yours."

"That's none of your business."

"Maybe I should move here."

"Maybe you shouldn't."

Ashley looked up suddenly. "Maybe I'll ask Etta... Just in case." He dropped the book and closed the drawer, before moving to the shelf. "This definitely is bigger than my place."

This was the essence of their relationship. Ashley said something, Jackson argued, and Ashley replied with something he knew would aggravate Jackson. Ashley spun a web around himself, just waiting for Jackson to get caught. Then he'd have another thing he could whine about. Another thing Jackson did wrong.

On day three Jackson gave up. He'd probably get a scolding from Nana, but she had to know what she was doing when she asked this of Jackson.

"Do it for the pack," she'd said. "You owe it to Danny."

"Bullshit," Jackson muttered to himself while crossing the trail over to the wild woods. He owed nothing to nobody. He'd done his job. He'd played his part. Nana had thrown a million things at him throughout the years, and not once had he said no. He'd done it for the pack for the past ten years, but she still couldn't let it go.

Jackson was hoping to escape the scene without being noticed, but as it seemed to be the trend these days, his departure was noted. He barely reached the outskirts of the woods before Nana spotted him.

She was coming out of the woods with three younger females, all of whom Jackson recognized from the group of teens he'd caught running out in the forest a couple of weeks earlier. The pups weren't allowed to roam the woods alone, and it seemed the girls still remembered the scolding they'd received earlier. They all skittered away, rushing toward the main house while Nana slowed her pace, waiting for Jackson to catch up with her.

With her pearls and bouncy dark curls framing her defined and miraculously wrinkle-free face, she looked every bit as sweet and gentle as any other grandma. Except that she wasn't sweet or gentle. She was evil.

"Funny seeing you here." She smiled, lacing her arm with Jackson's as soon as she could reach him, effectively forcing him to walk with her. "I thought you'd be at the cottage."

"And I thought you'd be calling a demolition crew to get rid of the shack."

"I thought I'd take the kids for a run instead." With pretentious concern, she frowned up at Jackson. "That would be your job, by the way."

"I take them on runs."

"Yes, and they're barely breathing when you come back." She patted his arm. "Be gentle on them, Jackson. They're still only children."

"You wanna kitty-glove them, fine. I'm trying to teach them how to survive."

They walked in silence for a moment, and for once Nana didn't start bickering about how Jackson handled himself with the younger members of their pack. She wanted him to run the pack? She had to let him do it his way.

"Have you and Ashley been at the cottage?" she asked eventually, bringing them back on her new favorite subject.

"I saw him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Well, for one, have you gotten off to a good start?" Nana went on. "God knows what's in there."

"Maybe you should've taken care of this ten years ago."

"Perhaps," Nana spoke quietly. "But I always felt it was something you should do."

“Then why is Ashley there?”

Nana stayed quiet for so long Jackson had to look at her to make sure she'd even heard him. She was looking back, gray eyes filled with such tenderness it made Jackson sick.

“Because Danny was important to him, too.”

“A good-doer like him would be, wouldn't he?” Jackson muttered sourly. “I'm surprised Danny didn't drag home more cripples—”

“That's enough, Jackson,” Nana said patiently. “Show some respect for your brother. He loved Ashley very dearly.”

Not only was the topic old, it was also grating Jackson's nerves.

He stepped away, pulling his arm from his grandmother's loose grasp.

“I can sort the house with Ashley, but if you think this little scheme of yours is going to work, you're going to be disappointed.” He met Nana's disapproving gaze. “You might deem him a part of the family, but if you want me to run this place, he's never going to be a part of my pack.”

Nana watched him leave, never saying a word, but he could feel her eyes follow him as he crossed the courtyard. No doubt she was already plotting, but that was nothing new.

Jackson felt a certain sense of relief the moment he found his way behind the main house, out of her sight and into the sight of his friend. Harvey was skipping down the stairs from one of the private houses built on the edge of the fields. Once he saw Jackson he laughed and slowed his pace.

“You look like shit. What did that mutt do to you?”

“Don't ask.” While Jackson didn't appreciate his grandmother meddling into his life, he still respected her and her status as the oldest of the pack enough to keep his dislike to himself. His hate toward Ashley was one of the combining factors between him and Harvey, so he didn't bother to pretend he enjoyed being stuck at the cottage for God knows how long.

“I could use a run,” he said instead, nodding toward the trail running up behind the main house.

Harvey grinned mischievously. “Race you to the shore?”

The moment they left the courtyard and dived into the evergreen of the forest, the tension vanished from Jackson's body. Every bone, tendon, and joint molded under his mind's command as he took his other form.

The first touch of moss under his paws was always exhilarating, but as always, the excitement vanished much too soon. Primal instincts took over, ruling over common sense and human logics, but somewhere in the back of his mind that small part of his human mind remained, sensing his surroundings like his human always did.

Jackson didn't mind letting Harvey lead the way. Since they were old enough to run in the woods by themselves—and even before that—Harvey had always been the more adventurous one, the one who dashed into motion without a second thought and couldn't wait to get ahead. It never bothered Jackson, not even when he'd thought leading a pack meant being ahead of everyone else.

The carefully maintained edge of the woods turned into wild nature as they left the trails behind and sought the pristine greenery hidden deep inside the woods. For now, these parts of the woods were still kept a secret from the pups. It wouldn't be long until the teens would find their way into the rampant strand of trees. No doubt the safety and familiarity of the trails was starting to become a bore to the pups by now, as they, just like the ones before them, were anxious to feel the true freedom that came with their abilities. For now, though, Jackson was glad to see the riverbank and the overgrown verdancy surrounding it, knowing no one had been here since he'd last left.

Harvey stood by the waterline, already having taken his human form, while Jackson circled the pond. Small rocks and fresh grass felt like nothing under the gruffness of his paws, but the scents filling the air hit him like a ton of bricks. Rodents, moss, pine needles. Something had died nearby, the stench of decaying flesh combining sharply with the heavy odor of mud and sweetness rising from the water. And then there was Harvey's scent.

Never mind the nakedness; Harvey's postshift scent was quite stunning, but dangerous. Jackson could easily overlook the naked body, but even in his wolf form he couldn't help but to react to Harvey's scent. The muskiness and wildness oozing from Harvey's skin made Jackson agitated, his wolf convinced there was a rival on its turf. It wasn't the scent of an alpha. It was the scent of a feral male, and the only way Jackson's wolf knew how to react was to eliminate it.

Shifting before his wolf got the best of him, Jackson stayed a few feet from Harvey. He found it more disturbing to shift from wolf to human than the other way around, and getting used to the change took longer as well. While slowly

calming his senses and taking in the space around him without the extra layer of security his wolf always provided, Jackson remembered Nana telling him Danny had been like that too. But then again Danny had been a natural pack leader, spending all of his time out in the woods whether he had someone to join him or not. No wonder he'd felt more at home in his wolf form than that of a human.

“Still thinking about the mutt?”

Looking to his side, Jackson realized Harvey had managed to sneak up on him. Harvey stood right next to him now, that heavy scent of his floating around them both like some overpriced perfume you couldn't wash off as quickly as you'd like.

“No.” Jackson stepped back, avoiding both eye contact and any immediate touch. Harvey was a flirt in his postshift state, but he always stepped it up a notch with Jackson. Maybe he thought it would work, maybe he just did it for fun. Whatever the reason, it did very little for Jackson. His wolf might demand control and would use any means to conquer its target, but even as the primitiveness held on tight long after the shift, Jackson's human mind won over his wolf's every time.

“Danny, actually.”

Harvey had the decency to stay back, probably knowing how close to the surface Jackson's wolf still lingered. He didn't turn away, though, unashamed of his nakedness. Not that there was anything to be embarrassed about. With a body like his, all smooth skin and bulging muscles, he could walk around in any pack and know his assets were something to be proud of. And maybe if there weren't over twenty years of friendship between him and Jackson, and if Jackson's type wasn't something different entirely, Jackson's eyes might've lingered. Now he looked elsewhere, still caught by the memory of his brother.

“Do you think he ever came here?” he asked, absently running his eyes over the water's rippling surface.

“If he found the place, which I'm pretty sure he did.” Harvey sat down nearby. “That cottage got you so nostalgic?”

Jackson just shrugged, uninterested in sharing his thoughts.

No doubt this was exactly what Nana had in mind when she ordered Jackson to go through Danny's things. She always talked about the importance

of family, about heritage. About how it was important to know where you came from in order to know where you wanted to go.

Jackson wanted to go forward, yet Nana insisted on dwelling in the past.

The getaway gave Jackson no peace this time. He could easily imagine Danny striding along the waterline, that sharp glint in his eyes while he gazed around his land. His kingdom.

“I’m leaving,” Jackson muttered, turning his back to the water. “You coming with?”

Harvey looked displeased, but he stood up nonetheless, shifting only seconds after Jackson.

On their way back, Jackson took the lead, running like the devil was after him.

Chapter Four

With his work at the stable, Ashley couldn't really focus on venturing to Danny's home and sorting through his possessions. Ashley didn't like going alone in the evenings. He was never sure whether something unexpected would cross his path, and he wasn't going to ask Jackson to join him every time he wanted to go to the cottage. Apart from the first few days, Ashley hadn't seen Jackson, and he liked to keep it that way. When he stopped by the cottage during lunch or early in the morning before he went to the stable, he could see Jackson had been there. Something was always missing. A book or a small box from one of the shelves in the living room. It seemed Jackson wasn't hurrying with this job, though Ashley had thought he might.

About a week after first going to the cottage, Ashley managed to get a whole day off from work. He still stopped by to see Fay in the morning, just to make sure she was okay, before he headed over to the cottage.

The trail followed the edge of the woods, sunlight filtering through the thick foliage and painting the path splotchy with the brown of dried pine needles and the bright orange of the sun. This was the barrier between the wild and the skillfully maintained safety of the estate. As sad as it was, Ashley had never strayed from the trail even while in his wolf form. The only time he'd ever ventured the woods was the day after Danny's death. Somehow, ten years later, he still feared he might get lost, that even after growing up from that scared kid he still couldn't find his way back if he strayed too far.

Rogues crave company too, Danny had once said when Ashley told him how he didn't need anyone to run with. A friend would be enough. He ran with Danny, once or twice, but he'd never been able to keep up, so they'd kept it close to the house. Ashley missed that the most, the chance of confiding in someone who wouldn't judge or laugh or think he was too weak just because of who he was. While he'd grown up in this place, it had stopped being his home the day Danny died. After that he was merely the bottom of the barrel, the lowest of the low. Someone the others put up with because of Etta.

With heavy thoughts, Ashley reached the cottage. It still felt odd being there without Danny, but Ashley no longer felt guilty. He could look around and pick things up without remembering the last time he'd seen Danny read a specific book or lounge on the couch. It was still sad, but it wasn't crippling like it had been in the beginning.

Jackson had been at the cottage and cleared the way up to the attic. He had carried everything down from the shallow space, spreading boxes and boxes around the bedroom. Few were opened, but most sat closed and untouched in random piles and groups.

Ashley ignored the ones Jackson had already looked through and picked up a closed one instead, the box heavy in his hands as he lifted it on the couch. After steeling himself again for whatever reaction he might have, he tore off the tape securing the lid and started going through the contents.

Ashley had been working in peace for over an hour before Jackson arrived. As usual, he marched in without saying a word. Ashley continued going through boxes filled with papers and files. Apparently Danny had been a bit of a hoarder, saving stuff Ashley wouldn't think twice about throwing away. Everything from old, washed-out receipts to newspaper clips were stapled together neatly, then placed between paper-thin folders. Ashley didn't know the significance of those treasures, but they must've meant something to Danny.

One box held handmade cards for Christmas and birthdays. Ashley thought they were cute. Then he saw that most were signed by the male now sitting at the end of the couch. Jackson was too preoccupied going through a small plastic box to realize Ashley was shamelessly spreading Jackson's artwork on the floor.

"This is cute." Ashley held up a card with a scruffy elf and a disfigured reindeer. "I didn't know you were such an artist."

Jackson stared at the card for few seconds, before bouncing up from the couch. "Leave it," he said and tried to snatch the card from Ashley. He missed, and while his hands groped the air, Ashley grabbed the cards and got up from the floor.

Holding up another card, this one for Danny's twentieth birthday, he skittered around the coffee table. "How about this?"

Understandably, Jackson refused to stoop low enough to appreciate someone complimenting his talents. He chased Ashley around the table, looking rather annoyed as he went, all the while snarling commands and curses as each of his attacks failed. Ashley dodged outstretched hands and continued displaying more of those adorable endearments. Soon the room was even messier than when they'd started; boxes were knocked over, rugs lumped up under the table and against the walls. But it was fun. Ashley thought so, at least.

Deeming his efforts useless, Jackson stood next to the box he'd been going through. "Give me the cards."

"Why? You said there's nothing worth saving here."

Jackson stared at Ashley maliciously, his eyes narrowed while he grabbed something from the box. "One last time," he said calmly and pulled out a black binder. "Give me the cards."

Ashley recognized the binder; it was his sketchbook, one of many he'd had while staying at the center among other abandoned pups. Against common sense, he shook his head. "Nope."

"You sure?" Jackson opened the binder and help up the front page. "Is this me?"

It was a poor drawing of Jackson sitting on the front stairs of the main house, but Ashley could make out similar features.

Something cold and prickly spread through his chest when Jackson turned the page, revealing another drawing of him.

"Were you stalking me?"

"At least they look like you." Ashley held up a card with a pencil drawing of a stick figure. "What's this supposed to be?" he asked snidely.

Jackson retaliated by showing a picture of Danny walking in the pasture with a younger Fay following. Ashley's heart sank when Jackson crumbled the edge of the drawing in his fist.

"Will you give me the cards?"

"No."

Jackson tore the paper off the binder effortlessly, then crumbled it into a tiny ball, before tossing it aside. He grabbed another drawing, another picture of Danny and Fay, and after Ashley refused to hand over the cards, Jackson tore the page off.

Somehow it got to a point where they both destroyed innocent artwork, sneering as shreds of paper drifted through the air.

When Ashley grabbed a birthday card Jackson had given Danny only months before the accident, Jackson threw the binder aside and pulled a small, yellow stuffed toy from the box. Ashley never knew what it was supposed to

look like; to him it didn't look like any animal he had ever seen. It was old and rugged, missing an eye, but tenderness welled up the moment Ashley saw it.

"Wait!" He held up his hands, handing over the cards. "You can have these, just don't hurt the toy."

"Aww," Jackson sighed pretentiously, looking at the stuffed toy. "It's special, then?"

"Jackson..."

"First toy, I assume?"

Ashley bit his lip not to gasp when Jackson twisted the left leg of the toy. Ashley could hear stitches stretch and give under the strain. He swore he could feel the tear in his own limb when Jackson suddenly stood there with the leg in one hand and the rest of the toy in the other.

Ashley snapped. The few remaining cards flew in the air as he lunged. Jackson tossed the toy across the room just before Ashley was on him, and they toppled on the floor in a growling, snarling mess. The small table in front of the couch was knocked over as they rolled on the floor, hands and legs twisting and kicking. It had been years since their arguments had gotten physical, but Jackson really crossed the line this time. Unfortunately Jackson also had a physique Ashley could only dream of, and it took very little time for Jackson to end up on top while Ashley struggled to breathe under the sudden weight.

Had he been able to breathe properly, he would've told Jackson to get off him, but a sharp gasp from the door stilled them both. Etta stood there, her mouth open while she gaped at the destruction.

"What on earth is going on here?"

Jackson sat up and snatched his hands away from where he'd held Ashley's. "He started it."

Ashley smacked Jackson on the shoulder, glaring up at him. "You provoked me."

Instead of getting up, which would've been nice, Jackson snarled down at Ashley. "You *attacked* me, like some crazy—"

"That is enough!" Etta bellowed from the door. Her eyes were like two glaciers as she came inside, looking around. "Look at this place."

They did. Ashley's line of vision was limited at the time, but he managed to turn his head enough to see the chaos meandering across the floor. With

Jackson still straddling his hips, Ashley glanced up and realized he wasn't the only one feeling a little bit embarrassed.

"Get the hell off me," he muttered, when Jackson made no effort to actually move. He shoved Jackson aside and sat up, immediately distancing himself.

Etta circled the table, then the couch, all the while muttering silently as she took in the state of the room. Her obvious shock was enough to silence Ashley, but when she turned her eyes on the pair now sitting quietly side by side, Ashley wanted to disappear and never be found again.

"Look at this place," she repeated. "Is this what I asked you to do? Destroy the last of what we have left of Danny?"

She picked the binder from the floor and skimmed through it, muttering at the poor state of the few remaining drawings. It landed on the box as she tossed it aside, shaking her head as she turned to Jackson. "How dare you? Brawling like some disobedient pup? Is this how I raised you?"

Ashley glanced at Jackson under his brows, smirking. It was about time someone put him in his place. Lucky Ashley for having front-row seats for the show.

Etta walked closer, her eyes now on Ashley. "And you..."

He blinked, confused. Etta held up a hand when Ashley went to speak.

"I asked you to help Jackson, because I know how much Danny meant to you. Now I'm wondering if I was wrong about that. Is this really how you think Danny would want the two of you acting?"

She stared down at them until they both lowered their eyes. She didn't need to say she was disappointed; it was painfully obvious by the way she watched them.

"You should be ashamed. Both of you." Her stare was relentless, condemning them on the spot until Ashley's cheeks burned scarlet with shame.

"This is what you'll do." Etta pulled a key ring from her pocket and detached one key, her movements calm and controlled. "You will clean up the mess you have made. I expect this place to be spotless by the end of the day." She placed the key on the armrest of the couch before pushing the ring back into the pocket of her light jacket. "Then you will lock the doors and make sure the windows are locked as well. Jackson will bring the key to me, and after that

neither of you will set foot in this place. I will have someone else finish the job. I was stupid to think you two could forget this childish quarrel and act like two grown males. I will not make that mistake twice.”

With that, she turned on her heels and walked out, leaving Ashley and Jackson in deafening silence. Ashley stared at the key resting against the dark blue of the couch. Next to him Jackson stood up, snarling as he moved. “Look what you did.”

“What *I* did? You didn’t have to break the toy.”

“Yeah, a toy. Who gives a shit about some ugly old toy?” Jackson snorted, moving stiffly as he headed into the kitchen. By the time he returned, Ashley had stood up, and he barely caught the trash bag Jackson threw at him.

Jackson’s dark brows were drawn in a frown when he started gathering things from the floor. “I told her this wouldn’t work,” he muttered. “I knew you couldn’t just do the job without any emotional bullshit.”

“That was my stuff you broke!”

“You should’ve backed off when I told you to, and none of this would’ve happened.” Jackson didn’t even hesitate when he picked the shredded cards and papers from the floor; he shoved them in the bag without even looking what was on them. “You should know your place by now.”

“And that’s below you, right?”

Jackson turned and smiled charmingly. “Miles below me.”

Ashley had a sudden desire to smack Jackson across the face, but he held his temper. Instead he straightened the table, muttering sourly, “You really think everything revolves around you, don’t you?” With a chuckle, he looked at Jackson. “Has it ever occurred to you, that there’s a whole world outside this little bubble you live in? With people who don’t even know you exist.”

“They’re not my people.”

“Yeah, be thankful for that, because you wouldn’t make it out in the real world.”

Jackson straightened his posture, and suddenly they were toe to toe again. “Yeah?”

Nodding, Ashley cocked his chin. “You wouldn’t last a day.” Suddenly Ashley imagined Jackson out on the city streets, boasting his self-proclaimed

superiority with no effect whatsoever. No one would listen to him there. No one would even see him. He would get lost in the crowd, just like anyone else. Here he might be the future alpha, the male everybody supposedly looked up to, but out there he would be just another nobody.

Jackson scoffed. “What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing.” Ashley stepped back and picked the broken toy from the floor. “Just thought a change in the scenery would do you good.”

Jackson snorted and continued cleaning the floor. Ashley stared down at the toy, saddened by the state of his beloved friend. Some of the filling had squeezed out, making the toy look like a rag. With one last look, Ashley tossed the toy in the bag and started looking for the missing leg.

It was just another thing Jackson had taken from him.

Chapter Five

Nana wouldn't tell who was going to finish at the cottage. Jackson tried to pry, but she eventually told him to mind his own business, and he knew the conversation was over.

Word spread around the estate quickly. Their pack was rather small, but that did nothing to hold back the gossiping. When the rumors reached Jackson, Harvey told him that Nana had supposedly caught him in his wolf form, chasing Ashley around the cottage.

"She'd skin me alive if I ever tried that," he retorted as they sat by the river a few days after Nana had caught him and Ashley at the cottage. "But I'm guessing Ashley doesn't mind the gossip. He gets to be the good guy."

"It's just something someone said. No one believes that."

Jackson shrugged. Either way, he didn't care. If people didn't like the way he ran things, they were free to leave. No doubt a few would depart the day Nana handed him the reins, but Jackson was beyond worrying about it. He didn't need disloyalty in his pack.

"Just give him a scare, and he'll run right off." Harvey nodded. "Trust me. His gentle personality wouldn't handle the nightmares well." He smirked wickedly, and Jackson had to agree.

"It would be great, I admit."

An uneventful period followed the confrontation at the cottage. Regardless of Jackson's decision of not giving a damn about people's opinions, he soon realized Ashley was gaining pity points just by being Ashley. It was that pretentiously tender nature of his, Jackson assumed. He sometimes saw Ashley by the pasture, secluding himself from the rest of the pack like he always did, but that was obviously something no one found troublesome. Except Jackson. It had been the same since Ashley arrived all those years ago. It was as if someone had put him in the middle of the room for them all to watch, but never to touch. Danny had been generously patient with Ashley, demanding the same kind of tolerance from everybody else. Jackson had never given it. He still refused to. The way he saw it, they were defending a rogue. What kind of a pack supported disobedience? If it was anyone else acting like Ashley did, they would be confronted about it immediately. Nana just smiled and told Jackson to

understand. Understand what? Ashley wasn't the only one who'd had it rough while growing up. Still he was the only one who insisted on acting like a pampered pup.

Days went by, and as far as Jackson knew, no one had been to the cottage. He stopped by the place every day during his morning run, just to see if he'd spot anyone there, but the cottage remained deserted. He'd checked the windows once or twice, but the place looked the same. Everything he and Ashley had stacked in boxes and plastic bags still rested on the floors, untouched. Sometimes Jackson reached the cottage moments after Ashley had been there, his scent still lingering on the porch when Jackson reached the small building. No doubt Ashley felt sorry for himself now. Jackson wondered if Ashley had gone to Nana and complained; that was something Jackson could easily picture Ashley doing. Nana never said a word, though. Not that she would, even if Ashley had gone to her. She was always so gentle on him, like Ashley would get broken if someone handled him a little too roughly.

Ridiculous. He was a grown male, after all.

But that was just Nana's double standards. Ashley got away with everything, while Jackson couldn't even curse without being chided like a little child.

And then Nana wondered why they didn't get along? Typical of her.

"Maybe you should give him a break." Ollie nodded when Ashley glanced at her questioningly. "He's not *that* bad."

"We are talking about Jackson here, right?"

"Yes. But if you gave him a chance, maybe you'd—"

"Wait. You're siding with him on this?"

Ollie shrugged and rewrapped her half-eaten sandwich while gazing out onto the pasture, where the horses grazed in peace. "I'm unbiased."

"You're brainwashed; that's what you are."

The day after the incident, like Ollie liked to call it, she'd given Ashley no sympathy. She'd said she was appalled by what she'd heard. Still, she apparently wasn't surprised that things had gotten to this. Ashley wasn't either. He was, however, surprised she would have Jackson's back on this.

“I’m supposed to just sit back quietly and let him act like a pompous jerk, just because he happens to be Etta’s grandson?” He snorted. “What the hell is wrong with everybody? I get that he’ll eventually inherit all of this, and we’re expected to be his loyal subordinates, but he’s not the leader yet. You don’t have to bow down to him just because everybody else does.”

“I’m not bowing down to him,” Ollie muttered. “I just think you should try seeing things from his perspective for once.” She got up from the bench outside the stable and tossed the remains of her lunch in the small plastic bag they had sitting by the doors.

Ashley watched her, thinking she’d finally lost it. She was the odd bird around here, the vegan shifter who spoke vigorously about plantations and growing eggplants. Jackson called her a hippie, and there were too many cases where Ashley had seen Jackson put her down one way or another, but here she was, defending the asshole.

Shawn busied in the stable, whistling as he went. He wasn’t a fan of controversy, but Ashley dragged him down for the ride this time.

“Are you hearing this?”

He shook his head quickly. “I’m trying not to.” With a tangle of bridles held in his grasp, he turned to Ashley with a pleading stare. “Please don’t ask me to join this conversation. I live a house down from Harvey, and I get enough of this crap on my time off.”

Ashley was tempted to ask for more details, but Shawn looked uncomfortable enough as it was. No doubt Harvey was defending his friend fiercely, much like Ashley would’ve liked *his* friends to do, but it seemed he was alone.

Out of a habit, Ashley took the long route home that evening and walked by the cottage. Did he regret fighting with Jackson? No. Did he regret losing the opportunity of saying one last good-bye to Danny’s home? Absolutely.

Maybe he had been wrong, but he wasn’t the only one. It still irked him that Jackson had gone through his stuff and destroyed most of it. An apology would’ve been nice, but that was too much to ask. Jackson never apologized for anything.

Ashley left the cottage, saddened by the future of that place. It would’ve been a nice place to live in: quiet, private, and far enough away from the rest of

the pack. Maybe that was why Danny had chosen the cottage. Ashley wouldn't mind having the place for himself, but what he'd said to Jackson about asking Etta if he could move in was just to piss the male off. Ashley would never go that far. There were boundaries to his behavior, after all.

The trail continued past Danny's cottage, still following the outlines of the woods, but from time to time, Ashley lost sight of the main house. He never strayed into the woods during dark. Not even when he shifted and gained courage he never felt outside of his wolf form. There were shortcuts, he'd heard of them, but as he looked around, the view was the same, regardless which way he looked. Trees and rocks and moss, leaves and bushes. He advanced slowly, feeling both nervous and excited by this little slice of adventure. He listened to his surroundings, finding safety in the chatter of the other housemates he could hear all the way from the courtyard. Next to the familiar sounds of the members of their pack, there was the bustle of wind and leaves and the few footfalls of whatever creatures moved among the flora. And then suddenly there was a growl, a monotonic rumble, climbing from the depths of a beast Ashley feared more than anything.

His palms grew sweaty at the wake of that sound, but he still turned, forcing his breathing to remain steady when he came face-to-face with a wolf. Maybe it was a shifter, maybe it was a real wolf. Ashley couldn't tell the difference. He should've known, but he didn't.

The wolf stood on a baulk just outside the trail with its head held low and its canines bared as it watched Ashley sharply. Ashley's wolf shrank with fear, telling him to run while he knew that was exactly what he shouldn't do, and for once he managed to overrule his wolf. Instead of running, he lowered his eyes and felt his way backward, slowly moving along the trail until all he felt under his feet were fallen branches and moss-covered rocks.

He tried not to think about possibly getting lost if he had to run, about not knowing where he'd find himself if the wolf chased him off the trail. He tried not to think about those few nights ten years ago when he got lost here and thought he'd never get home again. He tried, but when the wolf jumped down from the baulk, and Ashley's retreat ended when his back hit against a tree, those four nights were the only thing on his mind. Still avoiding looking at the wolf, Ashley closed his eyes and breathed deep, his feet heavy and knees shaky as he leaned back against the tree.

When he had gotten lost in the woods, he'd been sure no one would find him, that he'd be forgotten and no one would even come looking for him. The

thought of being chewed to death was far less appealing than being starved to death, like he'd feared ten years ago.

Time seemed to stand still, the air dense with the scent of the wolf as the whole world went quiet. Ashley breathed through his mouth, trying to get rid of the stench he hated, and just waited for the beast to attack. The touch came unexpectedly, though, a hand landing on his shoulder instead of teeth biting into his throat.

Ashley shrieked, a high-pitched wail escaping his lips before he realized Jackson stood right in front of him. Jackson looked at him like he'd gone insane.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Ashley looked around, but there was no sign of the wolf. "Where did it go?"

"Where did what go?"

"The wolf."

"There was no wolf."

Pushing Jackson aside, Ashley walked over to the baulk and looked around, hoping to see even the smallest sign of the creature. "It was just here."

"I'm telling you, there was no wolf here." Jackson shook his head and laughed. "You're crazy, you know that?" He laughed like it was funny, but to him it probably was. "And so what if there was a wolf here? What kind of a shifter is scared of wolves?"

Ashley stood by the baulk and watched Jackson's square face twist into a mocking smirk. He'd always hated the things Jackson did, the things he'd said, but Ashley had never hated Jackson. He couldn't, not when Danny had loved him so much. But this feeling, this hollow ache in his chest was so close to hate, Ashley wanted to believe he'd finally reached that point.

"You're such an asshole."

"What?"

"I was bit by one, remember?" Ashley said. "Don't act like you don't know. You all laughed about it when we were kids. It was so funny, wasn't it? The cripple pup who couldn't even shift properly, and he was ugly too."

Jackson looked away, avoiding Ashley's gaze, but at least he looked guilty. Not that it helped much.

“Did you think I couldn’t hear you?” Ashley pressed on. “Really? Like I wouldn’t have heard you guys whispering and making jokes about my scars and my limp. Are you fucking kidding me?”

Jackson brought up his hand and rubbed his neck, glancing at Ashley briefly. Seeing Jackson so uncomfortable was better than any apology. Ashley moved closer, his wolf completely overshadowed by the anger boiling in his gut. He brushed past Jackson, muttering as he went. “I can’t believe anyone would think you’d be a great leader for any pack, let alone the one Danny left behind.”

Jackson’s laughter was no longer an issue as he snarled after Ashley. “Stop talking about my brother like you knew anything about him.”

Ashley twirled around and faced the other male. “He wasn’t exclusively yours, Jackson. Stop acting like you’re the only one who lost something.”

“At least I had something to lose. You still think he was this sweet, kind person who saw something special in you and wanted to give you a chance? Give me a fucking break.”

Jackson cringed and moved closer, so close Ashley could feel the heat of Jackson’s breath as he spoke.

“I’m fucking tired of watching you walk around this place like you actually belong here. No one wants you here,” Jackson said carefully. “If Danny gave a shit about you, he never would’ve brought you here. He just felt sorry for you, just like everyone else. He picked you up like he would’ve picked up a stray dog from the side of the road. It’s not caring, Ashley. It’s pity.”

It was Jackson’s turn to walk past Ashley. He strode back on the trail, his shoulders tense with anger. Ashley watched after him, frozen for that brief moment it took Jackson to disappear from sight. Ashley followed slowly, a tidal wave of sorrow washing over him as memories of Danny flooded his mind. Ashley couldn’t count all the times he’d wondered if things would have been different had Danny not died. If Ashley still had his family. If Jackson wouldn’t hate him so much. The last one was just an instinctive wish of that eight-year-old, who’d gone into his new home, waiting anxiously to meet the little brother of the male he’d learned to trust and love. He’d imagined that meeting so many times he’d felt like he already knew Jackson before he’d ever even met him. Sadly, reality was nothing like the dream Ashley had created for himself. He hadn’t found a best friend, just a lifelong enemy.

Chapter Six

Jackson was still seething when he met the pack later that evening. The daily runs had never been a means for him to ease his restlessness; his only job was to see that the pack worked as it was supposed to and to make sure the pups stayed in line. This time, though, he wished he was alone out there, that no one followed his lead or demanded his attention. Nana usually passed on the runs; she said she was too old, too slow. It was one of those things she had passed on to Jackson, and on any other day, he would've been happy with her trust. Now he hoped Nana would step in when he felt he couldn't handle it.

He returned home after the run, settling in for a quiet, boring evening. He had brought a few things along from the cottage, but he'd put off going through the boxes. Now he carried them in the kitchen and sat down, determined to have the thing over with by the end of the night.

Jackson had no pictures of their parents in his cottage, but he had taken all of the photos he'd found at Danny's. It wasn't sentimentality, he'd told himself. He just didn't want anyone else going through the pictures, regardless of the fact that all of the people in those pictures were dead by now. He'd only been a kid when their parents died, so his memories of them were few and far between. Danny had talked about them frequently, but looking at the portraits and holiday pictures now, Jackson wished he could remember.

Danny had inherited their mother's light hair, as well as her temper. Though Jackson remembered very little of her, he remembered her everlasting patience. He couldn't recall a single time she'd been angry or loud. To him, she signified kindness and love. Their father, on the other hand, had been stern and solemn. Even in the pictures Jackson found, his father never smiled. Nana sometimes talked about him, wondering if her son would have been different had his father not passed away as early as he had. He, too, had earned the alpha status too early in life. Now Jackson wondered if the same fate would've met Danny, had he lived beyond his twenty-sixth year.

With a grunt, Jackson put the pictures aside and grabbed a new stack from the box. They were those family portraits Jackson had asked Ashley about. No doubt Ashley would've liked to have a few of them, but he probably knew Jackson didn't want him to have any. Regardless of Ashley smiling side by side with Nana and Danny, he still held no place in this family. At the most, he was a part of the décor.

Digging deeper into the box, Jackson found a few pictures he hadn't noticed before. He didn't recognize the location, but as he sorted through the frames and saw a younger, more timid Ashley in each of those pictures, he realized they were taken at the center. The summer camps and visitations at the center had been Danny's project, something Nana had soon been excited about as well. Since Danny's death, there had been no camps, no visitations. Jackson hadn't even thought of the place until now, and now it only came back because of the distraught look on the face of a small boy. A younger Ashley stared back from one of the pictures. He stood next to Nana, hiding partly behind her, squeezing that rugged old toy in his hand. Nana had a wide smile on her face, but Ashley looked as shy as the day he'd arrived to the house. He looked nothing like the annoying pest he was now.

Jackson didn't know how long he stared at that picture, but by the time he shoved all of the photos back in the box, it was well after midnight. He crawled in bed, now angry at himself for even opening those boxes, and while he slept, that fearful stare followed him all through the night. It haunted him in his dreams and painted them ghastly, and as he woke up, the picture was the first thing on his mind.

It wouldn't let go, not while he went on a run with Harvey or while he had breakfast. The first few hours of work went by without him even hearing what the other males talked about, and by the time they were heading for lunch, Jackson excused himself and headed home. He fetched the box, carried it in the main house, and dropped it on the kitchen table when he found Nana fixing herself lunch.

"Can you make sure Ashley gets this?" he simply asked and turned to exit the room.

"What is it?"

"Just a box of stuff he might like to have."

"What's in it?"

Jackson stilled, sighing deep, before he turned to face his grandmother. "Pictures."

Nana nodded and stirred something in a small bowl. "Of what?" She glanced up quickly, a casual smile on her face as she continued with her food.

"Just... pictures. I didn't go through all of them." That was a lie. He *had* gone through every single one of those pictures, and when Nana looked up, her light brows slightly raised, Jackson knew she wasn't buying the lie.

“Come sit down,” she said, gesturing at the table. “You haven’t eaten yet, have you? I made chicken salad and then I’ve got some delicious rolls. You like fresh bread, don’t you, dear?”

She was already setting the table for two, and Jackson’s reluctance to stay was of no use. He sat opposite of her and let her plate food while she chatted. “Now, this vinaigrette is just amazing. Ollie gave me the recipe. You know Ollie, don’t you? She’s a friend of Ashley’s.”

“I know her.” Though Jackson doubted the two were actually friends. They were just camped up together at the stable, finding solace in one another when no one else wanted them around.

“Yes, she’d such a lovely girl. A bit odd, I admit, but such a sweet nature.”

Jackson glanced at his grandmother and found her humming silently while she poured water in two glasses and took a seat by the table. It was that innocent look on her face, as she looked back, that told Jackson this wasn’t about lunch.

“Have you had time to think about what I said at Danny’s cottage?”

Her ulterior motives were never anything simple or easy, like getting someone to take the trash out for her or someone else watering the flowers. Oh no. She went straight to business. It seemed she wasn’t done planting guilt into her grandson.

“I thought that conversation was over.”

“It is. I just thought maybe you and Ashley both needed some time to think things over.”

“And have you asked Ashley if he has thought things over?”

“That is none of your concern. Now eat your food.”

Jackson’s appetite was gone, and it wasn’t the most comfortable meal he’d had. The food was good. That sauce—whatever it was—was okay too, and knowing Nana had handmade the rolls only a little while ago made up for some of the tension in the room. Still, Jackson could feel her glances, and those nonchalant comments about the everyday things happening around the grounds were nothing but her way of making him feel even guiltier.

Eventually Jackson couldn’t take it anymore. “I haven’t thought about it, no.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Nana said, frowning. “I really do wish you boys could settle this petty argument of yours. It’s such a waste of energy, don’t you think?”

“It wasn’t a petty argument. He attacked me for no—”

“I’m not talking about what happened at the cottage,” Nana interrupted gently. “I’m talking about this silly hatred of yours. It has been going on for seventeen years. Don’t you think it’s time to let go?”

Jackson stabbed a piece of chicken from his plate and chewed it down. He’d fallen right into this one, hadn’t he?

Nana ate her food quietly, munching down a few mouthfuls before she continued her gentle attack. “At least tell me why you insist on hating him so much? I see no sense in it.”

“Of course you don’t. You don’t know him like I do.”

“And what do I not know, Jackson? That he’s stubborn and whimsical? That he disagrees with you on everything and doesn’t bother to hide it?”

“If it was anyone else acting like he did, you would deal with it.”

Nana lowered her cutlery on the plate, frowning confusedly. “Are you saying I’m biased?”

“I’m saying both you and Danny treated him too softly. He gets away with everything, just because he had a hard time growing up.” Jackson had never voiced his opinion like this before. Now that he had started, he couldn’t stop. “If anyone else refused to be a part of the pack the way he’s doing all the time, you wouldn’t stand for that. He has lived here for almost two decades, and he has never ran with the pack.”

“Have you ever asked him to join you?”

“And have him complain about the way I lead? Hell no.”

“Watch the language, Jackson.” Nana continued her meal, ever so calm. “And you’re wrong. If I believed he endangered this pack, I would have a talk with him and deal with it as I would deal with any other member of our pack. He gets no special treatment from me.”

“You don’t think he’s jeopardizing the well-being of our pack?”

“No, I do not.”

“He’s completely secluded himself. He stays out at the stable all day long; he doesn’t participate on the runs. How do we even know he knows how to shift properly?”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous. Of course he knows how to shift.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

When they were kids, and Jackson had seen Ashley’s first shift, it was nothing short of comical. Any other fifteen-year-old knew how to shift properly, but not Ashley. The image of that tailless, silvery-gray ball of fur was burned on Jackson’s retinas for good, and it was still funny, no matter how much time had passed. Since then he hadn’t seen Ashley shift once.

Nana apparently didn’t care for such details. “We’re much more than our wolves, Jackson. It’s the strength of character you should be worried about, not whether or not he can keep up with the rest of you in the woods.”

Jackson snorted, rolling his eyes. Nana looked at him discontentedly, her cutlery once again placed neatly on the side of her plate.

“He managed to survive being left out in the woods for four days with a broken arm, nonetheless. Surely you haven’t forgotten about that?”

Jackson stared down at his plate. No, he hadn’t forgotten. After all, he was the one who had taken Ashley there. He hadn’t left him there, regardless of Ashley insisting Jackson left him there to die. That was not true. He just wanted to teach Ashley a lesson. Needless to say it had backfired. Jackson had spent the entire night looking for the other teen, suddenly realizing Ashley couldn’t find his way back. He hadn’t found Ashley, and now he wondered how much of an impact that incident still had on Ashley. That whole thing with seeing a wolf in the woods was ridiculous, but was it a wonder Ashley was a little skittish?

“You’re free to try it yourself,” Nana chatted. “I’ll find a remote location somewhere and leave you there for four days. Let’s see how well you do with no food or water.”

Jackson wanted to argue, but by this point, he knew this whole talk would be over if he just agreed with Nana. She offered him more salad, but he declined. He emptied his plate quickly, but Nana enjoyed her meal, forcing Jackson to sit by and listen to her kind scolding.

Then, when he thought he was off the hook, Nana reached her hand across the table and took ahold of his. Her expression softened as she spoke. “I’m not young anymore, Jackson. My wolf’s getting tired,” she said. “It won’t be long

until you'll step into my shoes and rule this place, and I don't want this hatred to leave you without the last of your family."

Jackson felt like he was ten again: a little boy playing in Nana's study while she tried to work. She had that same look on her face, patient and understanding, while waiting for Jackson to find the right words.

"Danny brought him here for a reason," she said softly. "You should always remember that."

The scene at the cottage came rushing back. Jackson remembered the devastated look in Ashley's eyes when Jackson had twisted that toy. It had been an impulse, just like every other thing he did or said in Ashley's presence. His self-control went flying out of the window the moment Ashley was around. But Jackson did regret breaking the toy. Even if it was just an old, rugged thing someone had stashed in a box in the attic. And now it lay in a trash bag next to all the other useless junk they'd packed away, forgotten in the small storage room behind the garage.

"Just think about it?"

Looking up at his grandmother, Jackson nodded. He cleared the table with Nana and declined when she asked if he'd have a cup of tea with her.

"I have to get back to work."

"Of course." Nana started the tea. "Don't worry about the pictures. I'll make sure Ashley gets them."

"Okay."

Jackson stalled by the front door, unable to get that stupid toy out of his mind.

Without giving it another thought, he returned to the kitchen. "Do you have a needle?"

Nana looked at him questioningly. "A needle?"

"Yeah. And some thread?"

When Ashley got home in the evening, he found the toy sitting against his door. He stared at the washed-out stuffed toy, unsure what to think of it. He picked it up as he entered the cottage, noticing someone had done a pretty bad

job at sewing the thing together. The toy was a faded yellow, but the stitches were done with a bright red thread. The toy looked even worse than it had before, but at least it was intact. Apart from the missing eye, that is.

It didn't take a genius to realize who'd fixed it and then brought it here. Ashley's animosities ran deep, but he couldn't help but wonder if this was some kind of a peace offering. He had waited for one of those since he was eight. He'd thought he'd found one when Jackson came to him after Danny's death, saying he wanted to show Ashley something in the woods. Broken and torn by the death of his guardian angel, Ashley had clung on to the first friendly gesture Jackson had ever given him. He'd followed the other teen for hours, and then Jackson just disappeared. Ashley's hell had lasted for four days. Four days of cuts, bruises, and a broken bone. Four days of thinking this was it; this was death.

Now Jackson had stitched Ashley's childhood toy back together. Talk about mixed signals.

After a shower and a quick dinner, Ashley went looking for Jackson. The least he could do was say thank you. Jackson was nowhere to be found, though. Ashley thought about going to Danny's just to see if maybe Jackson was ruminating over the lost opportunity, but just thinking about what happened the last time Ashley was there made him shiver. The memory of that wolf was stuck in his mind so tightly, he could barely go anywhere anymore without feeling like someone was watching him. Ashley even hesitated about going to Jackson's cottage, but eventually he stopped by only to find the place empty.

He should've gone home then, but instead he went to the main house, hoping Etta could point him in the right direction.

She could.

"Jackson's checking the fencing around the woods," she said while tending to the flowers in her backyard. "He said someone had noticed some unwanted activity in the woods. He and Harvey left a few hours ago. I'm sure they'll be back shortly."

Ashley nodded, stalling by the small deck Etta had built inside a circle of flowerbeds. Jackson had told him there were no wolves in the woods. Why would he be checking the fencing?

"Can I help you, perhaps?"

Etta had moved closer, standing barely a foot from Ashley. He shook his head. “No, I just wanted to thank him for something.”

“Oh?”

“He dropped something off earlier. It’s no big deal.” Ashley’s eyes trained to the mockery of a fountain standing in the middle of the yard. He and Jackson had destroyed it, then fixed it later, but it looked awful. It used to be pretty and gracious. Now it looked shapeless and hideous.

“Oh, yes. I forgot all about these.” Etta chuckled as she went indoors, and when she returned moments later, she was carrying a small box. “Jackson asked me to give you these.”

Ashley took the box and lowered it on the deck before opening the lid. Instantly he was taken back years, bad memories mingling with the good, as he stared down at faces he’d almost forgotten.

Etta sat on the deck, gesturing at the box. “May I have a look?”

Ashley nodded and sat down next to her. He watched as Etta pulled a stack of pictures from the box, murmuring softly as she gazed down at the photos. “Oh... these are sweet. Did you ask Danny to save these?”

“I asked him to throw these away.” Ashley nodded at Etta’s questioning look. “I had a few boxes of stuff when I came here, and I asked him to burn it all.” He picked a picture of him and Danny, smiling sadly. “I guess he never did.”

“Well, Danny was never one to just get rid of things.”

They sat there for a long time. Etta wasn’t shy about groping around the box, and her laughter took away the heaviness from Ashley’s chest. Etta asked about the pictures, about the people and the other pups, and Ashley became more and more relaxed as he told her everything she wanted to know.

Almost at the bottom of the stack was one photo, taken a few years after Ashley arrived. He stood next to Jackson, and Etta and Danny stood behind them, smiling. Jackson looked stern and grave, nothing like a boy his age should look like. Next to him Ashley looked skinny and sick, still with that shy, peering gaze.

“Was this from Christmas?” Etta asked.

“New Year’s Eve.”

“Oh, yes.” Etta stroked her fingers over the picture, smiling absently. “He always loved the festivities.”

Ashley swallowed a lump in his throat and looked away. Had Jackson gone through these pictures? If he had, had he even felt a thing?

“They were so close back then,” Etta spoke absently. “When their parents died, Danny changed. But he was still so patient with Jackson. So different than how he was with the rest of us.” She looked at Ashley, moisture glistening in her eyes. “Much like how he was with you.”

She went through the pictures again, but Ashley had lost interest in the old frames.

Was that why Jackson hated him so much? Because Danny’s affection hadn’t gone solely to Jackson?

What kind of a grown male would still harbor such anger over something like that?

Ashley looked at Etta, prepared to comment on Jackson’s ridiculous actions, but something else entirely came out.

“I’m sorry about what happened at the cottage.” He cringed as the shame came rushing back. “Jackson just gets to me so badly sometimes, but that’s no excuse for what happened.”

“I’m sure he feels the same way, dear.” Etta patted his knee and fished out another picture. “You were always so much alike, even as children.”

“Alike? Me and Jackson?” Ashley laughed and shook his head. “No offense, but I’m nothing like him.”

“No offense, but you’re mistaken.” Etta looked fondly at the picture, brows raised softly as she continued. “I always thought I had it hard with one stubborn pup, but you sure proved me wrong. You were both so adamant in your opinions, sometimes I had difficulty deciding whether to chide you for arguing or praise you for holding your ground. But you’re both such good boys, Ashley. You always were. Difficult and stubborn, but good.”

Ashley couldn’t help but to mutter, “I only argue when I think he’s wrong,” then glance at Etta and shrug when she looked at him knowingly. “We’re not arguing that much anymore, though.”

“You’re not working together anymore either, now are you?” Etta placed the frame back into the box and turned to Ashley. “It is a shame, don’t you

think? I'm sure Danny would've loved to see you two working side by side for once in your life."

She did that thing again, stared at him gently while letting the silence stretch, until Ashley felt scrutinized by her tenderness.

"It would've been nice," he confessed reluctantly.

She nodded. "Yes... I have to agree. And I have to say that while I knew Jackson wasn't thrilled to spend his time with you, I assumed you'd have more self-control. I know how important he's always been to you, even though I assume you've tried your hardest to let go of those feelings."

Ashley opened his mouth to argue, but Etta beat him to it.

"It's not too late, Ashley. It is never too late for friendship." Determination turned into sadness as she went on. "Though you are the same in many ways, there are things you master that he has yet to learn. Facing your fears is natural for you, but he doesn't know how to do it. Sometimes I fear he doesn't know how to feel, that there are so many things he hasn't let go of that they'll bury him whole one day."

Ashley thought about the look on Jackson's face when he had seen the cards in Ashley's hand. For a second he'd looked panicked and pained, and then anger had swooshed in and covered everything else.

Ashley knew all about that anger. The pain was familiar, too.

"I do care about him," Ashley mumbled. In a way, it was easy to say it to Etta. But it was also hard to admit he still, after all these years, cared for someone he didn't even truly know. "But I think I'm done trying with him."

"You'll give up? Just like that?"

"I'm not giving up. I'm just done beating myself for not being good enough for him." Anxious, Ashley stood up. "We don't blend well, Etta. I know you want things to be all smooth and pretty, but it doesn't work that way with us."

"Try, Ashley." Etta stood up as well. "I know he doesn't want this hatred either, but he can't stop. He doesn't know how to."

"You think I do?"

"I *know* you do." Etta picked the box from the ground and handed it to Ashley. "Maybe he can learn, but he'll need someone to show him how."

Ashley took the box and stared down at the picture lying on the top of the pile. It was the last one ever taken of all of them. They all looked happy. They all smiled. They looked like any other happy family. Just by looking at the picture, no one could tell two of them couldn't stand the sight of one another.

"Maybe you could go to the city with Jackson tomorrow," Etta said out of nowhere. "He's heading out there first thing in the morning. You two would have a chance to talk without any interruptions."

"You really trust us to be off on our own? You don't worry about the damage we could cause?" Ashley said it as a joke, but really, he wasn't joking.

Etta obviously didn't think it was funny, either.

"I think you two could very well find a common ground. You both just need to take a step back and give each other some room."

Ashley mulled it over, thinking about the toy he had sitting on his living room table.

Try, Ashley, she said.

He felt like he'd been trying his whole life, and look where that got him.

Still, when he looked up and met Etta's expectant gaze, all Ashley could do was nod.

Chapter Seven

The weekly shopping trip was a welcome change of routine. Nana usually came along, but this time she'd told Jackson she would be making phone calls regarding the sales of her precious plants, and though Jackson appreciated her company, he was happy he could go alone. There was a limit to how much patronizing he could handle.

He met up with Harvey at the garage, quickly going over the errands for the day, and as he was ready climb in the car and drive off, Harvey spoke quietly. "Mutt alert."

Harvey nodded toward the main house, and Jackson saw Ashley approaching across the courtyard. For once his clothes weren't dappled with mud and dust. In a pair of clean jeans, an equally dirt-free white shirt, and sunglasses hiding those taunting amber eyes of his, he looked almost presentable. Too bad there was a permanent aura of disorder in his presence he apparently didn't care to improve.

As he closed the distance, Jackson noticed the slight limp in Ashley's step. It was so minor no one could tell unless they knew it was there, and up until recently, Jackson would've looked at it with loathing. To him it had always been just another sign of how little they needed Ashley. Now he thought of the conversation with Nana, realizing this cripple had made it out of the woods alive after being starved and dehydrated for days.

Harvey took a stance next to Jackson, his detestation floating around him like a thick thundercloud. For the first time in his life, Jackson hoped he could distance himself from his best friend. Was such hostility really needed right now?

Ashley was about to say something, probably something as innocent as "hey," but Harvey beat him to it.

"If you're here to whine about some dangling cornice, go talk to Etta about it."

Ashley slowed his pace and took off his shades, watching Harvey with a frown. "Actually, I'm here to talk to Jackson." Then he smiled sweetly. "But since you brought it up, the shed in the pasture needs some fixing. That's what you're here for, Harvey. When something's broken, you fix it. Now how about you go to Etta and let her know you don't want to do your job."

Jackson caught Harvey just as he was about to launch himself at Ashley. Ashley didn't even blink. He just stood there and stared, as if Harvey didn't have a hundred pounds on him.

"Just leave it," Jackson said quietly to Harvey. "I'll see you when I get back, yeah?"

Harvey glared at Ashley, but he stepped back. His mood hadn't improved, but grudgingly he left, speeding away with the truck and leaving a cloud of dust behind.

"Was that necessary?" Jackson asked and turned to Ashley.

"Yes, it was." He gestured at the car. "Your grandmother told me to go with you."

"She did?"

"Last night, yeah." Ashley walked to the car and opened the passenger's side door. He glanced at Jackson with a raised brow. "Unless you want me to drive?"

"You don't even have a license," Jackson muttered while getting behind the wheel.

Once seated, Ashley buckled the seat belt, speaking absently. "I bet I know how to drive this thing."

"Let's not find out."

To say the trip was awkward would be an understatement. They mostly kept quiet. Jackson didn't utter a word because he feared he would say something that would destroy the momentary calm. Ashley probably felt the same way. Jackson couldn't remember the last time he and Ashley had been in the same room without one or both of them picking a fight. Now, trying to hold on to the peace, Jackson couldn't think of a single thing to say. How sad was that?

The fields and forests surrounding the road soon turned into country estates and farmhouses, then smaller apartment complexes. City life wasn't such a foreign concept for either of them. They'd both been away from the estate for a couple of years after high school. Nana never stopped worrying about Ashley while he lived in a commune, and Jackson never stopped wondering how someone could live with strangers. He had his own studio—not much larger than a shoebox, but at least it was his own—and he'd had trouble getting along with his neighbors. Living at the estate suited him a lot better than being surrounded by hundreds of strangers every single day.

As he glanced at Ashley, he realized Ashley liked it here. The busier the streets got, the more at ease he seemed.

“Thanks for the box,” Ashley said suddenly.

“Nana gave it to you, then?” Jackson kept his cool, though he now regretted making such a big deal out of it.

“Yep.” Ashley shifted on his seat, fiddling with the sunglasses he had folded in his hands. “Thanks for the... other thing, too.”

Jackson just nodded. Patching up the toy had seemed like a great idea at the time, but as soon as he got home after leaving the thing on Ashley’s doorstep, he’d felt like an idiot. He went back to get the toy, but it was already gone. Now he feared Ashley would read too much into it.

Which Ashley apparently did.

“You didn’t have to do that. It’s—”

“Let’s just leave it, okay?” Jackson interrupted and parked the car as they reached the market. “I broke it, so I fixed it. That’s all.”

He shut off the engine and pulled the keys from the ignition. Then they just sat there. The parking lot was buzzing with customers, but it was quiet in the car. The silence was heavy and uncomfortable, like one of those moments where you know you have to say something quickly, before it gets worse. Jackson couldn’t come up with anything.

Next to him Ashley had no such problems. He spoke quietly. “I just wanted to say thank you. It was very...” He went quiet when Jackson glared at him warningly.

“Say cute, and I will strangle you.”

“I was going to say thoughtful, but now that you mentioned it...” Ashley shrugged and smirked. “If the shoe fits...”

Jackson controlled himself. He thought of the picture he found among Ashley’s stuff and was prepared to overlook a lot of things, so long as that picture never came haunting him again.

Ashley was useless in the market. He didn’t know where anything was, he was too slow, and Jackson caught him reading labels of things they weren’t even supposed to buy. Still, Jackson maintained his cool. Nana obviously had a

reason for sending Ashley on this shopping trip, and whatever that reason was, this would not turn into another thing-gone-wrong Nana could use against Jackson.

While Jackson packed their shopping, Ashley contributed by chatting with the clerk. If you asked Jackson, Ashley was flirting, but who was he to judge. It seemed quiet Ashley was gone, and he was back to his usual overly expressive nuisance self. He bought bubble gum, and then he chewed it so loudly Jackson could hear it all the way from where Ashley walked a couple of feet behind him as they returned to the car.

“I’m hungry,” Ashley called out. He blew a bubble, popped it, then blew another one. “We could go have lunch.”

Pop.

Pop-pop.

Jackson shoved the bags in the backseat and turned to Ashley. “You’re doing that just to annoy me, aren’t you?”

“Doing what?”

Pop.

“That.”

Ashley continued that obnoxious chewing for a few more seconds. Then he sighed and snatched off his shades. “Yes.” He fished the empty wrapper from his pocket and got rid of the gum. “But that’s just because annoying you is so easy.”

Jackson shook his head and turned to get into the car. Ashley was next to him in an instant, holding the door shut. “Okay, I’ll stop annoying you. How’s that?”

“You can’t stop. You’re annoying without even doing anything.”

“Then how about I stop annoying you on purpose?” Ashley offered. “And you could maybe stop being so touchy.”

“I’m not touchy.”

Ashley chuckled and circled the car. “Let’s get food, and I’ll explain all about your touchiness.”

Like an idiot, Jackson agreed.

He found himself in a diner ten minutes later, attending Ashley's private lecture on socializing. Apparently Jackson's biggest flaw was that he never smiled. Jackson was sure that was a lie, but for some reason he didn't care if he was being scolded about things such as that. For now, he was pretty content eating a burger and listening to Ashley babble about irrelevant nonsense.

The waitress left their table and Jackson was ready to dive in, but he caught Ashley watching him with a displeased look on his face. "What?"

"You didn't thank her."

Jackson glanced at the female, who'd already moved over to the next table. "I'll tip her later."

"A simple smile and a 'thank you' would feel a lot better than a little bit of money."

"Okay, I'll tip her generously." Deeming the conversation over, Jackson took a bite of his burger and tried not to notice how Ashley's look of displeasure had turned into a scowl.

"See, this is why I think you'll never be a good leader," he said bluntly. "If you don't know how to be friendly, how do you think you'll lead a happy pack?"

"I know how to be friendly."

"Then why are you always such an asshole?" Ashley asked calmly. "If you know how to act like a decent person, why don't you ever do it?"

"I..." Jackson frowned, confused by the question. He acted like a decent person. Right?

Ashley nodded and gathered his cutlery. "It's time you get off your high horse. You're not that special." He attacked his food, leaving Jackson to enjoy his for the time being.

Too bad Jackson's appetite was gone. Again. It was the second time during the past two days someone managed to ruin his meal, and on any other occasion, he would've been pissed off. Now he was baffled.

"I never claimed to be special," he said. "There's just a certain protocol—"

"In the pack. Yes, I know. That applies when you're in your wolf form and you're out with the pack. But outside the pack, when you're meeting people and talking to them, you don't need to act like you're so much better than

everybody else. Newsflash: you're not." Ashley tossed a fry in his mouth and chewed it carefully. "You're just like everybody else."

He said it neutrally, with no tease or taunt. Then he smiled, amused. "Don't tell me you really thought you're something we should all bow down to?"

"No. Just..."

"Just what?"

"If this really bugs you this much, why didn't you just say something earlier?"

"I've been saying the same thing for seventeen years."

"No," Jackson drawled over his barely eaten burger as he leaned a little closer. "You've been an annoying brat for seventeen years."

They stared at each other over the squeaky table, and Jackson was one hundred percent sure Ashley would toss his head, or snicker, or say something that would send Jackson into an uncontrollable fit. Instead Ashley frowned, nodding slowly.

"I have, haven't I?" He lowered his cutlery to the plate and took a sip of his drink.

Mimicking Ashley's earlier tone, Jackson teased. "Don't tell me you never realized what a pain you can be?"

"Oh, I realized all right. That was the whole point."

"Was?"

Ashley shrugged. "You went and got my childhood toy from the dumpster and then you stitched it back together. It's kinda hard to be an ass to someone who does something like that." He looked up, smirking self-sarcastically. "Besides... I was hoping you and I could convince Etta to give back the keys. I heard she's thinking about hiring a moving crew to take care of the cottage, and that doesn't feel right. So... Maybe we could get along long enough to finish up with Danny's things."

"We?"

"Or you." Ashley shrank back visibly, that smirk fading quickly. "He was your brother. He was just a friend to me."

Jackson watched as Ashley continued his meal, thinking how everything Ashley just said was a lie. He remembered the pictures and the way Ashley had

held those broken glasses. There was still hurt there. Now Jackson realized he'd never seen that hurt before.

“We could go talk to her when we get back... see if she'll give the keys back to us.”

Ashley looked up warily, his fork swirling around a piece of lettuce. “Yeah?”

Jackson nodded nonchalantly. “Yeah.” Focusing on his food was hard when Ashley kept looking at him like that.

Eventually Ashley went back to his food, but he still mumbled quietly. “Wasn't so hard, was it?”

“What?”

“Being nice.” Ashley glanced up, smiling. Jackson had been called a lot of things, but never nice. Somehow this beat every adulatory praise he'd ever had.

Chapter Eight

Etta returned the keys. She did make clear that they were on their last notice, and one more incident would have serious consequences. Ashley believed every word she said.

It was odd to be on good terms with Jackson. The temptation was constant; whatever Jackson did, Ashley wanted to comment, tease. There wasn't anything specifically funny or wrong in anything Jackson said or did. It just came naturally, like a second skin Ashley was so used to slipping into. There was an underlying tension between them every time they met, even in passing, and Ashley tried his hardest not to let it swallow all the good they'd achieved. So far, so good. They were no longer arguing, no longer shouting or accusing each other of things that had lost their meaning years ago. There were still things they never talked about, like Danny or what happened in the woods all those years ago, but maybe the most painful things didn't need to be addressed.

A couple of days after their trip to the city, Ashley spotted a truck parked at the edge of the smaller pasture behind the one they mostly used these days. He'd been asking for someone to check the wooden shelter since last summer. Mostly it had been Etta who'd listened to Ashley's complaints, since Jackson never cared for a nuisance such as that, but now Ashley could see a group busying around the old, rundown shed. As he neared the spot, following the narrow trail next to the deserted pasture, Ashley recognized Jackson standing on a ladder braced against the shed's wall, his hand waving in the air as he gestured something to Harvey, who stood at the foot of the ladder. Harvey noticed Ashley first, a sour glare in his eyes when Ashley continued his walk through the thick grass.

Squinting against the sun, Ashley greeted the other three males now standing silently next to the truck. Only then did he acknowledge Jackson, who had climbed down the ladder, looking like the kid who got caught with his hand stuck in the cookie jar.

“What are you doing here?”

Jackson scratched his stubbly chin with the back of his fingers, glancing at the shed. “You've been whining about this thing for a year now. I thought we'd see if it's worth saving. You just mentioned it a couple of days ago.”

Behind Jackson's back Harvey muttered something, shaking his head. Jackson seemed to sense his friend's annoyance. He looked at Harvey, smiling that confident smile of his. "You guys can head back. I'll be right with you."

"You sure?" Harvey eyed Ashley suspiciously, his posture stiff and tense, though he seemed willing to broadcast his massive frame for anyone who hadn't seen it so far.

Ashley rolled his eyes and looked elsewhere, bored by Harvey's antics.

After a quick talk, Harvey and the other males climbed into the truck and drove off. Ashley appreciated the privacy, but he didn't want this little chat to be the gossip of the day tomorrow. Still, when Jackson leaned against the sturdy, wooden fence, Ashley walked up to him and easily climbed up on the fence. "So what's the verdict?"

"It's rotten in places." Jackson walked over to the shed and tapped his hand against the wall. Looking up toward the roof, he gestured at the corner. "The baulks there are fractured. No use in fixing this."

"So you have to take it down?"

Jackson nodded. "And build a new one. It's not a big job. Few days."

Ashley nodded, but most of what Jackson said after that went in one ear and out the other. He looked sweaty and soiled, dirt covering most of his bare arms and spots of his face. The ends of Jackson's hair were gray with dust, the color ridiculously light next to the dark of his hair. Ashley found himself wondering if Jackson used sunblock, or if he had enough to drink while he'd clearly been out here in the sun for some time. At least he didn't look dehydrated. He looked positively lively while gesturing at this and that, talking about a location that might be better for the shed.

"Have you ever thought of that?"

Ashley blinked and realized Jackson was standing right in front of him. "What?"

"We could join the pastures." Jackson gazed over to where the horses grazed. "This one's so small anyways."

"Danny always talked about keeping these separate," Ashley said quietly, not sure if it was safe to mention the male's name. "Just in case."

Jackson's gray gaze landed on him so quickly Ashley had no time to prepare for the intensity of those eyes. No storm erupted. "In case of what?"

“In case Hubby needs to cool off for a bit.”

Confused, Jackson frowned. “Hubby?”

Ashley chuckled and slid off the fence. He gestured over to the pasture. “The stallion. He gets frisky during the fall. It’s better to keep him separated then.” Then, just because the mood felt right, Ashley added casually, “He’s got a bit of an attitude. Thinks he’s the king of the world, or something.”

“Really?” Jackson nodded thoughtfully, gazing over to the pens. “Must be going around.”

“Must be.”

They met eyes, and Ashley could’ve sworn something almost tactile passed between them. It went by so quickly he couldn’t grasp it, but when Jackson looked away and climbed over the fence, Ashley could still feel the odd sensation.

“I have to get back,” Jackson said, and Ashley followed his lead.

They walked side by side in the overgrown grass, both seemingly cautious not to touch the other. Ashley was constantly worried about what not to say; they’d reached a certain level of politeness he wasn’t willing to let go of. It was a nice change from the constant fighting.

Glancing at the male walking next to him, Ashley began casually. “Did you have a chance to stop by the cottage?”

“This morning, yeah.”

Jackson caught him looking, and Ashley’s first instinct was to look away. Only he didn’t. Just this morning he’d passed Jackson while going to work, and he hadn’t even bothered to pretend he wasn’t looking. It wasn’t flirtatious, still. Just... curious?

“You got time to stop by tonight?” Jackson asked. They were reaching the stable, where Ashley could see both Ollie and Shawn hiding in the shadow of the cornice. They probably thought no one could see them, but they might as well be standing in the middle of the yard.

“After dinner, maybe?” Jackson prompted when Ashley didn’t answer.

“Yeah. I think I can squeeze it in.”

Jackson was quick to get away when he saw Ollie and Shawn, and Ashley was left to awkwardly explain. Shawn wasn’t much for rumors, but Ollie liked to gossip. All she was interested in now was Ashley’s sudden change of heart.

“What happened to him being a pompous jerk?” she goaded, batting her lashes. “Or is it the alpha-charms that are starting to get to you?”

“What? No!” Ashley chuffed and waved her off. “Are you crazy?”

“No. But I do have eyes in my head. And so does everybody else. You should hear the rumors that go around this place.”

“I’d rather not.”

Still, as Ashley began the short walk to the cottage later that same day, he couldn’t help noticing the glances he got. He wasn’t really bothered by any other than those Harvey shot at him across the yard. If Jackson was pompous, Harvey was a liability. He was so wrapped up in some twisted sense of superiority, it was even worse than Jackson’s on his worst days. Jackson had always been an idiot, but Harvey was a bully. He showed no mercy, and as he now watched Ashley walk along the small trail leading to Danny’s cottage, Ashley could’ve sworn he felt that glare shooting daggers into his back.

He found Jackson in the living room with the table covered with a mess of junk. He stood by the furniture, staring at the variety of stuff covering the tabletop.

“He didn’t throw anything away.”

Jackson looked up, then smiled lopsidedly. “Yeah, I’m starting to see that.” He picked a purple paperweight from the stash, rolling it in his hands. “Where did he even get all of this?”

Ashley felt it was more of a rhetorical question, so he ignored it. He grabbed the empty box from where Jackson had left it by the couch and sat down, keeping a safe distance from Jackson. “If it’s trash, just throw it away.” He dropped the box on the floor and began sorting the chaos spread over the table. After a little while, Jackson sat next to him and joined in on the mission.

There was very little left at the cottage apart from the furniture, only a few boxes here and there. Ashley found more of those cards and drawings Jackson had made, a selection of artwork made by a little boy he remembered so well.

“These are actually pretty good.”

Jackson groaned when he saw what Ashley was holding. “Still rubbing it in, huh?” He chuckled awkwardly.

“No, really... I think these are good.” Ashley passed the cards over to Jackson. “You should save these.”

Jackson took the cards and stared down at the small pile. Ashley could see he wanted to argue, but eventually Jackson placed the cards on the floor, far away from the box that was beginning to fill with disposable junk.

Jackson cleared his throat. "Sorry about the sketchbook."

"Sorry about the cards."

Nodding, Jackson dropped random slips of papers in the box lying on the floor between them. "Sorry about breaking the toy."

"Sorry about acting like a crazy person because of an ugly old toy." Ashley smirked when Jackson looked at him alarmingly, maybe thinking Ashley was offended by the comment. "It *was* my first toy, but I overreacted."

"I should've seen it coming. It's not the first time you jumped me." Jackson cocked a brow and tapped a finger against the small scar he had on his jaw. It was a relic from when Ashley had pushed him into the fountain.

"I'm not gonna apologize for that."

"I didn't think you would."

Jackson went back to the box, grinning absently. Ashley found that he liked that look. Actually, he found that he liked everything better about the male now, compared to the way things had been before. Even the silence was comfortable instead of that dense pressure they'd often slipped into before.

He liked this quietness, this lack of resentment. Jackson still carried an aura of nobility, but now it was more like Etta's. Maybe it was a family thing. Maybe Danny had had it too.

"Ashley?"

Ashley hummed absently while skimming through a mushrooming guide he'd found from one of the boxes. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jackson fiddle with that same paperweight, but no words came out. Ashley looked up at him. "Yes?"

Jackson stared down at the purple chunk rolling around inside his palms. "I'm sorry I left you in the woods that night." He glanced up quickly, discomposed. "I tried to find you later, but I couldn't. I didn't mean for you to get lost. If I had known you couldn't find your way back, I never would've taken you there."

Ashley stared at Jackson, who'd now gone back to watching that seemingly fascinating block of purple glass. "You came back looking for me?"

Jackson nodded. “I waited here, on the porch. Then, I don’t know... around midnight? You still weren’t back, and I realized you probably got lost. I was out there all night, but I couldn’t find you.”

Ashley was speechless. Almost on the verge of tears, but speechless. He had waited ten years to hear what Jackson just said, but the apology was nothing compared to hearing that Jackson had come back for him.

Jackson finally looked up. “It was wrong, and I never should’ve done it, and I’m sorry.”

Ashley nodded, hoping his voice wouldn’t crack. “Apology accepted.”

It was like getting a giant block of ice off his chest. The moment Jackson apologized, he felt like things had truly changed. Maybe not by much, but enough for him to admit that maybe there were things he could adjust in himself, rather than point the finger at everybody else. And by everybody else, he generally meant Ashley.

Nana was ecstatic, of course. She was convinced this was a new beginning—which Jackson liked to believe as well—and while Nana was happy spreading the joyous word, regardless of Jackson telling her not to, Jackson was happy adapting to a new form of friendship. It was still a little touch and go, but at least no one was in immediate danger of getting strangled. And while this new turn of events should’ve been a good thing, it turned out not everybody was happy about it.

Harvey wasn’t impressed. It wasn’t a secret that he and Ashley never got along. Looking back, Jackson wondered how much of that was due to his own resentment toward Ashley.

Harvey chose to bring up the topic one night after work, when Jackson was getting ready to head over to Danny’s. Harvey showed up right when Jackson was getting dressed, unapologetic as he walked right in and sat in the armchair closest to the small living room window.

“You could knock, you know.” In only his briefs, Jackson tossed the towel on his bed and went to his closet. “Some people would think you’re trespassing.”

“Sorry if I offended you,” Harvey said with a bitter tone. He stared at Jackson across the open space, fingers laced loosely over his lap. “Got a date or something?”

“Nothing special.”

Harvey snorted, looking away when Jackson glanced at him. “What?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m wondering. What the hell are you doing?”

Jackson stood by the open closet, a shirt in one hand and a pair of old sweats in the other, watching as the man stood up and walked closer.

“You and the mutt are best friends now?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Since when did you give a shit about some shed?”

Shrugging, Jackson tossed the shirt over the closet door and pulled on the sweats. “You saw the condition it’s in. It’s time we do something about it.”

“You’re going soft on him, aren’t you?” Harvey teased, leaning against the side of the closet. “Feeling sorry for the sad little mutt?”

The shirt was next, and Jackson pulled it on quickly. “Give the guy a break. He’s just doing his job.”

“And what are you doing? What the hell happened to not fending for the cripple?”

The closet door banged shut and Jackson stood face-to-face with his friend, more annoyed by the nickname he’d given Ashley years ago than the mocking tone of Harvey’s voice. “I’m just trying to get along with him, that’s all.” Except that it wasn’t. Having Ashley look him in the eye and say he accepted the apology had felt better than he’d imagined. Better than something that simple should’ve felt.

Harvey didn’t seem to believe him either. He shook his head and stepped back, watching Jackson incredulously. “You’re gonna turn soft on him, just like your brother did.”

“No one’s turning soft on anyone.”

“Oh yeah? Come tell me that when you stop giving the guy special treatment.”

Harvey left with an angry scowl, closing the front door with a loud bang, and Jackson stood by the closet for a long time, thinking back on the months and years following Ashley’s arrival.

Danny had been different then, no doubt about it. He’d been different around the pack, around the pups, like a cotton version of himself.

“That’s the weakling’s fault,” Harvey had said once, when they’d returned from one of their runs. Danny had kept them near the house that night, not letting them run off too far.

“Stupid mutt,” Jackson had hissed, swearing forever hatred over the stray his brother had wanted to join their pack.

The memories still held on when he left his cottage. Instead of heading straight to Danny’s, Jackson picked a different route.

The stable had always been Danny’s place. He had tried to get the pups interested, saying it would do them good to learn how to handle the horses, but none of them found the appeal Danny obviously had found immediately.

Ashley looked right at home in the space, tossing fresh hay into the stalls and checking the water. In the light cascading through the doorway, Jackson could see the white line sneaking up along Ashley’s neck, like a thin little snake squirming from under his striped black-and-white shirt. Jackson knew the scar was one of many covering Ashley’s back, though he’d never seen any other than the tip peeking from the neckline of Ashley’s shirts. Instead Jackson had once seen the gaps running along Ashley’s wolf’s back, like small hollows cut into the thick silvery fur. The scar looked ugly against his subtle tan, doing nothing to diminish the tousled appearance.

Ashley turned his head slightly, speaking over his shoulder. “It’s impolite to sneak up on people like that.” There was that glint of a smirk in his catty amber eyes, though his face remained blank otherwise.

Jackson stepped inside, suddenly nervous. “It’s not good for a shifter to not notice when they’re being sneaked up on.”

Ashley’s brows rose briefly. “Who said I didn’t?” he then asked, soon continuing nonchalantly. “Maybe your presence still fails to impress me.”

No bitterness whatsoever. A playful glint passed Ashley’s gaze, before he turned back to Fay’s stall. “I assume you’re not just passing by?”

“Actually... I just...” Jackson should’ve thought of a proper excuse. He had none. “Actually I was just passing by. Just to say hi.”

Ashley turned around at that, eyeing Jackson thoughtfully. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“You said that already.”

“I did, yes.” Where the hell did all of this nervousness come from? “Are you busy?”

“I was going to get Fay.” Ashley pushed the wheelbarrow outside, then dusted his hands. “You wanna come with me?” he asked, already backing away as he headed over to the pasture.

The pasture looked huge, especially when Fay seemed to be in the mood for sprinting. The mare snickered at Ashley’s coaxes, but when he shunned her for acting out, Fay appeared to fully understand. Apologetically, she made her way closer.

Reluctant to get too close to the animal, Jackson planned on staying by the gate, but Ashley took him by the hand and pulled him along.

“She likes making new friends.”

“I don’t remember volunteering for the job.” He followed regardless, a little less intimidated by Fay when Ashley stood between him and the mare. “Did you know she bit me once?”

Ashley laughed, smirking at Jackson. “Is there anyone in your family she hasn’t bit?”

“You?” Jackson suggested.

Ashley floated further, their hands no longer joined as he moved toward the approaching mare. His eyes held Jackson’s, a self-content smile on his face. “I must be special, then.”

Jackson stayed back, unwilling to disturb the wordless bond between Ashley and the mare. The two met near the thick wooden fence, Ashley’s features melting into a tender smile when Fay tossed her head in a greeting. Immediately Ashley’s hands found their way over her strong neck, Fay snickering while nudging Ashley on the shoulder.

He looked at Jackson, gesturing him to come closer. “Come say hello.”

Jackson shook his head. “No, I’m good, thanks.”

Ashley wasn’t in the mood for refusal. He started toward Jackson, and Fay followed without a word of command. “Are you scared of her?” Ashley asked when he got closer. “It’s okay if you are.”

“Not scared. Just... unsure.”

“We’ll start off easy, then.” Fay stood behind him, observant eyes watching Jackson curiously. “Give me your hand,” Ashley said, all the while rubbing along Fay’s side.

His hand felt good around Jackson’s, firm but not too rough, and Ashley turned to Jackson when he pressed Jackson’s hand gently against Fay’s short, cinnamon coat.

“You have to be gentle with her,” Ashley murmured, his eyes on Jackson’s. “People hurt her in the past, so she’s a little scared sometimes. But if you treat her right, she won’t forget it.”

To Fay, he murmured, “Be nice to him, okay? I think you scare him more than he scares you.”

The mare tossed her head, but seemed to lose interest in Jackson’s presence as she started chewing stubbly grass from the ground. Under Jackson’s palm, her coat was prickly and silky at the same time. The strength of her massive body was noticeable just by stroking her side.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” Ashley asked.

Jackson shook his head, but found no words. This wasn’t bad at all.

The late evening sun shone from behind them, coloring Ashley’s hair almost white while his face was hidden from the rays. He looked mischievous with his eyes narrowed as he continued whispering things to Fay, and he seemed completely oblivious to the distance between them when Jackson moved closer.

“Why won’t you leave her out for the night with the rest of the herd?” he asked, completely fixated on the sheer happiness beaming from Ashley’s eyes as he pampered the mare.

“She’s a little skittish,” Ashley explained. “She reacted badly in the past when the whole pack was on the move. Maybe it’s the energy... I don’t know. I rather have her inside when you guys go for a run.” He started toward the gate, and Fay followed automatically. She seemed completely oblivious to Jackson’s presence, and he was glad to be overlooked.

He didn’t mind waiting by the stable doors while Ashley gave Fay a thorough brushing. Ashley looked just as happy and calm as Jackson felt while in his wolf form. He’d never understood how a shifter could overlook the needs of his wolf, but maybe Ashley’s needs lay elsewhere. Maybe this was what made him happy.

Still, now more than ever, Jackson wished Ashley would join them. He'd always wanted Ashley to truly be a part of their pack, but so far, resentment had driven that wish; what kind of a shifter refused to run with his pack? Now, though, Jackson felt responsible for not even trying to introduce Ashley to the true strength of their pack. He imagined Ashley fitting in quite nicely alongside with the rest of pack. Maybe he'd need some getting used to, but how could it end badly?

“Are you sure you don't want to come with us?”

Ashley chuckled and glanced over. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Because I've never ran with anyone?”

“Not even with Danny?”

Ashley lowered the brush, stroking Fay's side for a moment, before he stepped out of the stall. “That's different.”

“Different how?”

“He was patient. Understanding.” Ashley closed the door and organized the small shelf outside the stall. “He never rushed me.”

“I wouldn't—”

“You run in a pack. You don't have time to fend for a cripple like me.”

Harvey's words were thrown in Jackson's face, and he had no time to react to the closed-off look on Ashley's face before he walked past him. “The pack's your thing. Not mine.”

Jackson grabbed him by the hand, preventing Ashley from running off. “You've never tried it.”

“And I like it that way.” Ashley pulled his hand away. “They're your people, remember? Not mine.” The annoying tone was like an ancient relic from when they were kids and Ashley would shove his nose into every single conversation, just to point out how he disagreed on everything. Jackson wished he could let it pass and not care, but it still got to him.

“We run in a pack. You should join us if you ever want to be a part of the pack.”

“Then I guess I'll never be,” Ashley said. “You don't really want me there, Jackson. This is your grandmother talking, not you.”

“I just want you to try.”

“There’s nothing to try. I don’t mind, really. I don’t need to run with you. I’m okay on my own.” Ashley pulled away, smiling reassuringly. “Don’t worry about it.”

Still, Jackson did. He still worried about it when he reached the woods with the rest of the pack, his eyes lingering on one specific porch where one male sat and watched. Jackson might not be the most sensible person in the world, but he could feel the longing even across the distance.

Chapter Nine

The short conversation at the stable haunted Ashley for days. Jackson might know about the scars and about Ashley's limp after he shifted, but Jackson had never actually seen Ashley in that state of cripplement. No one had. Not even Danny. It was embarrassing how little Ashley's body could handle, how easily he became weak and sore. He'd once thought it was vanity that kept him from sharing it with the others, but now he knew better; he'd lose his last chance of ever being a part of this pack if they saw how useless he really was.

Sometimes in the evenings, Ashley sat on the porch of his house watching the wolves return from the woods. He sometimes toyed with the idea of joining the others, imagining what it would be like to run free, surrounded by other shifters. But he never joined them, never dared to risk it.

Jackson was always the last to emerge from the woods, his dark gray coat thick and coarse to the eye as he reached the yard, slowly easing his stride while he watched his pack return from their evening run. For a moment the whole courtyard was filled with wolves, and even from afar, Ashley's heart drummed painfully inside his chest, both afraid of the sight and excited by it. Ever since Jackson had asked Ashley to join them, Ashley had felt a burn in his bones, knowing he couldn't fight against his wolf's demands much longer.

One night, well after the pack had returned from their run, Ashley left his house, shifting before his feet ever touched the ground, and disappeared into the woods. It didn't take long for his wolf to overrule his human senses, the chained creature inside him taking in the smell of freedom for the first time in weeks. Ashley knew there would be hell to pay, but for now, all that mattered was the sense of living he never realized he longed for until he allowed his wolf to step to the front.

Jackson had told him the fencing was checked and everything looked right, and even though he hadn't said it directly, Ashley knew Jackson still thought he'd lied about seeing a wolf in the woods. Ashley figured it had been a shifter, but if he'd told Jackson that, that would've meant he'd blamed someone from the pack of scaring and terrorizing him on Jackson's land. That was not a conversation Ashley wanted to be a part of. Still, he wanted to believe Jackson when he said it was safe to wander the woods, and Ashley pushed aside the shallow fear still coating his mind.

Time passed without him even noticing it. He never ventured too far into the woods, afraid he'd get lost again, but he followed the trails as far as they took him before he turned back. The scents lingering in the air around him, wolves and insects and the tiniest creatures mulling through layers upon layers of ground, gave him such a high he barely noticed the more vibrant scents floating inches above the ground.

Brisk outdoors and dried pine needles, the saltiness of human skin mixed with the coarse earthiness of a wolf.

Ashley moved cautiously, sniffing the ground as he returned along the trail. The sun was long gone, leaving nothing but a black blanket around him. Through the trees he could see the lights of the houses, small spots of brightness glistering in the middle of pitch black, giving him a route back home. But that scent remained, much too strong to have been left behind by someone who'd been here before.

Ashley reached the last stretch of the trail, his paws moving soundlessly over the moss on the ground on the side of the trail. The closer to home he got, the more afraid he became, his human memories taking over the logics of his wolf. It was the moment he always hated the most, that brief breath when his wolf realized time was up and it would be locked away again. Fear and anger exploded, rushing Ashley along the rest of the way and over the distance of the yard.

The feel of another wolf haunted him all the way to his front door, never forgotten, reminding him of the sad reality he faced the moment he reached his porch and forced his wolf back. It was still out there somewhere, a beast that could kill him if it chose to. And all he was left with was an aching body that crumbled on the floor as soon as he got inside, every bone and muscle hurting from the shift.

He staggered into the kitchen, blindly reaching for the handle of the freezer while he was in too much hurry to even switch the lights on. The ice pack was familiar in his hand. It brought a sensation of instant relief as he pressed it against the small of his back, right over where the white lines zigzagged over his skin.

Gingerly lowering himself on the floor, Ashley gritted his teeth, willing the pain to go away. Still in the dark, he leaned back against the cupboards, breathing deep as the remnants of his wolf disappeared and left him in the blinding darkness.

He'd once thought the spasms were a thing of the past. Sure, there was some ache every now and then, but not like this. Months had passed without a single twitch of pain, but then it came back. It didn't help that he knew the pain would pass quite quickly; the pain was still there, just waiting to strike back the moment he forgot.

His head dropped back against the cupboard, Ashley stared at the crack in the curtains, lights beaming an ugly yellow against the edge of his blue kitchen curtains.

“Ashley?”

At the sound of Jackson's voice, Ashley went stiff. Well, stiffer.

Shoes creaked against the floor as he came inside. “Everything okay? Your door's wide open.”

“Stay there,” Ashley called out, fighting his way back up. But no, of course Jackson couldn't stay where he was. He kept on coming, his steps thumping closer and closer.

“I'm naked!” Ashley croaked, now leaning back against the wall, grasping the ice pack in his hand. His back protested against the standing position, and Ashley tried to twist and turn so that the tension would ease even a little bit.

“This really isn't a good time,” he muttered, eyes closed as another cramp grabbed ahold of the whole left side of his back. It hurt so badly he wanted to cry, just sob and wallow on the floor until the pain would ease and his body went numb.

Something cold and smooth brushed against his arm, and he jerked back instinctively. A pained groan nearly slipped out, but he bit it back just in time. He saw Jackson standing by the small kitchen table with his head turned to the side and eyes shut tightly.

“I didn't look,” he said, holding Ashley's bedspread between them. He looked ridiculous, and Ashley felt pathetic and completely useless, but the gesture was so kind. Ashley wrapped himself inside the bedspread, thanking Jackson quietly.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Yeah.” Ashley hoped he could hide, that the darkness was enough to hide the paleness on his face and the shakiness of his hands, but even without the lights on, he could sense Jackson observing him.

“Did you get hurt?” Jackson asked, placing his hand gently on Ashley’s shoulder. Even through the light fabric, the touch was scorching against Ashley’s ice-cold skin.

“What?” he mumbled, trying to shake off the hand.

“I saw you in the woods.” Both hands were on Ashley now, disturbing his mind and setting his skin on fire.

“Don’t touch,” he said weakly, shrinking back. “It feels really bad.”

Jackson pulled his hands away immediately, moving back slightly. “Sorry. I... Are you okay?”

Nodding, Ashley turned toward the door. “I need to sit down.” Maybe lie down, too. Maybe curl on the bed and stay there until his system would work properly again.

The ice pack had turned his left palm numb, but Ashley held on to it while staggering from the kitchen to the bedroom. Jackson followed him all the way to the corner of the room where his bed was located, then stood next to him while he sat down and folded over, cherishing the stretch spreading along his back.

“Did you get hurt?” Jackson asked again. From the corner of his eye, Ashley could see Jackson shift from one foot to the other, impatience making itself known.

“No.” Ashley leaned his cheek against his knees, breathing deep while the sharpest burn turned into a dull ache. “I’ll be okay.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe you should lie down.”

“I’m good.”

Jackson shifted closer, his cotton-covered knee bumping the mattress. “You don’t sound good,” he said bluntly. “Come on... Give me the ice pack and lie down, and I’ll put the pack where you need it.”

Ashley stared at the tiny hole in the left knee of Jackson’s black sweats. At least they looked black. Everything looked kind of black in the dark. Even the eye-hurting bright purple of the bedspread looked pitch black.

“Ashley...” Jackson coaxed. “It’ll help if you lie down, right?”

Ashley muttered, “Maybe.”

“Then why are you still sitting?” Jackson pulled the ice pack from Ashley’s hand and nudged his shoulder. “Just lie down.”

Ashley remained still, stubbornly holding on to the last of his pride, but his body longed for the relief the ice pack could give. Rigidly he sat up, moving slowly, and just as slowly settled on his stomach on the bed. Jackson sat next to him, hip to hip, and when he grabbed the edge of the bedspread, Ashley screwed his eyes shut.

He knew the exact moment Jackson saw the scars. The bedspread pooled at the small of Ashley’s back, and while Jackson said nothing, his silence spoke volumes. Even in the poor lighting Jackson couldn’t miss the collection of small, white lines running along Ashley’s back next to his spine. They were like a bad painting slurred on his skin, and now more than ever Ashley hated having something so hideous covering his body.

Jackson touched the skin carefully, tactically avoiding the scars. “Your skin’s ice cold.”

“I’ll warm up.” Under his chest, Ashley’s hands were fisted tightly. He stared at the corner of the nightstand, trying to block out the confusion spreading inside his body. His skin was shivering, but it burned where Jackson touched him. The skin around the scars was so sensitive the touch was almost too much, but Jackson was generously gentle while searching for the sorest spots.

Finally he placed the ice pack where Ashley had had it a little while earlier, and the release was almost instant. Ashley’s body went lax, all tension melting away.

Jackson asked if he could put the light on, and turned on the table lamp when Ashley said it was okay. “Is it always this bad after your shift?” he asked, adding some pressure on the ice pack.

“Not always.” Ashley moved a little and pulled a pillow under his cheek. “If it’s just a quick run, like fifteen or twenty minutes, it doesn’t get this bad.”

“How long was it now?”

“I don’t know. What time is it?”

“Almost midnight.”

Ashley turned his head enough to meet eyes with Jackson. “Really?” He’d been out there for over two hours.

Jackson nodded and shifted his eyes back to where his hand rested over the ice pack. “When I saw you, I thought one of the pups had gone back out there. I wouldn’t have followed you if I knew it was you.”

Ashley settled back down, thinking of the presence he’d sensed in the woods.

“I smelled you out there.”

“Yeah? What did I smell like?”

“Could’ve been worse, I suppose.”

Jackson snorted, and Ashley smiled groggily at the sound. He had a vague memory of someone rubbing his back when he was little, before he ever knew Danny or Etta or this place even existed. He remembered it had felt nice, made him feel sleepy and relaxed and safe, but he was sure it hadn’t felt as nice as this.

Jackson lifted the ice pack and felt the skin beneath it, saying he didn’t want any frostbite, and Ashley felt too floaty to say he’d done this so many times he was used to the cold by now.

“Think of it this way,” Jackson chatted. “At least you make it home after every run. It could get awkward if someone found you naked in the woods.” He placed the ice pack back over the largest scars, apparently thinking he was funny.

“It was a joke.”

Murmuring sourly, Ashley rubbed his face against the pillow. “I know.”

“Not there yet, huh?”

“Not by a mile.”

“My apologies.” Fingers grazed up and over the smaller scars, Jackson’s touch exploring more than thrilling, but it was odd he wanted to touch at all. “They’re not ugly,” he said, as if knowing what went through Ashley’s head.

“They’re not pretty either.”

“Battle wounds. You should be proud.” From the mark on Ashley’s neck to the smaller spot just below his left shoulder blade, Jackson’s fingers danced along the now glowing skin. Ashley was sure he should’ve told him to stop, but it had been so long since anyone had touched him, and no one had ever touched him like this. Not his back, definitely not the scars. The last male he’d been with had been okay with Ashley keeping his shirt on, which had ultimately been the reason the guy was an ex instead of a significant other. It wasn’t shame, though. People had seen the scars. Ashley just didn’t like them ogling the marks. They’d go crazy, asking questions they thought Ashley could answer. Few understood why he didn’t want to talk about what it felt like to be attacked by a wolf. As if he even remembered. It could’ve been a shifter for all he knew. Maybe his own mother.

What a depressing thought.

“It’s really not that bad,” Jackson said, yanking Ashley back. “You could have a chunk of meat missing above your ass.”

“Not there yet, remember?”

“I thought I’d give it a shot.”

Regardless of missing the punch line, Ashley smiled. “I thank you for your efforts.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Chapter Ten

Jackson's head was not in the game the next morning. He'd passed out on Ashley's couch after making sure he was fast asleep. Then Jackson had sneaked out at dawn, hoping no one saw him. But of course someone did.

Jackson owed them no explanations, so while he was met with raised brows in the morning, he ignored them. He ignored them all through the day, although he could sense people's confusion. He couldn't even deal with his own confusion, let alone others'. It had been a while since he last sneaked out after spending a night at someone's, but it was the first time he spent the night in completely platonic circumstances. So, yeah, there had been nudity—not that Jackson had seen much—and some touching, too. But still platonic. Why mull over it, then?

Because of the scars.

All through the day, while fixing this and that and ordering lumber for Nana's projects around the estate, Jackson's mind wandered back to the moment he'd pulled down the bedspread and those scars were revealed. They weren't ugly. They weren't shocking, though they popped right out from the otherwise tanned skin. They weren't hideous, though judging from Ashley's tension, he probably thought nothing could look even close to as bad. Much to Jackson's surprise, those scars on that back were by far the sexiest thing he'd ever laid his eyes on. Hence the confusion. So he found a few marks sexy? Big deal. But it was Ashley. Ashley, the annoying twig Jackson had fought with almost his entire life. In retrospect, Ashley's momentary vulnerability turned out to be kind of a turn-on, too.

So, Jackson's mind was on everything else other than work, and it was noticed by Harvey, who wasn't exactly glad about Jackson's nightly activities.

It was no surprise he noticed Jackson's absentmindedness, and it didn't take him long to figure out the cause. "I'm surprised the mutt let you get out at all."

A few of the males from their crew were still hanging by the garage, but they were quick to exit when Harvey's tone reached that nasty snarl.

"Since when have you been doing house calls?"

"He wasn't feeling well." Jackson met eyes with Harvey, and realized he hadn't answered the question. For once, he didn't feel like he wanted to, either.

“I’m all grown up, *Dad*, so don’t you worry about me.” Jackson grinned and started emptying the truck.

Harvey appeared on the opposite side of the truck and contributed to the job by staring at Jackson. “People talk.”

“Since when did you care?”

“I don’t, but maybe you should.” Harvey looked displeased, frowning disgustedly while looking over the mostly deserted courtyard. “They’re starting to think you and the mutt are getting real cozy.”

“What’s with the attitude?” Jackson asked, confused by Harvey’s obvious resentment.

“I just don’t see the sense in what you’re doing. Spending the night? Come on. You had to know someone would see you sneak in in the middle of the night.”

“Is that what this is about?” Jackson laughed. “He wasn’t feeling well, that’s all.”

As Jackson assessed Harvey’s mood, he realized that little was left of the jokester Jackson had grown up with. Harvey had developed a mean side to him Jackson knew all too well, a side even Nana didn’t really know, but Jackson wasn’t prepared to come face-to-face with it this early in the day.

“What the hell is this really about?” he asked, void of amusement. “I’ve been there for you when you needed help, haven’t I?”

A nasty snarl emerged from Harvey’s throat, the male suddenly tense with anger. “I’d say it’s a little different than him needing a crutch just because he can’t handle his wolf.” Harvey nodded. “I was there too, in the woods. I watched you follow the mutt around. I stood right next to you, and you didn’t even sense me. That’s how bad the mutt’s messing with your head.”

It was pointless to say Jackson had been worried. It would’ve also been a lie, because that wasn’t why he’d followed Ashley. He’d been intrigued, granted with the rare opportunity of seeing Ashley’s wolf.

Harvey stepped closer, his gaze filled with disgust. “I could handle pity, you know? If this was a handout, you being nice for the benefit of your grandmother. I would totally get that. But it’s not, now is it? You’re going soft on the guy, just like your brother.”

“Don’t talk about Danny.”

“Why? Is that something you and Ashley chat about when you sneak up to the cottage?”

Something in Harvey’s voice sent chills racing down Jackson’s back. He’d seen Harvey break males much weaker than him, doing damage without ever touching any of them, and Jackson had been in awe of the cruel gleam in Harvey’s eyes when he’d spat out insults one after another. That same gleam was there now, staring at Jackson with no respect whatsoever.

“What we do or do not do, is none of your business, Harv. And don’t sneak up on me in the woods. You don’t need to look after me.”

“Everybody’s been looking after you, Jackson. They’re looking *at* you. This whole place is looking at you right now. Ever since he came here, you’ve been telling people he doesn’t belong here, that he should leave, that he’s a disgrace to this pack. What the hell happened to that?”

“I was wrong,” Jackson admitted. “There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“Clearly not, since he’s managed to get the special treatment from you,” Harvey sneered, looking Jackson up and down. “You just keep on giving the mutt private attention, and I can guarantee you’ll have a pack of two in no time.”

“Is that a threat?” Jackson’s wolf paraded anxiously, like a caged animal. “Friend or not, you’re in no position to tell me what to do. Do you understand? If things don’t please you, you’re free to leave.”

“Three months ago you would’ve kicked the mutt out.”

“Three months ago things were different.”

Harvey grimaced with scorn. “Yeah... You had some balls then. You wouldn’t have crawled after a pest who can’t even walk through the woods without getting scared.” He scoffed disgustedly and stepped back. “And don’t think I’m the only one thinking you’re out of your mind. What does he have to offer to this pack? People are starting to think you’re choosing the mutt over the pack.”

“If they think that, then they don’t know me.”

Harvey shrugged. “Then I guess I don’t know you either.”

He left, striding confidently across the yard, while Jackson stood by the truck with a toolbox in one hand and a half-empty water bottle in the other.

The truck never got emptied. Jackson never went home after work, and he didn't see Ashley either. He did what he knew best: evicted memories.

Finding the cottage empty was a surprise Ashley wasn't particularly happy about. When he got there in the evening, the doors were locked, and after a quick inspection he realized the windows were tightly shut as well.

He checked each room through the spotless panes and realized that even the furniture was gone. The space looked so much bigger now, with nothing filling the empty spots. The old garden chairs had been removed from the backyard as well as the hammock Etta had put up on the porch every summer, though no one even lounged in it.

Ashley was confused. They'd been assigned to this tedious task weeks ago, and he'd originally thought Jackson would waste no time getting rid of what little was left of his brother. Instead, Jackson had stalled at every turn. Contrary to what he'd thought, Ashley had been the one to tell Jackson to throw things away, when it seemed he had trouble letting go of anything.

With his body still sore and weak, Ashley made his way back. He hadn't planned on going to Jackson's that day; waking up in the morning with him nowhere to be seen had been weird enough. Ashley had no interest in chatting about his weak condition. Now, though, he ignored the raised brows when he crossed the yard and headed straight to Jackson's cottage. Ashley had seen the pack return from the woods a little earlier, and it was safe to assume that sleeping wasn't Jackson's main priority this soon after a shift. He always seemed restless for quite a while after his shift, a luxury Ashley often yearned for. Jackson got a boost of energy from his wolf, while Ashley got stiff muscles and a headache from his.

Still, when Ashley reached the cottage, Jackson didn't seem too energetic. There was no answer from the door, and after peeking through the windows, Ashley circled the house and found Jackson in the backyard, polishing sports trophies. The shiny ones were lined up neatly on Jackson's right side, while the still-dusty ones were in a box on his left.

The closer Ashley got, the sharper the stench of Jackson's wolf got. It wasn't that strong, earthy aroma Ashley had learned to know and not be afraid of during the past few weeks. He reeked of anxiousness and distress as he worked the rag against the trophies with quick, sharp movements.

He regarded Ashley with a quick glance, before he picked a new trophy from the box and started working the dim surface. Ashley climbed up the stairs and sat next to the box, trying to sense his surroundings. His wolf detected no immediate danger, but just looking at Jackson, Ashley could tell he wasn't having one of his good days.

“Are these from the cottage?”

Jackson checked the trophy against the sun and continued rubbing on a spot that looked perfectly clean to Ashley.

“I found them in the attic.”

“Are they all Danny's?” Ashley picked a small trophy from the box and read the carving on the base. “I didn't know he was a jock.”

“Dad wanted him to play.” Jackson placed the trophy he'd been cleaning at the end of the line and picked a new one from the box. “Danny hated it.”

Nodding, Ashley placed the trophy back in the box. He wasn't sure what to say. He hadn't seen this side of Jackson in so long he'd almost forgotten what it actually looked like. The clearness in Jackson's eyes was replaced by that stormy darkness, and every time Jackson even as much as glanced at Ashley, his eyes pierced right through.

“I stopped by Danny's,” Ashley began casually. “Did you empty the place alone?”

“After work.” It seemed Jackson had lost interest in actually cleaning the trophies; now he merely brushed the rag over the tarnished surface before moving on to the next one. “Everything's stashed in the truck until Nana tells me what to do with it.”

“I could've helped you. Not today, obviously, but maybe over the weekend. You didn't have to do it alone.”

“It should've been done weeks ago.” This time the trophy was just dropped on the floor. “Hell... Years ago.”

Ashley watched the angry movements of Jackson's hands, and little by little Ashley's inner calmness crumbled and his wolf skittered. Still, he'd seen a different kind of Jackson, someone who wasn't this angry, impatient male Ashley was now facing. That was the memory he now clung on to as he went on.

“I thought you weren't in a rush to get the job done.”

“You thought wrong.” Now the cleaning process seemed to aggravate Jackson more than calm him down, and he shoved the rag into the box along with the remaining trophies. “Nana should’ve gotten rid of this junk when Danny died. I don’t understand why she held on to it this long.”

Jackson started shoving the cleaned prizes into the box alongside the dirty ones, his bad mood floating around him like a heavy wind. “Do you want these?” he asked and pushed the box at Ashley’s direction. “If not, then they’ll go into the trash with everything else.”

“If you don’t want it, then why did you even take it home with you?”

Jackson shrugged and stood up. “I thought it would be a nice souvenir for you.” He looked down on Ashley, challenging with his voice alone.

It took a few calming breaths, but Ashley managed to tame his temper. He got up as well and stepped down the stairs. “I’m going home,” he said calmly. “You have fun stewing in your problems.”

The moment he turned and started toward the corner of the cottage, Jackson called after him. “I don’t have problems.”

“Of course you don’t.”

He should’ve known, but that eight-year-old wouldn’t let go of the dream. Now that little kid was crouched in the corner, crying, watching grown-up Ashley get shoved aside when the old Jackson reappeared.

Behind Ashley’s back Jackson scoffed. “Yeah... You just walk away.” The box was thrown off the porch, and Ashley could hear the trophies scatter across the lawn. “That’s what you’re good at.”

Ashley’s determined stride came to a halt, and he turned around. “Excuse me?”

From the porch Jackson waved toward the stable, an obnoxious glare on his face. “I try to talk about you joining the rest of the pack on a run, and what do you do? You walk away. You can’t even let me see your scars without wanting to run.” He nodded knowingly. “Yeah. Don’t think I didn’t sense that.”

“You’re one to talk about walking away.” Ashley made his way back to the porch. “This is your brother’s stuff, and the only thing you can think of is to throw it away? That’s really mature.”

“It’s trash.”

“It’s *Danny’s*.”

Ashley laughed when Jackson snarled and waved him off. “Oh, right. I forgot. We’re not supposed to talk about him, right?” he sneered. “Let’s not even mention his name, because Jackson, the big bad alpha to be, can’t even talk about his dead big brother.”

“Shut up, mutt.”

On the inside, Ashley cringed. It felt like forever since anyone last called him that so that he heard them. It seemed as though others stopped using the name the moment Jackson dropped it from his vocabulary, but now it was back. And it hurt just as much.

“You’re so childish,” Ashley muttered. Jackson’s ignorant stare across the yard only fueled Ashley’s anger. “I admit. I don’t want to talk about joining everybody, because just the thought of being out there with the pack scares the shit out of me. But at least I’ve got the balls to admit that I am scared. You’re so full of yourself you can’t even admit that you miss him.”

“Don’t talk to me like you know how I feel.”

“How could I know? You never talk about it. But this?” Ashley waved a hand over the mess littering Jackson’s neatly mowed lawn. “This doesn’t exactly say you appreciate *anything* your brother accomplished. I don’t care if he hated playing. He wouldn’t have saved those if he didn’t care. But you don’t care about anything, do you? You just don’t give a shit. I’m starting to think you never gave a shit about him, either.”

Jackson moved so quickly Ashley had no time to react. Jackson stood on the porch one moment, and then in the next he stood right in front of Ashley, teeth bared while he snarled, “Don’t ever say things like that. I would do anything to get him back.”

The storm in his eyes had turned into thunderclouds. Ashley couldn’t help the shudders as they ran through him, and if Jackson hadn’t moved, Ashley would’ve stepped away. But Jackson stepped back, still watching Ashley closely. Anger vanished, leaving sadness behind. Jackson took another step, then turned and ascended the stairs with one leap. The backdoor hit the wall when Jackson yanked it open and stormed inside, and Ashley watched him, shaky and confused.

He’d gone too far. He knew it. But as he looked over the lawn where sunlight beamed off the scattered prizes, he couldn’t see anything but

indifference in Jackson's actions. And then that sad stare fled across Ashley's mind, and he couldn't help thinking how close to that feeling he had been so many times.

Ashley glanced over his shoulder, thinking it would be best if he just left. But his feet took him forward, across the grass, and up the stairs.

Jackson's cottage felt cool and airy after the sun and heat outside, but Ashley felt downright shivery when he saw Jackson sitting on the couch. In front of him on the table were stacks and stacks of books, all of which Ashley recognized from Danny's bookshelf.

It seemed Jackson had lost most of his furor. He didn't even look up when Ashley moved closer. Jackson picked a book from the table, skimming through it absently.

"Did he ever read any of these to you?" Jackson asked.

"No."

"Sometimes he would tell us to take a seat and then he'd pick a book and start reading about some random stuff. Plants and hobbies... Just about any stupid thing." Jackson stared down at the open page. Slowly he frowned, his eyes moist as he pushed the book back on the table and rubbed a hand over his face. With all the strength he possessed, he'd always looked massive in Ashley's eyes, but with his gaze gleaming and glossy, he looked so tiny. Ashley was sure some part of his heart broke a little right then and there. He moved closer, cautious at first.

Jackson sat still, elbows on his knees and fingers laced loosely, but as seconds ticked by, that broken look in his eyes became more and more fractured. He buried his face in his palms, and the tension in his shoulders melted under the shudders that took over.

Ashley sat and slid his arm around Jackson shoulders. Then he just hugged him. Just like Etta had hugged Ashley the first night he woke up in a new place and didn't know where he was, or when Ashley's first shift was over and he knew he'd failed and he was convinced they would send him back.

Little by little words started pouring out, and when Jackson finally started talking about Danny, it seemed he couldn't stop. It was like a dam had broken. Ashley had never heard Jackson speak as much as he spoke now. Ashley listened regardless. He rubbed Jackson's back in slow circles and leaned his

cheek against Jackson's shoulder, never uttering a word though at times he would've liked to. Jackson talked about the good times, and then about the months following Ashley's arrival when Jackson had felt like the whole world had gone mad. He talked about Danny's quirks and about the little things he had done that no one even noticed. Jackson had noticed, though. Ashley had, too.

Jackson talked until his voice was raspy and those shudders stopped. He wiped his eyes and snorted. "Didn't think I'd be the one to cry."

Ashley gave Jackson one last tight squeeze, before he sat up. "Ten years in the making."

Jackson nodded absently and wiped his whole face, running nose and all, on the hem of his shirt.

Ashley grimaced. "Gross."

"I've seen you bawl your eyes out, so don't judge."

"I used tissues, though."

Jackson chuckled dryly, staring at the books covering the table. He picked one up, ran his hand over the back with a sigh.

"He talked about you," Ashley said quietly. "He talked about you all the time."

Staring down at his hands, Ashley recalled every single talk they'd had in Etta's kitchen or in the large backyard of the center. It was one of those moments again; if he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine it was Danny next to him and not Jackson. But Danny was gone. And Jackson was here. He was still here, so close to Ashley, looking just as lost and hurt as Ashley had felt for years.

"I..." Ashley began, but words were struggling to get out. He looked at the book in Jackson's hands, wondering why it was so hard to speak the truth when spewing insults had always been so easy.

"The way Danny always talked about you made me think you'd be a great friend. When I was younger, I used to make the same wish every year on my birthday. Every time I blew out the candles, I wished that you and I would be friends." It seemed almost funny now. Back then he'd close his eyes and pray his wish would come true, and now it sounded like a joke, even to his own ears. "It would've been the best birthday present ever."

Breathing deep, Ashley sat up a bit. “Never happened, though.” He brushed it off, stood up, and headed for the door, now wishing he hadn’t said anything. “I’ll go clear the lawn.”

“Ashley...”

Glancing over his shoulder, Ashley saw Jackson standing by the table with the book still clutched in his hand.

Jackson shook his head, clearly confused. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Would you have said something, if you were me? Knowing you’d get laughed at and teased for it?”

Jackson stared back. He looked so unlike himself, his eyes red and face blotchy, that Ashley knew this was something he could easily hold over Jackson if he ever wanted to. But the sight of the torn male roused no temptation. Ashley was so done with hurt and grief he just wished it would be over for all of them.

“I didn’t tell you so that you’d feel guilty.” Standing by the door, Ashley turned to Jackson and spoke quietly. “I just wanted you to know that even if I took all of his time, he still loved you.”

“He loved you, too.”

“It wasn’t the same. But I guess it wasn’t supposed to be.” The whole topic was starting to get on Ashley’s nerves; he’d meant to check if Jackson was okay, not get into a conversation this deep and meaningful.

Ashley left Jackson standing there, looking thoughtful. He cleared the lawn and carried the box back onto the porch. Jackson had piled the books on the corner of the bookshelf, and now he looked around tiredly. Ashley was itching to ask what had caused the earlier outburst, but he was afraid to bring the topic to the table.

He stalled by the door. “I think I’m gonna head home.”

Jackson looked at him sharply. “Already?” He cringed at the wake of his disappointed voice. “I mean you can stay, if you want to.”

Ashley shuffled over the threshold, inching closer. “Do you want me to stay?”

Jackson shrugged vaguely, eyes running over the wall while Ashley waited. Eventually Jackson looked at him, somehow looking even barer now.

“I was thinking of making some tea.”

Tempted to cringe, Ashley cleared his throat and stepped further inside. “I don’t suppose you have coffee?”

“I don’t even have a coffee machine.” Jackson wiped his face once more while moving into the small kitchen. There he hesitated, brought up a small box of tea, and looked at Ashley questioningly.

Ashley closed the back door, watched it shut behind him silently, before he walked inside. “Tea’s fine.”

Chapter Eleven

Ashley spent the night. The only reason why Jackson even knew this was because he woke up sometime during the night and realized they were both squeezed on his couch. His initial thought was to get up and sneak into bed without waking Ashley. Two second later he realized how nice it felt to have Ashley snuggled up against him. That led to all sorts of unnecessary and provocative thoughts, and it took a while before Jackson could relax without the fear of his body revealing the images rushing through his mind. But Ashley was gone in the morning, and while Jackson would've liked to say he didn't care, he had to admit he was disappointed.

Maybe he was the only one having these confusing feelings. Maybe, just maybe, he was rushing into something Ashley wasn't going to share.

In the bright morning light, the living room wasn't the only thing that looked a mess. Jackson's tiny breakdown the night before started looking more and more embarrassing as he got up and went through his morning rituals. Then there was that whole thing with his swollen face and red-rimmed eyes. Not a good look on him. No wonder Ashley had left. Jackson vomited years of suppressed feelings in one breath; even he couldn't stand it.

But, as usual, Ashley wasn't easily read. By the time Jackson was getting dressed after a shower, Ashley reappeared. Apparently he tried to sneak quietly, and with a clear view to the door, Jackson could see Ashley's gaze landing on the couch the second he got inside. His body relaxed the moment he noticed the couch was empty, and when he looked up and saw Jackson by the bedroom door, he smiled. Not that taunting smirk he sometimes shot at Jackson; it was a wide, happy-to-see-you smile.

"You're up." Ashley kicked the door shut and brought up his hands, gesturing at the small bag he had hanging from the crook of his arm and the two mugs he was balancing in his hands. "Etta sent breakfast."

Caught off guard, Jackson nodded and followed quietly when Ashley went into the kitchen. He lowered the mugs to the table before he started emptying the bag.

"She had fresh bread. And some fancy tea thing going on, which you apparently love. I said they'd go cold by the time I get here, but she insisted I take some with me."

The smell of bread and berries was appetizing, but it still couldn't distract Jackson enough from the sight before him. Ashley had showered, his hair still damp and messy, and instead of the old rags he wore to work, his attire was clean and fit well enough for Jackson to notice the shape of his body. Ashley looked scrawny, but having seen him barely covered, Jackson knew there were taut muscles under Ashley's clothes.

"Did you sleep well?"

Jackson tore his gaze from where it laid on Ashley's hips and nodded hastily. "Yeah." He picked a mug from the table and went on with little less rush. "Though I woke up around three."

Ashley nodded and went to the fridge. "I noticed," he said casually and glanced at Jackson with a small smile.

Jackson swallowed, thinking about the quite ambitious tent in the front of his tracks when he'd realized how tightly together they lay on the couch. "You did?"

"Mm-hmm." Butter and cheese were pulled from the fridge. "Don't worry. I won't take it personally."

Ashley busied himself with the bread, and Jackson stood frozen by the table, staring at the tiny white mark just above the collar of Ashley's shirt. It was almost impossible not to take a few steps and touch the scar. Ashley had said they were sensitive; Jackson wanted to know just how sensitive they were.

He moved, almost senseless as he cornered Ashley against the counter without him even realizing it. Jackson breathed deep and savored the smell of fresh air and soap, probably something very plain and common that left Ashley's skin squeaky-clean. He wanted to run his fingers through Ashley's hair, just to know whether it was as soft and fluffy as it looked, or coarse like his. In that instant, there were so many things Jackson wanted to do, so many places he wanted to place his hands, but he could almost feel the fire charring his palms if he stepped too close. He'd been burned by Ashley so many times he knew it hurt, and sometimes the hurt wouldn't fade. But sometimes, on a few rare occasions, the hurt was the good kind, the kind that made him crave more just to see how far Ashley would go before he gave up.

Stupid of Jackson to think Ashley would ever give up.

Ashley glanced over his shoulder, no offense in his eyes when he looked up.

Jackson's tea had gone completely cold long ago, but he couldn't have cared less. He left the mug on the counter, mumbling absently, "Maybe you should."

Ashley looked back, seemingly calm, but Jackson knew Ashley well enough to recognize the fiery glint in his eyes. "Maybe I should what?" he asked and tossed a piece of bread into his mouth.

"Take it personally."

Why hide it? Apart from last night and the most exhausting half an hour Jackson had gone through in a long time, this thing they were having was the only thing he looked forward to these days. He didn't care about the runs, not about work, not about going to the riverbank each morning. All those things were secondary, something he rushed through just to get to that point where he could spend even a moment with Ashley. It didn't matter if they bickered or joked or just sat without saying a word. It still felt good. It felt right, somehow.

This, though... this oddly intimate space secluding them from the rest of the world felt an awful lot like an adventure. Excitement with a little bit of danger.

Ashley leaned back against the counter and glanced down to the plate he'd haphazardly put together. He looked back at Jackson, his eyes torching while he seemed to make sure Jackson was *really* watching. Melted butter gleamed on the tip of his thumb when he brought the digit up to his lips and sucked it in. He watched Jackson watch him, left brow raised just barely when his tongue peeked from between his lips and ran over the pad of his thumb. Though Ashley's eyes had always been one of the few things Jackson genuinely liked—up until recently, that is. That mixture of golden wheat and centuries-old amber held nothing against the simple movement of Ashley tongue. Jackson's gaze darted south, his wolf boasting like a proper alpha should when something this tempting and provoking was *this* near. Jackson recalled one time, a few years ago, when they'd all gone out to celebrate someone's birthday. Ashley had been there too. Everybody had. Ashley had flirted with anyone even remotely decent, and Jackson had watched him strut around the club like an overly flamboyant joke. Even then, Jackson's focus had been on Ashley when Ashley probably couldn't even remember Jackson was there. Ashley had been annoying then, his presence a personal insult in some way, but Jackson still couldn't take his eyes off of the blond who'd seemed to gain admirers with a simple smile. This was different, though. This wasn't pretentious flirting, though Jackson liked to think he knew when someone was flirting with him. This was Ashley spinning a see-

through web round and round and then watching Jackson fall face-first into the trap.

“Good,” Ashley murmured and licked his lips. “Your nana bakes the best bread.”

Jackson nodded. That was about as much as he could muster. Speaking proved to be a task, his focus on all the wrong things. On Ashley’s catty eyes and teasing, self-content smirk, on how nice he smelled, or how nice it was that he was as tall as Jackson and not one of those petite, pretty things Jackson usually went for. Ashley wasn’t pretty. Nor was he handsome. He was scarred and flawed and common. But there was something dreamlike about him, something that made him look radiant when he was happy or when he would shamelessly laugh at Jackson. Or when he played the part of a tease, like he did now.

“I can’t get a clear reading from you,” Ashley said absently. “One minute you’re fluffy and sweet, and then you turn into a raging meathead with way too many personal issues.”

The statement sobered Jackson up a bit. “You’re complaining about *my* baggage?”

“Not complaining. I’m just pointing out that you have some.”

“Everybody does.”

“That’s true.” Ashley smirked. “I just called you a meathead. Did you notice?”

“Yes. Coming from you it must be a compliment.”

Ashley tossed his head and snatched a slice of cheese from the plate. Munching down the snack, he watched Jackson, before mumbling absently, “Must be...”

Chapter Twelve

There once was a pie.

It was years ago, and since then, Ashley had learned that he wasn't really a fan of pastries, but at the time, he was ecstatic. Why? Because it was the first homemade pie he ever tasted, and it was made just for him.

Etta baked the pie on Ashley's ninth birthday, and he'd sat in the kitchen throughout the baking. To him, it was something amazing. Etta let him help make the filling, and Ashley had never really prepared any food before, so to him it was big deal. But Etta was very nonchalant about it, and while Ashley felt like he would pop right out of his skin with excitement, she didn't cuss him for making a mess or getting some of the ingredients wrong. She said it would taste delicious regardless.

Well, once the pie was ready, and Ashley was practically drooling at the sight of that beautiful pastry, Jackson stepped into the kitchen. He took one look at the pie, then at Ashley's amazed ogle, and then he shoved his hand straight into the filling. Etta was outraged, and Jackson got in trouble, but it didn't matter, because Ashley cried, and if there was one thing he never wanted to do in front of Jackson, it was cry.

So, pastries had a bit of a role in their colorful history. And here they were again, on opposite sides of the table with a still-warm pie lying innocently between them. Ashley didn't even know what was in it.

Looking up from the pie, Ashley watched as a calculating smirk slowly made its way on Jackson's face.

"Dibs on the pie, Rattie?" Jackson asked, that wicked smirk betraying the innocence of his tone. But while there had been true malice in his voice for years while spelling out that hated nickname, he only seemed curious now. And, for whatever reason, Ashley couldn't sum up enough anger to actually be offended.

"I thought sticky fillings were more of your thing, Jackie." He picked a grape from the bowl next to the pie and tossed the fruit in his mouth. A smile twitched on the corner of Jackson's mouth, his mood surprisingly mellow despite the situation. He shook his head and moved along the table.

“Get some meat on your plate, twig,” he said, glancing at the paper plate Ashley had left on the corner of the table. “You’d think a male your age would know how to feed himself.”

Jackson lobbed a massive chunk of pork on Ashley’s plate and smirked up at him, before sauntering over where Harvey and Chris sat by the sundeck.

Was this friendship? Ashley didn’t know. Ollie was his friend. Shawn too. Did he think Jackson fit in the same category? Probably not. Ashley didn’t rile his friends up just to get a reaction. Now that he and Jackson had moved past that dysfunctional, absurdly unhealthy phase, Ashley could admit that there were quite a few things Jackson did well.

Number one, he handled the pack well. Ashley still felt Jackson was a little too hard on some of the pack members, but maybe that was how it was supposed to be. They *were* all supposed to listen to him, after all. At least in their wolf forms. Ollie was glad Ashley had finally seen the light; sometimes she couldn’t stop telling him how incredibly amazing it was to sprint across the woods with the whole pack, with Jackson’s immense knowledge of their surroundings. Okay, so he was a good leader. Maybe Ashley had been wrong.

Number two had struck Ashley when he watched Jackson plan and execute the rebuilding of the shed. His ability to use a hammer wasn’t something Ashley found astonishing. Instead Ashley had been quite impressed with the speed and commitment which Jackson worked with. Like his grandmother, he seemed driven when he had his mind set on something. Ashley appreciated it immensely.

Number three? Jackson was hot. It wasn’t exactly something he *did*; just something Ashley had noticed. Jackson wasn’t sexy gorgeous like Harvey, for example, and while Jackson had a nice build to him, he wasn’t massive like that leech of a friend of his. But these days he was polite and friendly, smiling a little bit more and earning smiles from fellow males and females instead of serious glances and wary looks. Then he turned into a taunting tease Ashley knew well, like Jackson had a switch whenever he came face-to-face with Ashley. Ashley never knew good manners could be such a turn-on, but apparently they could. And they were.

Ashley was caught staring—again—when Jackson glanced his way, grinning conceitedly when he saw Ashley still by the table. To make matters worse, Ashley flushed the moment Jackson winked, and he was quick to pick up his plate and escape the spotlight.

People had already started gathering in the backyard, small groups forming by the patio and to the edge of the yard where clean-cut grass met the flourishing greenery of the woods. Ashley sat next to Shawn, who was nibbling grilled veggies near the patio. As usual, Shawn kept to himself, but Ashley didn't mind keeping him company. It was unlikely anyone else would, seeing how Shawn drew back from conversation and took the role of the bystander like it was his second nature.

Ollie, on the other hand, fluttered across the yard, her laughter bubbling over the chatter as she talked with everybody. She earned raised brows from Jackson's "crew," but she didn't care. She looked back and blew a kiss at Harvey, whose glare was as disgusted as it was insulted.

"I don't know why she does that," Shawn sighed. "She annoys people on purpose."

"She's just being herself. It's everybody else's problem if they don't accept her the way she is."

Shawn shrugged and poked a piece of grilled tomato into his mouth. His blandness was almost depressing, but maybe he liked being a wallflower. He *was* fun and good company, but only when he was in the right frame of mind. Big crowds—or even a group of more than three people—made him clam up. Now he fell silent and just looked around, seemingly uninterested in any conversation.

Ashley resigned to a quiet meal, just waiting for Ollie to be done with her socializing.

Before long, the pups arrived. They came along with their parents, but the grown-ups were mainly part of the décor when the kids started playing and joking and sprinting across the yard. They were loud, messy, and uncontrollable, but no one cared. Ashley sure didn't. He sat back and soaked up the sun, thankful for the good weather and even better food. And for the great view.

Someone put on some music. The pups were starting to get hyperactive, and sitting in the sun caused Ashley to lose the last of his appetite, but he didn't care. Maybe it was the heat, or the summer, or the rare moment of calmness in their otherwise hectic pack. Whatever the reason, Ashley decided to embrace and enjoy.

Etta floated out of the house in a flowery dress and a gigantic brimmed hat. As usual, she was too preoccupied with watching over her pack to actually

enjoy the festivities herself. Ashley managed to get to her by the time she was instructing one of the pups with the important task of watering her roses.

“Come take a seat, and I’ll get you something to eat.” He almost pulled her along, but eventually she was sure her flowers were in good hands, and she let Ashley to guide her to the porch.

“What would you like to eat?”

“Bring me little bit of everything,” she said and smiled up at him. “I’m in the mood for excitement.”

“Little bit of everything it is.”

Harvey left the table just as Ashley got there and glanced at him bitterly before striding back to the sundeck. Those mean glances had become more frequent as days went by, and while Ashley was used to it, he had noticed Jackson was getting those looks too. They still worked together and spent time together as usual, but just looking at them now told Ashley their harmony was gone.

His eyes stalled on the pair for a second too long, and Jackson looked up just in time to see Ashley staring by the table. And because Jackson never wasted a good opportunity, he stood up and headed over to the table.

Ashley chided himself and started gathering Etta’s plate. Seconds later Jackson appeared, his shadow crossing over the table as he moved in sync with Ashley.

“You changed your mind about the pie?” he asked casually.

“I’m not gonna start this with you.” But yes, Ashley wanted some. For the sake of nostalgia, perhaps.

“You sure?” Jackson abandoned his plate on the table and stuck his finger in the filling. He pushed the digit in his mouth, humming contently. The sound went straight to Ashley’s knees, and he absolutely could not take his eyes off Jackson’s mouth when he licked over the tip of his finger.

“Tasty.” With one final lick, Jackson reached back toward the pie. It was one of those moments where Ashley’s mind went blank and he acted before thinking. A whole handful of filling was plastered across Jackson’s face before Ashley fully realized what he was doing.

Instinctively he took a step back, horrified. Ruby-red lumps fell from Jackson’s jaw, and he spooned most of the filling off his face with his fingers.

“I’m... so sorry,” Ashley stuttered, but quiet laughter still sneaked out before he controlled himself.

“You are, huh?” Another shirt went to waste when Jackson wiped his face on the hem. Then he took a step toward Ashley, the leftover filling covering his features so that Ashley couldn’t tell if Jackson was angry or... really angry.

Ashley meant to apologize again—not sure if he meant it, though—but all that came out was a sharp gasp when something cold ran over his head and down his body.

Jackson smirked and held up an empty jug. Ashley smelled lemon—he tasted it too—and the juice became sticky the moment it dried in the sun. But it was still cold.

“You...”

“Me, what?” Jackson pushed the jug back on the table. “This soaked look works on you, by the way.”

Etta was rushing toward them, telling them to stop, but Ashley had already reached for the rest of the pie. Jackson took a step back every time Ashley took one forward, shaking his head. “You don’t wanna do that.”

“Oh trust me, I do.”

It was a mess from there on. Ashley chased Jackson around the yard while Etta continued telling them to stop, but even she was laughing. Ashley hadn’t heard her laugh like that in ages, and he would’ve laughed with her, except that Jackson grabbed ahold of the garden hose and aimed the spray at Ashley the moment the pie flew across the air.

The water was lukewarm, but it felt ice cold when it hit Ashley’s skin, and it was his turn to run away while Jackson chased him.

He cornered him against the porch, and under the continuous spray of water Ashley managed to hold his hands up, trying to cover his face.

“I give, I give!” He *felt* soaked, his clothes glued to his skin, and Jackson’s victorious grin didn’t help when he finally stepped back.

“Haven’t you learned by now, Lee?” he teased. “You’ll always come in second with me.”

Ashley glared, and like a petulant child, he kicked Jackson on the shin. He had the decency to muffle his curses as he staggered backward, and Ashley

took the opportunity and ran. Literally. He was up on his feet in no time, sprinting across the lawn. He could hear Jackson running after him as he dove through the thicket, rushing aimlessly into the woods.

Here he was, running toward something he didn't even know, and the only thing he felt was joy. No fear, no worry, no panic. The further he ran, the more excited he became, and even as he realized he really had no idea where he was, he couldn't bring himself to be scared. Because Jackson was there too. Somewhere. Unseen, but there.

Ashley slowed his pace, looking around. As usual, everywhere he looked, the view was the same. He couldn't tell one tree from the other, and every shadow crossing over the ground looked exactly the same.

Sharpening his instincts, Ashley moved carefully and listened to the tiniest sounds around him. He could sense Jackson somewhere nearby, but he could sneak around without ever being seen.

"Jackson?" he called out invitingly, still looking around. "Jackie?"

Steps creaked behind him moments before Jackson spoke. "Did you get lost?"

Ashley spun around, suddenly breathless, and backed away while Jackson came closer, his face spotted with dried filling. "You should never run into the woods if you're trying to get away from me."

"Who said I was?" Ashley's back hit a tree, but he didn't feel captured. He didn't feel intimidated or trapped. He felt flushed when Jackson suddenly stood so close, his hands resting on the trunk above Ashley's shoulders.

From this close, Ashley could smell the lingering scent of wildness Jackson always carried. It cocooned around him and buried everything else.

"You spoiled Nana's pie."

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who spoiled it," Ashley argued. "I just helped a little."

Jackson smirked, dried filling making his skin look purplish and doing nothing to diminish the devilish look on his face. He was close— so, so close— and somewhere in the back of his mind, Ashley was trying to convince himself that this was a bad idea, but instead of telling Jackson to stop moving, he stilled when voices rang closer.

Even Ashley could hear the approaching sounds. He moved a little, leaning past the tree to take a look to see who was coming their way, but then he was yanked into motion.

“Come on.”

Jackson pulled him along, hand tightly around Ashley’s as he took him even deeper into the woods. He ran over every obstacle with expertise, while Ashley struggled not to trip. Regardless, Ashley followed. He glanced over his shoulder every now and then to see if anyone was coming after them. Nothing but quietness spread around them. It felt like nothing else existed in the whole world except them and this forest. These trees.

Ashley barely started seeing the gorgeousness around him when Jackson slowed their pace. Looking ahead, Ashley could see a clearing through the trees. His hand still linked safely with Jackson’s, Ashley gazed through the branches and leaves, listening to the increasing sounds of bustle and flutter. Wind smoothed warmly over his face the moment they stepped out from the shelter the trees provided. Sand and small rocks met the seemingly still water, but it moved constantly, rocking gently along the sandy shore. Nearby, branches hung heavy, creating a dozen little hideaways mere feet from the sandy riverbank. The stream was narrow and so shallow in places Ashley estimated he could easily walk through the water over to the other side.

“Pretty awesome, isn’t it?” Jackson asked. Ashley came to, realizing their fingers were still laced. He looked down at their joined hands, then up at Jackson, and he couldn’t help but to laugh.

“You should see yourself.”

He let go of Ashley’s hand and brushed his fingers along Ashley’s sticky hair. Jackson held up a small strip of lemon peel. “You’re one to talk.”

Self-consciously Ashley brushed his hair and felt clumps clinging to his hair. “Nice.”

“It’ll wash off.” To boost his words, Jackson stepped back and started peeling off his clothes. His shirt came off first, revealing a deep tan and well-defined muscles. Ashley had seen quite a few frames sharper and more defined, but Jackson’s body was a continuous line of firmness and tight muscles. Tough and strong.

Not that Ashley looked *that* closely.

Jackson toed off his shoes, and when he started pushing down his shorts, Ashley turned his head away. Suddenly their moment of privacy up against the tree seemed completely innocent. At least Jackson still had his clothes on then.

“You’re not shy, are you?” Jackson teased.

“I’m not going to boost your ego by watching you get undressed.”

Jackson chuckled. “Your loss.” Still in his briefs, Jackson started toward the water, his eyes on Ashley. “You’re expected to join me.”

“Am I now?” Ashley crossed his arms and watched as Jackson walked into the water. Black cotton wrapped around Jackson’s hips like a second skin, and Ashley couldn’t help but remember waking up a few nights ago and feeling something poke against his stomach. It was a good thing he hadn’t known it wasn’t just a whim. He might’ve done something stupid had he known what was going on in Jackson’s head.

“Come on...” He was covered to his hips, waving Ashley over. “I’ve seen you naked before.”

“This isn’t about nudity.” Much to his surprise, Ashley realized it really wasn’t. “Is the water cold?”

“A little chilly. You’ll get used to it.”

If someone had told Ashley six months ago that he’d be standing here, in the middle of the woods, with Jackson half-naked and inviting him over with that playful smirk, Ashley would’ve laughed himself to death. Now he took hold of his shirt and pulled it off, unabashed under Jackson’s observant gaze. And maybe, just maybe, Ashley stretched a little before he dropped the shirt on the ground. Following Jackson’s example, he got rid of his shoes and pants. He tossed his clothes in the same pile as Jackson’s behind a big rock near the waterline and advanced into the water.

Which was freezing, by the way.

“Liar,” he muttered between gritted teeth.

Jackson just laughed and moved back quickly, until water reached his shoulders.

For a moment Ashley ignored the mostly naked male right next to him and dove underwater, rubbing his hair as he went. They both cleaned up quickly, but Jackson still had a few random spots of dried filling on his face when he emerged.

Ashley floated closer and brushed his hand over Jackson's left temple. "You'd think a male your age would know how to get cleaned up."

Jackson resigned to Ashley's light touches, smiling contently. The smudge became a blur when Jackson moved closer, closer and closer, until Ashley could feel the warmth of Jackson's breath smoothing over his cheek. He looked up, found nothing but that crystal-clear gaze looking back, when one hand found the small of his back and the other rose to the nape of his neck.

The kiss thawed the last of Ashley's coldness.

From spark to fire, instantly. Ashley shivered when Jackson's hands traced over the cluster of scars, touching like they weren't even there. Jackson was greedy and bold, stealing even the smallest breaths, but Ashley wouldn't have it any other way. Dark hair was slick under his hands, but he wound his fingers around the strands and gave back what was taken from him. Every lick and flicker sparked flames, Ashley's skin burning from head to toe. He barely heard the wind, the sounds of water around him. Everything in and over his skin felt fabulous and whole, Jackson's skin hot against his even under water.

Ashley was so lost in the sensations he didn't hear the approaching group. Jackson pulled back sharply, his head turned toward the sounds of hushed chatter Ashley registered moments later.

"They followed us?" he mumbled absently, starting to regain his senses. The water felt cold again, though his skin barely felt the iciness.

Jackson didn't say a word, just took the lead again and grabbed Ashley's hand. Jackson pulled him under a branch into a little nest hidden from sight. The water was warmer there, the sand under their feet muddier and soggy.

Ashley opened his mouth to speak, but Jackson placed a hand over his mouth. "Be quiet."

The order roused mellow irritation, and Ashley would've argued, but then he heard speech somewhere nearby.

"I doubt they're here." Ollie's voice was as chipper as ever, though Ashley could hear a hint of hesitance in her words. *"Why would they run all this way?"*

"It's worth taking a look."

Ashley cringed at the sound of Harvey's voice. Looking over, Ashley could see Jackson wasn't happy to hear Harvey, either. Jackson lowered his hand, held a finger to his mouth as if to tell Ashley to keep quiet, before he leaned to look through the curtain of leaves falling around them.

Ashley heard steps approaching their hideout, and he fell still, not sure why exactly he didn't want to be found. He wondered if their clothes were in sight, like it even mattered.

"Come on. This is stupid." Now Ollie sounded frustrated. *"I don't think Ashley would come here with Jackson."*

"You didn't see them, then?" Harvey's voice rang from right behind them. *"These days, the mutt will go wherever Jackson takes him."*

"You say it like it's a bad thing." Ollie snorted. *"You know... Your jealousy is starting to stink, Harvey. Why don't you grow out of your stupid crush and let Jackson be with whoever he wants?"*

"He doesn't want Ashley. He's just trying to do the right thing. People always do that 'cause they feel sorry for the mutt, and then they're stuck with the cripple no one wants."

Ollie didn't reply. Shivers ran along Ashley's spine, and they had nothing to do with the coldness of the water. He stared ahead, unwilling to even look at Jackson, and just hoped Harvey and Ollie would leave so that he could go home.

Harvey's voice spoke from further away now. *"No one really thinks he's your friend, either. We all get it that you're stuck there with him with those stupid animals, just because you're trying to be a good person."* He chuckled. *"Just so you know... It doesn't do good for your reputation."*

"I like my reputation just fine," Ollie said matter-of-factly. *"And luckily I don't have to explain my friendship with Ashley to you. You wouldn't understand anyway. Maybe you should worry more about your friends than mine, because when your time comes and you need someone to have your back, I doubt anyone will be there for you. No one will stand by your side. People don't like bullies, Harvey, and that's all you'll ever be."*

Ashley heard her curse, and with quick steps crossed the sand before she padded across the small trail leading to the riverbank.

"Let's just go. Whatever they're doing, I doubt they need our help."

With his heart hammering in his chest, Ashley stood frozen and felt relief flood over him when Harvey's steps echoed after Ollie.

All through the bitter exchange, Ashley had avoided looking at Jackson, and now he pushed him out of the way as he got out of the water.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” The clothes stuck on his skin the moment he pulled them on, but he couldn’t wait for his skin to dry in the sun. He stepped away when Jackson came to collect his clothes, and still Ashley wouldn’t look at him.

“He’s wrong, you know,” Jackson spoke quietly as he got dressed. “That’s not why I’m with you.”

“You’re not *with* me. We just got carried away.”

“I don’t kiss people just because I get carried away.”

Ashley stared at the woods stubbornly, Harvey’s words still ringing in his head. It was like Harvey had stolen the thoughts right out of Ashley’s mind. Heedless kisses were nothing compared to years of hatred.

Strong fingers grabbed his shoulders and he was spun around easily. Jackson leaned closer, anger shadowing his eyes. “I don’t kiss people just because I get carried away,” he said again, this time with more conviction.

Ashley stared back relentlessly. “We all make mistakes. It’s only human.”

Jackson breathed deep. “Please, don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Get defensive? Harvey’s an idiot, and if you believe a word he just said, you’re an idiot too.” Jackson gave Ashley no chance to reply as he grabbed Ashley’s hand and started steering him back into the woods. “It wasn’t a mistake, and I’ll do it again real soon, so you just have to deal with it.”

Feeling like a fool, Ashley stared at their joined hands. “You don’t have to pull me by the hand, you know. It’s not like I could run off without getting lost.”

“I’m not gonna risk it.” Jackson sounded annoyed, and for a moment Ashley just followed quietly, staring at the tense shoulders moving in front of him.

“Can we at least walk a little slower?” he asked after a while. “You might be okay with this pace, but I’m not.” He could already feel the tension creep into his muscles, and no doubt he’d double over by the time he got home if Jackson insisted they run back.

Jackson glanced over his shoulder with a frown and slowed his stride. “Sorry.” He waited until Ashley walked next to him before speaking again. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Jackson nodded, still holding Ashley’s hand, and the whole thing was starting to feel more and more ridiculous the longer their walk lasted. The feeling only multiplied when Jackson stroked his thumb over the back of Ashley’s hand, touching untypically gently.

“I just want you to be okay, you know?” Jackson confessed, glancing at Ashley quickly before looking away. He looked embarrassed and flushed, and Ashley was sure he would’ve found it cute if it wasn’t so absurd.

“If I promise I’ll be okay, will you stop acting like a lovesick puppy?” Ashley brought up their joined hands, cocking his brow meaningfully. “This? Not cool.”

“I can’t hold your hand?”

“Do I seem like the type who likes holding hands?” Ashley peeled his hand off Jackson’s. “No hand holding.”

“It’s a sign of affection.”

“It’s sappy.” Ashley continued ahead. “I don’t do sappy.”

After a moment Jackson threw his arm over Ashley’s shoulder. “You said nothing about kisses, though...”

They parted ways when they got back to the house. Ashley said he had to go to the stable and Jackson promised to have a talk with Nana; no doubt she’d have a thing or two to say about earlier. Luckily, she seemed more curious than outraged. She did tell him he was supposed to set an example, not waste food in front of the pups. Then she praised him for embracing the unexpected.

“I’m happy for you, Jackson,” she said, smiling fondly. “And for Ashley, too.”

“We went on a walk, that’s all.”

“If you say so...”

He met the pack outside the small shelter at the edge of the woods. Nana had it built a few years back, thinking maybe people liked to have privacy

while they changed out of their clothes. The place was useless. Hardly anyone used it since most of them were happy to shift the moment they stepped out of their homes, and then jog to the yard where they met every evening.

Curiosity could be seen in the eyes of the wolves circling him, and a few glanced over to where light shone from Ashley's windows. Maybe they wondered why Ashley wasn't there. Maybe they thought he would join them now that...

Now that what? Because there was a hasty kiss down by the riverside?

The whole afternoon seemed like a dream now, with Ashley nowhere to be seen and their pack pacing impatiently. Confusion seemed to tighten its hold around them all. That evening the run felt hollow and sparse. Jackson felt alone in the middle of the pack, knowing something was missing. They weren't all there, after all, and he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to have Ashley there with him. Harvey had always run beside Jackson, but now kept to himself, as if he didn't even want to be there. And for the first time, Jackson wished Harvey wasn't.

He realized everything Ollie had said was true; Harvey wouldn't find anyone by his side if ever he needed help. It seemed wherever he went, he spread aversion and arrogance around him. Jackson wondered why it had taken him this long to realize the true nature of his friend. Maybe he had been the same way. Maybe he still would be had someone not put him in his place.

Jackson was hesitant to go to Ashley's that evening. Did he really have a reason to? This wasn't the first time he felt misplaced, and he'd been perfectly fine thinking things through on his own before. Why would he need anyone's company now?

Because it's Ashley.

Jackson stilled in the middle of the yard. The thought wasn't a new companion. Lately, a lot of things made sense just because they were somehow connected to Ashley. Stuff Jackson usually found irritating or, frankly, futile were more tolerable just because of Ashley.

Perhaps he will understand, Jackson wondered as he continued his stride. Around him the yard had gone quiet, lights beaming behind windows. He used to walk this land and think of the quietness and space as something he'd value to no end, but now the thought of his own quiet home felt suffocating. Ashley's smaller, emptier cottage felt much more welcoming, despite the current, somewhat confusing state of their... relationship.

Somehow that word had gained a whole new meaning within the past couple of days.

Ashley opened the door seconds after Jackson made his arrival known. Ashley had showered, no lemony tang to his appearance as he let Jackson in.

“Were you sleeping?”

“Reading.”

The open book on the coffee table was the only thing personal. Ashley’s cottage was depressingly bare, as if he never planned on staying for long.

“You want tea?” Ashley asked, lingering by the kitchen door. “I think I bought some a little while back.”

Jackson nodded, though he didn’t really want any, and followed Ashley into the small, dark kitchen. Ashley’s hands worked expertly as he started the tea, finding buttons and handles in the dark while Jackson stood just inside the doorway and watched.

“I missed you on the run tonight,” he confessed. He took a step closer, keeping his eyes on Ashley’s hands as he searched through the cupboards.

“I wondered what it would feel like to have you there,” he went on.

Ashley seemed unaffected by Jackson’s words. He never replied, nor did he tell Jackson to stop speaking. A box was located from one of the shelves, and Ashley tore off the plastic while Jackson had moved to stand right behind him.

“Don’t you ever wonder what it would feel like?” he asked, now standing so close Ashley’s back brushed against his chest every time Ashley moved.

“Sometimes,” Ashley spoke. “It passes quickly.”

“You should try it out.”

“No, thank you.”

Jackson smirked absently, his eyes fixated on the tiny mark on Ashley’s neck he could see even in the darkness. “I’d like you to.” This time he did touch, held up his hand and brushed the pad of his thumb over the scar. Ashley shuddered visibly and lowered his head, while Jackson’s touch became bolder. He pressed his whole palm on Ashley’s skin, the tips of his fingers pushing under the neckline of Ashley’s shirt as he rubbed gentle circles over the scar.

Ashley turned around, cheeks flushed as he looked at Jackson. “Do you really want tea?”

Jackson mumbled, “No.” He now cupped Ashley’s neck with one hand while moving the other south to grab a fistful of cotton.

Ashley came closer willingly, fumbling with the stove’s buttons. “Good.” He met Jackson halfway, mouth as hungry as Jackson’s. There was no fumbling, awkward touches, or shy little brushes. It felt as if the past few hours hadn’t even happened, and they were still surrounded by cold water in the middle of the wild forest. They just continued where they left off earlier. Naturally. Instinctively.

Ashley squeezed the sides of Jackson’s shirt and leaned against him while pulling him close. Fingers spread against Jackson’s sides before palms slid over his back, and Ashley held on to him. Little pecks and nibbles, Ashley’s lips curled into a smile that Jackson could feel spreading all over his own face in no time. Ashley tasted like raspberries and lemon, maybe something he’d eaten before, and underneath that was something wild and unchained, and Jackson wanted to have it all. Never had anyone’s touch burned him like this, not through layers of clothing and with just a kiss. Ashley did it so easily.

It took a surprisingly long time to make it from the kitchen to the bedroom, and Jackson figured he’d have quite the collection of bruises from every bump against what little furniture Ashley had. Ashley, on the other hand, managed to weave past every single obstacle as he walked a few steps ahead of Jackson, shamelessly taking advantage of Jackson’s distracted state. Jackson didn’t see the corner of the counter because he was watching Ashley pull off his shirt. The side of the shelf came out of nowhere when Ashley started skimming down his pants. And though Jackson kinda knew what came after that, he still couldn’t have cared less about the completely unnecessary drawer standing behind the couch, and he nearly knocked it over when Ashley’s sweats were left in a pile by the bedroom door.

“You’re such a tease,” he muttered, following Ashley’s lead.

He just smirked and fell back on the bed, watching Jackson undress. “I’ve been called worse things in my life.”

Jackson still had his pants dangling from his feet when he climbed in after Ashley, and he seemed quite content when Jackson mounted his half-naked body. More kisses, more of those unapologetically greedy touches. Ashley arched his back when Jackson slid his hand along the scars. Ashley wouldn’t look away, but Jackson could feel faint tremors when he slid his palm over

Ashley's back. He ran his touch over the scars the same way he had done that night he found Ashley after his shift, but this was still different somehow. More intimate. More tactile. More everything.

"It feels good to touch you like this," he whispered against Ashley's lips. It wasn't just touching skin, or a body. It was those scars, feeling the reminder of a moment when Ashley was at his weakest.

"Being touched like this feels good, too," Ashley finally spoke. He wouldn't look away, but he, too, eased into slower, more exploring touches. There shouldn't have been anything extraordinary about naked skin and muscles moving swiftly beneath the surface, but it became intoxicatingly enticing with every heated breath and even the smallest sounds. Underwear was pushed aside impatiently, and while Jackson was sure he'd love to see Ashley's briefs come off slowly, now he just wanted them gone. It seemed Ashley was just as eager to get Jackson fully naked.

He still wouldn't look away when Jackson's hand slid from the small of Ashley's back to the roundness beneath it. Ashley's eyes turned misty, a haze of sunset spreading beneath the bright amber, and from the corner of his eye Jackson saw Ashley's hands fist the pillowcase.

"How about this?" he mumbled absently and ran his fingers down Ashley's thigh. "Does this feel good too?"

"Do you hear me complaining?"

Jackson continued the questions, touching and testing, and Ashley answered every time. He had a sweet spot on his left hip, and he bit his lip when Jackson's touch lingered on the spot. But he watched Jackson relentlessly. He seemed just as eager to see Jackson's reactions to his body, as Jackson was to see Ashley's body's reactions to the touches. And those reactions were tasty.

Before long the slowness passed, and Jackson's hands were pushed aside. Ashley decided he'd had enough of being on the receiving end. But Jackson wasn't complaining. A more cooperative Ashley was fun too, and very enticing. It would've been stupid to think Ashley was quiet and compliant in bed, but Jackson was still a little surprised when Ashley shoved him on his back and straddled his hips. Ashley was gloriously shameless—and gloriously erect, and he just smiled, taking hold of Jackson's hands when he reached to touch him.

He leaned down and pressed Jackson's hands down. Their fingers entwining, Ashley kissed him. Jackson honestly didn't know which enthralled

him more; the blatant hungriness of Ashley's mouth, or the sudden touch of flesh against Jackson's as their hips rocked together. Maybe Ashley didn't know either. He breathed shakily and bit down on Jackson's lip, then lapped his tongue over the sore spot. His weight felt comfortable, still light enough for Jackson to grab him and toss him on the bed if he felt like it, but having Ashley like this was like walking on egg shells; one wrong move, and it's over. Jackson didn't want it to be over, so he laid back and calmed the need for control.

Ashley seemed to work on instinct, feeling his way around while moving on top of Jackson. The friction was good, just slow enough to keep Jackson waiting for the next lazy sway of Ashley's hips. But before long slow wasn't good enough anymore, and the kisses became rushed and sloppy. Jackson was dying to yank his hands free and grab whatever he could get ahold of, but he was loving the selfish greed erupting whenever Ashley touched him. Their bodies got more impatient, every motion erratic and fierce. Ashley's hands left Jackson's, one on the mattress while the other cupped Jackson's cheek, and when Ashley breathed, "Touch me," against Jackson's lips, he did. First Ashley's back—the scars and the heaving curve of his spine—before squeezing around his buttocks and driving their hips into a fast rhythm.

The kisses were merely open mouths exchanging heavy breaths, lips brushing together before moan-like sounds sneaked through. Jackson's fingers dug into soft flesh, and he drove them harder, until Ashley went stiff. He just stopped moving, stopped breathing. Then he melted against Jackson, his hips rubbing quick, determined circles, just quick enough to drive Jackson over the edge.

The orgasm came rushing, stiffening Jackson's whole body as Ashley drew it out and made it last. And last. And last. He didn't stop moving until Jackson wrapped an arm around his hips and held him still. Heavy breaths filled the air, Jackson's heart beating so fast he could hear it through the rush of blood in his ears.

Ashley kissed him once more, gently, before lowering himself. He pressed his cheek against Jackson's chest, hands caressing him slowly as he calmed his racing heart. Jackson hugged Ashley close, hands moving up and down his back, over and over. The confusion he'd felt for days was gone, leaving clarity behind. The satisfied state of his body was nothing compared to the calmness of his mind. Jackson's wolf was restful and secure, nothing aggravating its

sensitive nerves. Its surroundings were under control now, nothing sparking its interest in the slightest.

“I’ll get up in a second,” Ashley mumbled.

“No rush.” A tired body on top of Jackson’s did little to help his breathing, but he’d rather struggle a little than let go of Ashley now. “Feel free to stay as long as you like.”

Ashley hummed, and regardless of Jackson’s somewhat feeble attempt to hold Ashley still, he slid off the bed. “Shower first,” Ashley said and stood up. He stretched, arms raised above his head and the curve of his back sheering like a snake. Seeing him display his body like that—scars and all—was sexy as hell, and Jackson wasted no more time.

He got up as well, probably a little obvious with his intentions, as Ashley glanced over with a smile. “You’re coming with me?”

“Yes.”

“My shower isn’t really designed for two.”

“Then we’ll get creative.”

Nodding, Ashley sneaked into the bathroom. “I like creative.”

Chapter Thirteen

It became a habit. A pattern, almost. Ashley knew to expect Jackson, just as he knew to expect the quiet agreement they shared each night. He sometimes wanted to ask what they were doing, what it all meant, but he never did, and Jackson never uttered a word either. It was almost too convenient to be spoiled with conversation. But it had its downsides too.

Nothing was sacred at Etta's estate. Ashley started missing working alone when Ollie whooshed in the stable one day and started asking about the latest developments on the romance sector. For the next four hours Ashley didn't have to talk much; Ollie did all the talking. She said everybody knew about Jackson and Ashley, that everybody had heard about it, and at least half of them had seen them whispering like secret lovers. She said it was wonderful, that it was about time this place had some action, and she couldn't wait to hear all the dirty details.

Ashley's participation in the conversation wasn't exactly needed.

They never whispered like secret lovers, though. Out in the open, life continued as usual, and if ever they were caught alone somewhere, no one could tell what happened behind closed doors. Jackson kept it discreet, and Ashley was sure he managed to do the same. But in the privacy of their homes things were different. Why bother trying to pretend he didn't want Jackson, when he so desperately did? Since the first night, Jackson had shown up soon after his shift, and that dense scent floating off of his body made Ashley crazy. One sniff and Ashley's mind went elsewhere. It brought an element of danger into his small cottage, something Ashley had always fought hard to keep away from. Controlling that danger in the safety of his own home was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. In the light of day, the danger was gone, but Ashley still felt the intoxicating need. Lately it came and went so quickly, painfully present in one moment and then gone in the next, but it was present even when he was working, away from Jackson's immediate presence. It floated right beneath a polite surface, just waiting to emerge if given the chance.

Lately it had started to wear Ashley down. Confusion was nothing new when dealing with Jackson, but this new type of uncertainty was too hard, even for Ashley.

What kind of a future did this have? Jackson wasn't a player. He'd never spoken a word about whomever he ruffled the sheets with, and those he had loved and left were few and far between, but they still existed. Ashley had seen longing in the eyes of those who tried to attract Jackson's attention, and sadness in those who'd had a taste but never the real deal. Either Jackson's standards were really high, or he just didn't want to settle. Either way, it was unlikely Ashley would make the cut. What a pair they'd make... the future alpha and the rogue.

Still, Jackson didn't seem to be in a hurry to get out in the mornings. The more nights they spent together, the longer he stalled after waking up each day. Ashley made a point of keeping their conversation light and brief, simply because he didn't know what to say. This wasn't what he'd thought would happen. Mutual attraction was one thing; casual sex was another. He almost regretted ever flirting with him. Maybe if he'd contained himself, he wouldn't now be wondering if he was the only one rushing headfirst into something much more serious than sexual satisfaction.

It was morning again. Ashley's alarm clock hadn't gone off yet, but he was awake. Jackson was too. He wasn't a light sleeper, and when he started tossing and turning in the morning, Ashley knew it was moments before Jackson fully woke up. The tossing and turning had ended long ago, and Jackson had stayed quiet since. Maybe he felt troubled too.

Ashley lay on his stomach, his arms folded under his pillow and eyes on the window while he watched the light spread along the skyline. Soon he would have to get up, get dressed, and leave the quietness of his cottage. He still loved the mornings the most, but for different reasons these days. For a brief moment every morning he savored the feel of someone lying next to him under the sheets, someone's naked skin pressed against his. Then he woke up fully, remembered who he was with, and reminded himself that things weren't really as simple as he wanted them to be.

The mattress tilted to the center, the sheet slid down a few inches, and then Jackson's body pressed against Ashley's.

"Tomorrow's my day off," Jackson spoke quietly. His arm found a way over Ashley's back, fingers tracing up along his side. "It's yours too, right?"

"Should be, yeah."

A stubbly chin scratched against Ashley's shoulder, and he smiled a little, thinking how familiar that had become within the past few days.

“Maybe we could go somewhere. See a movie, get a bite to eat.”

Lips replaced the scratch, then a nibble, before Jackson rubbed his cheek against Ashley’s skin. Touches were starting to lull Ashley back to sleep, so he shook off the sleepiness and turned to face Jackson. “You mean like a date?”

Jackson always looked languid and homey first thing in the morning, like he had no cares in the world. Now he wormed his other arm under Ashley’s pillow, poking Ashley’s arms as he moved, before settling down.

“Yeah... like a date.”

“Is that what we do now? Go on dates?”

“Well, I guess we’d have to go on *a* date first, but yeah... that’s what we do now.”

Ashley watched him, trying to detect any signs of amusement or kidding, but he found none.

Jackson apparently took Ashley’s silence as a sign to continue. He inched a little closer, now well inside of Ashley’s personal space. “Isn’t that what couples do?” Jackson said it casually, but the momentary glaze of worry shadowing his eyes made Ashley think differently.

Maybe Ashley wasn’t the only one not feeling so sure of himself.

“You want us to be a couple?”

“I wouldn’t object to it.” Like so many times by now, Jackson’s hands never strayed far from Ashley when they were this close, in bed especially. His left fingers traced along Ashley’s side; his right hand cupped Ashley’s elbow loosely under the pillow, fingertips rubbing faintly against his skin. But it was more the way Jackson looked at him than the way he touched that made Ashley’s chest feel hollow and filled to its brim at the same time.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be with you.”

“You’ve been with me quite a few times already.”

Frustration flooded the clearness of Jackson’s eyes. “Don’t make a joke out of this.”

“Weren’t you supposed to stop being so touchy?”

“Weren’t you supposed to stop annoying me on purpose?” Jackson got worked up surprisingly quickly. “I’m serious about this.”

Ashley nodded awkwardly and pulled away. He sat up, painfully aware of Jackson's wondering gaze.

"You're not going to say anything?" he asked.

"We can go on a date," Ashley muttered and got up. He searched for his clothes from the floor, suddenly uncomfortable naked.

"You don't have to sound so excited," Jackson muttered sourly.

"It's just a little weird, that's all." Ashley pulled on his briefs and turned to Jackson, who looked at him like he couldn't comprehend.

"Up until a little while ago you and I couldn't even stand in the same room without wanting to bite each other's head off. You're telling me that changed this quickly for you?"

Jackson stared back, seemingly confused. "Yeah. Why? It hasn't for you?"

"No. How could it? You think I can let go of nearly two decades of grudge, just like that?"

The cozy atmosphere was gone, replaced by tension Ashley hadn't felt in a long time. Jackson looked back, clearly disappointed, and got up. Within moments he started pulling on his clothes. Had he been angry, Ashley could've stayed still. Seeing Jackson disappointed and maybe a little bit hurt had Ashley rushing after him when he started toward the door.

"No... don't go." He reached Jackson by the door and held on to his hand while pushing between Jackson and the open door. "I didn't mean it like that."

Jackson stared over Ashley's shoulder, his disappointment so evident Ashley could almost sense it.

"I do care about you, Jackson," he began carefully. "And I don't have anything against dating. It's just..." Searching for the right words—supposing there were any—Ashley ran his hand over Jackson's arm, trying to get Jackson to look at him.

"Ever since your brother died, I always knew that once Etta stepped down, I'd leave. You didn't want me here... I didn't want to be here... Why stay?" Ashley sighed when Jackson's eyes finally landed on him. "That was before, I know... But it's taking me a little while to understand that maybe I don't have to leave."

"I don't want you to go," Jackson rushed, now alarmed more than angry.

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“I know.”

“I don’t—”

Ashley shushed Jackson gently. “Things are different now. I get that,” he said. “But this is taking me a while. Okay?”

Jackson relaxed visibly, and nodded. He still had that sleepy halo surrounding his whole frame, but it did nothing to hide the sharp mind.

“Maybe we should’ve had this talk a while ago,” he spoke quietly and sneaked his hand along Ashley’s hip to pull him closer.

Ashley shrugged. “I’m not a fan of depressing topics. But I will say this; though this is highly unexpected, I am glad we got here. I’m still adjusting, you know. So you might want to go easy on declarations and such,” he joked. Unfortunately Jackson didn’t laugh.

Jackson looked back solemnly, his touch a bit too heavy for Ashley’s liking, but he didn’t dare complain when fingers dug into his skin momentarily. So long as there were no words, he could still believe they were just enjoying each other’s company. So long as Jackson didn’t say anything irreversible, Ashley could pretend he didn’t feel some of it too.

To lighten the mood, he inched closer with a smile. “So... Where are you taking me?”

Jackson narrowed his eyes a bit, watching Ashley intently. “Wherever you wanna go.” Trust Jackson to ignore Ashley’s attempts of lightening the mood...

Jackson pinned Ashley’s chin between his fingers and tilted his head back, before planting a kiss on his lips. It wasn’t sweet and soft and luring, but hard and forceful. Like he was staking a claim.

The kiss ended as quickly as it had started, Jackson’s eyes firmly on Ashley’s. “This isn’t a game for me, Ashley,” he said earnestly. “I feel things for you I haven’t felt for anyone, and if you need time, that’s fine. Just don’t play with me.”

It was such an unexpected confession, Ashley was speechless for those few seconds it took Jackson to step back and pull his shirt on. By the time Jackson looked at Ashley again, he shook his head.

“No playing, I promise.”

With something so precious, how could anything really go wrong?

Well, it could.

Jackson seemed determined to let everybody know what was happening, and while Ashley would've loved to be as open about things, he couldn't. Across the estate, he heard people's speculations, their wondering thoughts about Jackson's motives. It was hard to let go of the past when people were so helpful at shoving it in his face.

“Just ignore it,” Jackson said, like it didn't matter, but Ashley knew Jackson had it worse than he did. The other males, most of them working side by side with Jackson, wouldn't rebel. Still, Ashley saw their glares and questioning glances every time they saw him and Jackson walking or talking near the cottages. How long would it take before they'd question Jackson's leadership, demand he choose between his pack and the mutt who couldn't fully be a member of their extended family?

Ashley tried his hardest not to show how much the gossiping bothered him. He tried his hardest not to fight with Harvey, but as his relationship with Jackson settled, Harvey's attitude toward Ashley became even more toxic. Not a day went by that they didn't get into an argument over something so small it really wasn't worth it. But Ashley couldn't help it. And Harvey apparently didn't even care to try.

There was genuine spite in Harvey's eyes every time he looked at Ashley. It brought an unnerving restlessness into his heart, and he couldn't shake it off no matter how hard he tried. There were times when he was in the stable or on the trails, and he felt like someone was constantly keeping an eye on him. It became terrifying, the feeling of being watched. He couldn't even think of leaving his cottage after dark; just looking out of the windows made him feel like someone was looking back.

One night, hours after he and Jackson went to bed, Ashley still lay awake. He turned to look at the male lying next to him, wondering what Jackson would say if he told him about the weird sensations. Would Jackson believe him? Would he think Ashley was imagining things? Jackson had said there were no wolves in these woods, that no wolves had crossed through their terrain in decades. He'd said it kindly, like he didn't want to upset Ashley, and Ashley just nodded and went with it. He'd lain awake that night, too, thinking if maybe there hadn't been a wolf. Maybe he had imagined it.

When the morning came, Ashley made tea for them both—Jackson still didn't have a coffeemaker—and had breakfast with him, never telling him he didn't want to step out of the door that day. Or the day after that. He got ready for work, smiled when Jackson said something funny, and they left the cottage together. He kissed Jackson right there in the middle of the yard, clinging on to the feeling of Jackson's arms wrapped tightly around him. He smiled when Jackson said he'd find Ashley later. He held on to that unmistakable mask of happiness, and it only slipped when he got to the stable. There he crumbled a bit, his breaths shaky as he hid in one of the empty stalls.

He hadn't gone on a run in ages. It had been weeks since he last dared to step out there, and he couldn't even think about leaving the safety of his home without feeling terrified. He couldn't understand how things had come to this so quickly. They'd been to the riverside a bunch of times since their first trip to the place, and Ashley knew Jackson wanted them to venture into the woods. Ashley had felt so free that first day, like nothing could touch him, and now just thinking about stepping out into the sunlight made his skin crawl. Jackson rarely brought up the idea of Ashley joining the others, but he didn't have to talk about it. Ashley saw sadness in Jackson's eyes every time he left in the evening, ready to join his pack while leaving Ashley behind. It was sadness unlike anything Ashley had ever seen before, like Jackson's heart broke a little every time he left.

And, just maybe, Ashley's did too.

Chapter Fourteen

“Have you thought about moving into the cottage?” Nana asked one day when Jackson was helping her out in the garden plot. She sat under a sunshade while Jackson moved the soil bags she had bought from the supplier a few days prior.

“I think it would be a wonderful idea for you to stay there,” she went on. “It’s bigger than yours, you know.”

“We already had this conversation.”

“Yes, but you’ve had time to think about it since.”

“There’s nothing to think about.” Jackson lowered the bag next to the small greenhouse and looked at his grandmother. “Get the place torn down.”

Nana shrugged. “Maybe I’ll wait a bit longer.”

Jackson watched her thoughtfully, and when she still evaded his eyes after a moment, he shook his head. “This was never about emptying the cottage, was it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, this was just your way of forcing me and Ashley to work together.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

“You’re unbelievable.” Striding across the plot, Jackson picked another bag from the ground. “You just can’t help meddling, can you?”

“Oh please. I’m old, Jackson. I think I’ve earned the right to meddle with everybody’s lives. And don’t you look at me like that. You look all funny when he’s around. Do you think I don’t see the way you look at him?”

He threw the bag on top of the small pile he had created by the greenhouse and stood up to his grandmother. He leaned over the table she sat by and stared at her. “Stop meddling.”

She looked back just as stubbornly. “No.” She waved him off. “Back to work, Jackson.”

She was impossible. Even if she knew she was wrong—which she obviously didn’t—she would never admit it. And as much as it killed Jackson

to admit, she had been right. The cottage would probably remain empty, since she obviously had no real interest in doing anything about it, but at least Jackson had Ashley now.

Just thinking about the previous night made him feel all warm inside.

“Yes! That’s the look I’m talking about.” Nana waved her finger at Jackson, smiling victoriously. “Now tell me you wish I hadn’t meddled.”

Another hour passed with Jackson organizing the plot according to Nana’s instructions. Ollie stopped by, talking about some watering system she’d been looking into, and for a moment Nana stopped interrogating Jackson. He managed to finish the job by the time Ollie left, and he was ready to head home and take a shower once he finally got everything done. Nana had other ideas. She always did.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something,” she said, gesturing to the chair opposite of hers. “Do you have a minute to spare?”

Sweaty and hungry, Jackson complied reluctantly, sitting down. “What is it?”

“What is going on with Harvey?” Nana had lost that joyful tone of hers, her eyes stern and worried as she gazed at her grandson. “He’s been perfectly polite with me as usual, but I’ve heard people talk. And, Jackson... What I hear is not acceptable.”

“It’s under control.” It was. Sort of. Harvey didn’t argue about the jobs. He never acted out about work. It was the personal side of things they didn’t see eye to eye on. “I’ll talk with him.”

“Please, do.” Nana straightened her posture, looking serious. “Not so long ago, you accused me of treating Ashley differently. This thing with Harvey is starting to affect the pack, and I won’t tolerate it much longer.” She watched Jackson closely. “If it was anyone else acting like he did, you would deal with it. Wasn’t that what you said to me?”

Jackson looked down at his dirty hands, uncomfortable under Nana’s displeased gaze. He liked to think he was only giving Harvey a little bit of time to get used to things, but maybe that wasn’t it.

“Jackson, I understand this isn’t easy for you. But it will get twice as hard when I step down. You can’t just be friends with the members of our pack. They’ll trust you to make the right decisions. They’re not brainless or dumb,

but you'll be the head of the pack. Do you think I've never made decisions that are hard for me, that have hurt me? It happens too often for my liking, but it comes with the job. It's as simple as that."

"I'll take care of it," he reassured her.

"Either you do, or I will. Trust me, it will be a lot easier for both you and Harvey if I don't have to get involved." She stood up gracefully and gestured for Jackson to do the same. "Now, off you go. I have things to do, and you really should get cleaned up if you plan on seeing Ashley later tonight." She even went as far as to wink, and Jackson was sure he'd never been as embarrassed in his entire life.

He left the plot, feeling troubled and unnerved. He could feel eyes on him the moment he reached the yard, as if people were waiting for him to do, or say, something. Were they waiting for a declaration of some sort? Words of wisdom so that they could overlook the shit Harvey was spewing these days? As usual, he was nowhere to be seen. Harvey had picked up a habit of leaving the estate the moment work was done. It seemed he was determined to seclude himself from Jackson, knowing he couldn't avoid a confrontation if Jackson chose to initiate one. And maybe it was time. Maybe Nana was right.

Jackson laughed at the thought.

Nana was always right.

That night, hours after the run, Jackson sneaked into Ashley's cottage. The run had been as short as ever, nothing left of the happy buzz he used to get when he was out with the pack. He'd stayed out in the woods alone afterward, crossing the land in a confused buzz while the space around him felt too swamped regardless of his privacy. The run did nothing to ease his tension, and he returned home, only to leave soon after and walk the short distance to Ashley's. He never locked his doors, usually didn't even bother closing the windows unless it was rainy and windy.

Jackson entered the small building from the back door, moving quietly as he made his way into the bedroom. In the moonlight cascading through the window, he saw Ashley lying quietly on the edge of the mattress. On most mornings, Ashley was sprawled across the bed, as if he got restless in his sleep the closer to morning they got. It was still early, though, and he lay still, pillows tossed across the bed.

Jackson undressed and crawled under the sheets, still careful not to wake Ashley. He came to regardless, mumbling in his sleep as he turned over.

“Jackie?” The old nickname was a mixture of bad memories and good ones, and the good ones won every time, especially when Ashley looked at him sleepily and smiled. “What time is it?”

“Late,” Jackson said, uninterested in checking the time. “Or early. Whichever you wanna call it.”

“Mmm.” Without further inquiries as to why Jackson was there or why he hadn’t come over earlier, Ashley moved across the sheets and snuggled against Jackson, draping an arm over Jackson’s waist. Then he fell asleep. Just like that. His breath tickled Jackson’s neck, skin burning hot against Jackson’s. When Ashley was like this, relaxed and calm, he smelled like new spring, the first whiff of warm freshness weeks before dandelions blossomed across their land. It was always Jackson’s favorite time of the year. Now more than ever.

Looking down at Ashley, Jackson wondered if he even would’ve found his way here without Nana’s overbearing habit of sticking her nose into other people’s business. Maybe he would’ve missed out on this. Maybe he would’ve found someone else, years from now and been happy. But not like this. Never like this. He wouldn’t have felt proud of his home, of the land running around them for miles and miles. He wouldn’t have felt such happiness when showing that land to some stranger, someone who meant nothing to him compared to the male he had sleeping next to him now.

And still, that awful unnerving feeling weighed in the bottom of his stomach. He’d never feared failure before, but he feared it now. Thinking he’d see disappointment in Ashley’s eyes someday weighed heavy on Jackson’s heart. Ashley had been failed by so many already. For once, Jackson wanted to be the one to make him happy instead of making him sad.

The morning came all too soon, shadowed by dark clouds and the foreboding scent of rain. Ashley had pushed open the windows the moment he climbed out of bed, looking so tired Jackson doubted he had slept much during the night after all.

Sitting on the windowsill, Jackson watched the pasture, where the horses—Fay included—grazed peacefully. It seemed the low pressure wasn’t affecting the animals one bit. The male rinsing his breakfast dishes by the sink, on the other hand, seemed sort of under the weather.

Jackson watched Ashley, tasting his tea as he ran his eyes over Ashley’s rugged appearance. “Everything okay?” he asked.

Ashley glanced at him absently, then nodded before going back to the dishes. “Sure.” He brushed hair from his face and stifled a yawn as he checked the time from the clock hanging above the door.

“You look tired.”

Ashley shrugged. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“You barely woke up when I came in.”

“Then maybe I had nightmares... I don’t know.” Ashley sighed irately and piled his dishes in the bottom of the sink.

He glanced at Jackson. “Just leave your mug there. I’ll clean them when I get home.”

Jackson watched him exit the kitchen, a little puzzled by Ashley’s mood. “You’re leaving already?”

“I’m already late,” Ashley called from the living room, where he could be heard gathering his stuff for the day. He always insisted he didn’t need a bag or a backpack, but every morning he was in a hurry while searching for his things from around the cottage. This morning he was even louder than usual. Jackson could hear the quiet curses and mumbled words, Ashley’s bad mood noticeable even when Jackson had no visual of him.

Jackson left his empty mug in the sink like he was told to, then went into the living room and found Ashley switching from a semiproper shirt to one of the old rags he preferred to work.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look okay.”

Ashley regarded Jackson with a stare menacing enough to convince him to shut up. Only he didn’t.

“Did something happen?”

“It’s nothing.”

“So there is something.”

“Will you just drop it?” Ashley sighed. “It’s not a big deal.” He grabbed his phone from the table and headed to the door, but Jackson caught him by the wrist and held him still.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

“And I suppose you just have to help out?” Ashley snarled viciously. Taken aback, Jackson leaned back, watching Ashley questioningly.

“Someone’s snappy this morning.”

“Just leave it.”

“Not when you start attacking me. I haven’t done a thing to you.”

Ashley pulled away and walked right past Jackson, only to stall when he reached the door. Slowly he turned, looking uncomfortable, his gaze bouncing from one wall to the next.

“It’s really not a big deal.”

“You wouldn’t react if it wasn’t.”

Ashley stared back like he was trying to read Jackson’s mind, and then he walked back into the living room, dropped onto the couch, and tossed his phone back on the table.

“I feel like someone’s following me around this place.” He peered up, as if afraid of Jackson’s reaction. “Like... watching me or something.”

The thought was so ridiculous Jackson was about to brush it off just like that. But then he saw the haunted look in Ashley’s eyes. He sat next to him. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Ashley shrugged embarrassingly. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Of course I believe you.” Rubbing a hand over the small of Ashley’s back, Jackson looked out into the yard. “Have you seen someone following you on the trails?”

“No. And it’s not on the trails. It’s everywhere. Just the walk to the stable feels weird.” Ashley fidgeted on the couch, looking miserable. “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“Okay, okay...” Jackson nudged Ashley’s temple, hoping he was able to ease some of the worry. “I’ll check the premises, okay? See if anything seems off. But you know you’re safe here, right? No one’s going to attack you here.”

Ashley nodded, smiling a little. “I know. It’s just this creepy feeling I get sometimes.”

“Do you want me to walk you to the stable?”

Ashley laughed at that and stood up. “No, I do not need you to hold my hand and escort me around.” He leaned over and kissed Jackson. “But thank you for asking.”

Ashley pulled back and cupped Jackson’s cheek. “Sorry for being so snappy. It just gets to me sometimes.”

“It’s okay.” Jackson watched Ashley head to the door, a light bounce in his step now. “I’ll come find you later?”

Ashley nodded and spoke over his shoulder. “See you.”

“See you.”

The front door shut behind Ashley, leaving Jackson inside bare walls.

First the wolf. Now this. A while ago Jackson might’ve said Ashley was out of his mind and crazy enough to be sent off. Now? He wouldn’t say he was scared unless he had a reason to be. And if Jackson knew Ashley at all, he would not get scared easily.

Chapter Fifteen

“Next time I’ll race you here.”

Ashley snorted. “You wish.” He glanced at Jackson. “That’s one thing you can’t challenge me to.”

“I wouldn’t be sure of it.” Jackson leaned back on his hands and sighed contently. “All I gotta do is provoke you a little, and you’ll flip cartwheels just to prove me wrong.”

“Not this time.”

“We’ll see...”

Ashley shook his head and lay down on the blanket. Jackson called this a picnic, though they had no food with them, but Ashley didn’t mind. He’d become quite fond of the riverside, as crazy it seemed, and these days when Jackson asked him to take a walk in the woods, Ashley was happy to comply. Admittedly, Jackson’s persistence about Ashley shifting and letting his wolf run free for an hour or two tended to dampen the mood a bit. But only momentarily. Jackson never truly pressed the matter, though he did bring it up about twenty times a day. Maybe he knew where Ashley’s limits were. His wolf was his and his alone. He had no interest in sharing it with anyone.

“Next week is going to be busy,” Jackson chatted, while Ashley stretched out on the blanket and closed his eyes. His face soaking in the sun, he listened to Jackson’s pondering. “The riders come in on Tuesday, right?”

“Hmm.”

“I’m gonna have a few more people by the stable on Monday and Tuesday, just so that you guys have time to get everything sorted.”

“Sounds good.”

The heavenly warmth lasted for a few more seconds, before Ashley felt a sudden coolness on his face as a shadow crossed over him. “You couldn’t care less, could you?” Jackson asked right above Ashley.

Cracking a lid, Ashley peeked at Jackson, who leaned over him. “I’m trying to enjoy my day off and you’re talking about work. So, no, I really couldn’t care less.”

“I’m trying to make your job a little easier for you, you know.”

“And I appreciate it immensely,” Ashley praised teasingly. “But can we talk about this tomorrow, for example? You know... when I’m reunited with my beloved dungfork and I actually have to give a damn?”

Jackson smirked and dove for a kiss. “Understood.” Another kiss, just as quick. And like always, a few playful pecks led to battling tongues and wandering hands so quickly it was insane.

Outdoor sex wasn’t Ashley’s thing. Not that he’d ever tried it. Here, though, the trees provided privacy, not unlike doors or covered windows. Maybe that was why Ashley just laid there watching as Jackson started playing with the string on Ashley’s sweats.

“You’re thinking about taking a swim?” he suggested.

Jackson shook his head once and pulled the knot open. “Nope.”

Folding his arms under his head, Ashley watched playfulness dance along Jackson’s features. “Naked sunbathing?”

“Wrong again.” Calloused fingers slid along Ashley’s skin. Jackson’s pinkie pushed under the waistband of the sweats while he flattened his palm over Ashley’s stomach. Then he sat up quickly and knelt between Ashley’s legs. “But it’s a good start.”

Ashley bit his tongue not to laugh when Jackson yanked him downward by the loose waistband of the sweats. “How come?”

Ashley’s thighs rested over Jackson’s, and he started rolling Ashley’s shirt up. “We don’t want tan lines, now do we?” Jackson asked.

Ashley assisted by sitting up briefly, and the shirt was off in a flash. “I sunbathe naked all the time,” he chatted, and smirked at Jackson’s ogling. “In my backyard.”

“Oh really?”

“Really.” Settling back on the blanket, Ashley stretched indulgently. “Why do you think I insist on living at the cottage halfway across the land?”

Jackson was frozen, the shirt still clutched in his hand. “How did I not know this?” he asked, sounding astonished.

“It’s sort of a private thing.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t.” The shirt landed on the sand behind Jackson, and he leaned down over Ashley. “We could make it a mutual hobby.”

“Or maybe I’ll just keep my clothes on from now on.”

“Now that’s never going to happen.” As if to prove his words, Jackson pushed his hand under Ashley’s pants and grabbed a handful of flesh beneath the small of Ashley’s back. His lips landed on Ashley’s, slow and lazy again, and Ashley was happy to comply.

Resigning to those touches and simply letting go was easier now. As Ashley closed his eyes, he let go of those old barriers between his human and his wolf, and as every touch and flicker multiplied, he could no longer tell whether it was the man in him enjoying the closeness of his lover, or his wolf embracing its feral needs as it sensed Jackson’s wolf.

Hands wandered under pieces of clothing, quick to tempt and tease but resistant to rush. Ashley squeezed his thighs around Jackson’s hips as they rocked together gently, building the tension they both knew could explode in a matter of seconds. But it was good. The warmth in the air and Jackson’s scent covering Ashley made it that much better.

Shivers ran up Ashley’s back when Jackson nibbled his jaw, teeth grazing his neck as Jackson traveled south. But through the anticipation and pleasure, a different kind of shiver met those created by the male touching Ashley so perfectly. He opened his eyes, disturbed by the unnerving heaviness in the bottom of his stomach. It felt like thunderclouds had covered the sun, a sudden coldness blanketing the warmth.

“Jackson,” Ashley mumbled, his hand clutched around Jackson’s shoulder.

He hummed against Ashley’s chest, clearly not sensing Ashley’s distress.

“Do you feel that?” Ashley tried, but Jackson just chuckled.

“I sure do,” he said and rocked his hips against Ashley’s.

“No... Jackson... *stop*.”

Ashley shoved Jackson’s shoulder, fear now clouding his thoughts. Jackson looked up at him concernedly. “What?”

Ashley pushed himself up on his elbows, turning his head to the side. “Listen.”

Jackson sat up and looked around. Little by little worry crept to his eyes, his brows drawn into a frown as he stared over Ashley’s head.

“Knock it off, Harv.”

Harv?

Ashley scrambled into a sitting position just as Harvey walked out into the sun. He was dressed in loose jogging pants and a plain black shirt, so he hadn't shifted before intruding into their privacy. Still, with his clothes on or not, Harvey's presence was the perfect thing to spoil Ashley's mood. Harvey looked at him unashamedly, and though the shirt was the only thing Jackson had stripped off Ashley, he couldn't have felt more naked.

"This is cute," Harvey marveled.

Ashley pushed Jackson back and stood up. Harvey and Jackson met face-to-face while Ashley went to grab his shirt. It wasn't until Ashley stood a few feet from Jackson that he realized his scars were out there for anyone to see. He glanced over his shoulder while pulling on the shirt, and unsurprisingly Harvey's eyes were glued to Ashley's back.

"So they didn't heal with time, then?"

Jackson blocked the view. "What are you doing here?"

"It's my morning run. Trust me, I didn't think you'd be here. We haven't been here in a while, you know."

Ashley's movements slowed as he smoothed the shirt over his sides. Jealousy meandered through his chest so quickly it hurt. He glanced at Jackson, not sure what to think of this. Harvey and Jackson had been here together? Doing what?

"That was your choice. I didn't cut you off."

"No, you just got preoccupied with other things." Harvey walked across the sand, regarding Jackson with one glance before his mocking gaze landed on Ashley. "Can't say I'm surprised, though."

Again Jackson moved to stand between Ashley and Harvey, but it did little to help the nauseating discomfort rocking in the bottom of Ashley's stomach. He felt like someone had soiled their sweet moment, made it filthy somehow.

Ashley fought the urge to wrap his arms around himself, and laced his fingers behind his back instead. Instinctively he moved a little closer to Jackson, who stood still like a rock, standing his ground.

"If there's something you want to say to me, just say it. Don't drag Ashley into this."

With a scornful smirk, Harvey turned to Jackson. “Aren’t you cute? All protective and shit.” He glanced at Ashley, before speaking spitefully. “Why repeat things you haven’t listened to once so far?”

“All you’ve been doing is running your mouth about things that aren’t any of your business. I don’t need to listen to that.”

Harvey lost his smirk and moved closer still. “Your commitment to this pack is none of my business?”

“My commitment has never been an issue.”

This was not the best place for this conversation. Ashley could easily sense the rivalry oozing from Harvey, his wolf scraping its way to freedom. Would he attack Jackson?

As the thought passed through Ashley’s mind, he brushed it off. Harvey wasn’t that dumb. But when Ashley looked at him, all he saw was disgust and hatred looking back. It reminded Ashley of a hundred times he’d faced Harvey throughout the years, but this time it was different. Here Ashley had no chance of survival. No place to run.

“We used to run for hours in the evenings. Last night it was what? Thirty minutes? And then you take him out here, act like the perfect host? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Like I said, none of your business.”

Jackson’s anger smelled like rotten fruit. He stood frozen, hands fisted and shoulders square as he stared Harvey down.

Ashley soothed his wolf and moved closer cautiously. He curled his hand around Jackson’s and hoped he could soothe Jackson’s anger as well. “Let’s just go,” he said softly. “It’s not worth it.”

Through the commotion vibrating through the air, Ashley sensed the rage floating off Jackson. It clashed sharply with the stench of burnt rubber as Harvey’s fury became more evident. At least Jackson eased back, his fist loosening as he laced his fingers with Ashley’s.

Ashley leaned closer, tugging gently on Jackson’s hand. “I don’t care what he says,” he whispered. “Let’s just go home.”

“I don’t think people appreciate your attitude towards the pack,” Harvey said importantly. “You spend more time courting that pathetic pest than you spend taking care of anything else.”

“If the pack isn’t happy with how I handle things, they’re free to say it to my face.” It seemed Jackson had reached his limit. He let go of Ashley’s hand and walked up to Harvey, seemingly unafraid of Harvey’s obvious derision. “You’re just like everybody else in this place, Harvey. I don’t answer to you. I don’t owe you an explanation about what I do in my free time, and if I choose to spend it with Ashley, your opinion doesn’t matter. If you wanna bitch about it, bitch about it. But don’t pretend you’re doing it because of this pack, because that has nothing to do with it, and you know it.”

“I thought everybody’s allowed to have a say in this place,” Harvey sneered. “I suppose that changed when you took his side over everybody else’s. So, tell me... Is he still afraid to walk in the woods? Scared of the thing that’s watching him?”

Ashley sensed Jackson’s confusion as clearly as he felt his own. Harvey looked at him, smiling sadistically as Ashley slowly connected the dots.

“That was you?” he asked. Why he was astonished was beyond him. Jackson had said Harvey wouldn’t do that, but it seemed he didn’t know his friend nearly as well as he thought.

Instead of regret or guilt, Harvey boasted with pride.

“Bad Harvey,” he snarled. He watched Ashley with the focus of a predator, brown eyes cold with darkness. “Why don’t you ask lover-boy here what he thinks of that?”

“What is he talking about?” Ashley was happy he wasn’t stuttering, but before Jackson had a chance to reply, Harvey went on.

“It was my idea, I admit. But he seemed all for it. You remember that, don’t you?” He advanced toward Jackson. “After Etta took the keys... You weren’t so lovey-dovey then, were you?”

Ashley yanked him by the hand, forcing Jackson to look at him. “What is he talking about?” he asked again. “You knew it was him?”

“No.” Jackson shook his head vigorously. “Of course I didn’t.”

Harvey sauntered over to the waterline. “Yeah, he knew.”

“Shut up, Harvey,” Jackson snarled over his shoulder.

“Oh, come on, Jackson. You practically plotted the whole thing with me. How could you *not* know?”

Jackson was split between glaring at his former best friend and reassuring his current lover, but Ashley had heard enough. He stepped back, well out of Jackson's reach. "Either you come with me, or I'll go alone. I'm not staying here."

"And how do you think you'll do that?" Harvey asked. "You don't even know which way to go." To Jackson, Harvey snorted. "And this is who you choose? He'll never have your back when you need him to. He doesn't have it in him. He's physically unable to. He can't even find his way back home."

Ashley turned to leave, but Jackson wrapped a hand around his wrist. "He's already had my back more times than you ever did," he spoke to Harvey. It warmed Ashley a little, but betrayal was still at the top of his mind. Fear was a close second, when Harvey suddenly stood right in front of Jackson, the two staring at one another without either paying attention to the fearful quivers running through Ashley.

Jackson met Harvey head-on. Either he didn't sense Harvey's enraged wolf, or he just didn't care. "It's pathetic to take pride in something like this. Don't think you're above this just because you got away with a lot of shit throughout the years."

"Yeah... doing your dirty work." Harvey glanced over Jackson's shoulder and met eyes with Ashley before speaking deceitfully soft. "You never had the balls to do it yourself."

"Scaring someone who's afraid to begin with is not something you should be proud of." Jackson's wolf was starting to get uncomfortably restless, even Ashley could feel it. It was pacing already, waiting to be let free.

"You know how it goes, Harv. Either you apologize, or you're out."

"Apologize? To *him*?" Harvey chuckled. "I will never crawl for a disgrace like him."

"Then there's no place for you in this pack."

"Is that so?"

If Ashley wasn't so scared, he would've ran. He didn't even know what he was afraid of. All he knew was that there was so much hostility in the air he could barely breathe through it without choking. Jackson's hold on his wrist was painfully tight, and while Ashley tried to free himself without creating any more commotion, Harvey pressed on, as if he truly wanted a confrontation.

“A real leader knows when to give up.”

“A real leader never gives up.”

Ashley’s heart sank as he watched the endless darkness in Harvey’s eyes melt into bright yellow. Still, he tried to drag Jackson along, asking him to take him home, but it was pointless. For now, Jackson only had eyes for his old friend.

“You don’t wanna do this, Harvey.”

“Believe me. I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.”

It happened so fast. In a blink of an eye there were two grown wolves standing a few feet from him, both growling as shreds of clothing scattered across the sand. They assessed their opponent, both completely oblivious to Ashley’s presence, but still he stumbled backward. He recognized Jackson immediately, having seen him up close a few times growing up. Harvey, on the other hand, was only familiar from that one meeting in the woods. Teeth bared, growls like forewarns of an imminent confrontation. It looked nothing like the halfhearted brawl Ashley had seen between the two when they were pups.

Out of nowhere, the scent of two feral males spread through the air, and then a clash of growls and snarls. Part of Ashley wanted to turn and run, just leave the beasts and never come back, but the other part won, only taking him to edge of the bank. He stayed back, seeking shelter in the trees and branches, but he couldn’t stay still. He paced around the scene, flinching at the sound of every growl and even the quietest clash. At the wake of the first cut, the stench of blood filled the air. It pierced through Ashley’s guard, flooding his mouth with a metallic taste. He gagged, out loud and unashamed, but his reaction seemed to go unnoticed by the two males.

He wished he wasn’t here, or that he at least had someone with him. What the hell was he supposed to do now? His wolf was practically cowering up somewhere, hiding so deep Ashley could only sense its endless panic. Neither of the wolves even noticed him, but still his wolf feared they would both turn and aim the next strike at him.

He was afraid to intervene, to step to the front. Expectance and readiness welled up out of nowhere, but still he hesitated. He just wanted it to end. He hated seeing Jackson in this roaring state, hated knowing this was really what he was capable of; ripping someone to pieces. Nothing was spared as they attacked each another. Blood soiled the ground and colored their coats, and Ashley became numb to the smell. He just stood there, watching helplessly as

Harvey lunged time after time after time, teeth finding their mark too many times to keep track anymore. It suddenly hit Ashley; what if Jackson lost? What if he died? What if after this he'd never walk among them again?

However much Ashley wished he'd never get to see this side of Jackson, now he only hoped Jackson would be as cold as Harvey, just as merciless. But it seemed Jackson was losing the fight, his every movement far less controlled than Harvey's. And like the animal he was, Harvey seemed to thrive on Jackson's weakness. His every movement was controlled and calculated, like this was what he was born to do. If Jackson didn't walk away from this, Harvey would lead the pack. Ashley had no doubt about that. What Etta and Danny had worked so hard for would become rotten by this monster.

And then, out of nowhere, Jackson struck. Harvey was down and on his back so fast Ashley didn't even see what happened, and as Jackson closed his jaw around Harvey's throat, the whole world went quiet.

Ashley waited for the last howl, for the burst of blood. He waited for that hollow, low growl, which always seemed to go on and on and vibrate through the air, through him. He waited for something, some kind of closure, but instead he watched as Jackson stepped back suddenly, teeth still bared as he watched Harvey's defeated form lay motionless on the ground. Seconds ticked by, quiet and confusing, and then Harvey stood with his head held low. Evading the eyes watching him, he ran like the coward he was, seeking shelter from the woods. Only after he was gone, did Jackson move again. He staggered a step or two, then collapsed on the ground in a heaving mess.

Still shaking, Ashley watched after Harvey, looking for even the tiniest sign of him. He was met with the blurry curtain of green and brown and gray, nothing but the quietness of the forest answering his shaky breaths.

"Ashley..."

Jackson had shifted, now lying on his side on the sand. Blood seeped through an open wound on his side, another dappling the skin on the side of his right thigh.

Slowly Ashley moved closer, his mind in total chaos while he tried to keep his wolf at bay. Jackson looked up at him through heavy lids, his hand reaching up to soothe Ashley. "It's okay."

Ashley shook his head, but no words came out. Still, he managed to get to Jackson without breaking down, and though he hated the blood, he hated the exhaustion on Jackson's face even more.

“Can you get up?” he asked, worming his arm under Jackson’s. “We need to get you back to the house.”

Jackson nodded, and after a few attempts, he managed to get on his feet. Still, he leaned heavily on Ashley, who knew there was no way he could walk all the way back with Jackson’s weight blanketing him.

Jackson steered their slow, staggering walk, his left leg nearly useless as he limped more and more the farther they got. Ashley encouraged him forward, determined to make it out of the woods alive. He would not get stuck here again. He would *not* fail a second time.

His back protested against the weight, his wolf now in a full panic while it kept reminding Ashley that Harvey was still out there somewhere. Maybe he was watching them, waiting to attack.

“We need to stop,” Jackson muttered.

Ashley shook his head, refusing to even look at the naked, wounded man tottering next to him. “We need to keep going.”

Jackson stopped abruptly, swaying on his feet before he lowered himself on the ground. “I can’t walk much further.”

“I’ll help you. Come on,” Ashley begged, trying to pull Jackson back up. “We can’t stay here.”

“Ashley, listen to me.” As if he wasn’t in pain at all, Jackson pulled Ashley down and held his eyes. “I can’t walk all the way back on my own, and you can’t carry me. You need to go back and get help.”

Chuckling humorlessly, Ashley waved around. “I can’t leave you here! What if Harvey comes back? He’ll—”

“He won’t come back. He lost. He’s wounded and defeated. He won’t come back, trust me.” Jackson smiled encouragingly, but all Ashley could think of was the last time Jackson asked him to trust him. Jackson was wrong then. What if he was wrong now?

Ashley knelt on the mossy ground, running his eyes over Jackson’s naked frame. Small cuts and bruises were everywhere, and larger wounds striped Jackson’s skin randomly around his body.

“I don’t want to leave you here,” Ashley murmured, his hand hovering inches above the biggest wound on Jackson’s thigh. “Not like this.”

“I’ll be fine.” He cupped Ashley’s cheek, steering Ashley’s gaze to his. “But you need to go back and get help.”

“I don’t know how to get back.”

“Your wolf does.” Jackson continued quickly when Ashley went to protest. “We’ve been here so many times your wolf probably knows the route by heart. Just let it show you the way.”

Ashley shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” Jackson pulled Ashley closer, watching him relentlessly. “Stop doubting yourself. You’ve been here alone once before and you made it back home. I know you can do it again.”

Ashley looked around, thinking maybe he could see the path back home. Again, nothing he saw provoked any kind of memory of the route they’d taken hours earlier. But when he looked back at Jackson, all he saw was trust and confidence looking back. Gray eyes were clear as glass, and though pain was evident on Jackson’s face, none pierced through the brightness of his gaze.

“I’ll try,” Ashley finally said, nodding to reassure himself.

Jackson smiled tiredly and reached up to kiss Ashley. No heat, no lust. It calmed Ashley instantly, like he could steal some of Jackson’s strength by a simple kiss alone.

He stood up, breathing deep. “You’ll stay here, right?”

“It’s not like I can go anywhere.” Jackson laughed, gesturing at his leg. His smile faded quickly, worry painting a deep frown on his face. “Find Nana and tell her I got into a fight with Harvey. He needs to be checked out when he goes home.”

“I don’t understand why you still care,” Ashley muttered.

Jackson reached out his hand and took Ashley’s, before he managed to move away. “Don’t tell Nana about what Harvey did,” Jackson asked. “I’ll take care of it. Just don’t tell her. Please.”

Ashley looked down at Jackson, something cold spreading through his chest. He lay there, sore and blooded, and still he pleaded for Harvey? For someone who broke every rule in the book?

Past memories flooded in, burying every giddy glimpse of true happiness Ashley had felt since that first heart-to-heart they’d had over a couple of burgers. Pulling himself free, he stepped back and turned away. If he gave

himself any more time, he would've demanded an explanation, so he took a step, then another and another, until his feet raced across the ground. The stiffness in his body molded and melted, until it blended out into the wild feeling of freedom. Instantly he smelled the woods instead of seeing it, and his wolf rushed onward, like it had been caged for years. It ran aimlessly, still lost deep in fear and only interested in finding safety.

Ashley didn't know how long he had run, until he finally stopped. If there was a trace to be found, his wolf was blatantly ignoring it. Instead it calmed little by little when no danger emerged. Ashley regretted not doing this more often, sprinting out in the wild like his kind was so used to. It took ages for him to convince his wolf to listen and pay attention, but once it did, he finally started seeing some sense in his surroundings.

He recognized trees and rocks, smelled something of Jackson's on the ground while he advanced calmly. His paws found more familiar steps, an invisible path forming right before his eyes as he just let his wolf absorb everything around him. Within moments he was on track again, fighting his way back home with speed he'd never reached before.

By the time he saw the house peeking through the woods, Ashley's wolf was exhausted. It limped the last of the trails, its steps uneven and dragging as it finally found its way back home.

Ashley would've sobbed had he been able to, when he saw Etta crossing the yard. She spotted him in seconds and rushed over when Ashley's steps came to a halt. Then he fell, just crumbled on the ground when his wolf lost all strength in one, painful breath.

He shifted, not caring who was there or who saw him as he lay there on the gravelly ground completely naked. The spasms clenched all over his body, curling his frame into a tight ball as he tried to speak between clenched jaws. He stuttered, blind to Etta, who was next to him, smoothing her hand over his shoulders while she passed orders around in time with everything Ashley told her.

Then it just became too much. With one last clear view of Etta kneeling next to him, Ashley's world went dark.

Chapter Sixteen

Jackson remembered a time when his world was as confusing as it was now. Months after Danny had died, the whole pack was in a silent state of chaos. People tried to go on as if nothing had changed, but everything had. Well-learned patterns no longer applied. It had felt as if the ground had sunk under their feet and left them balancing right on the edge of something none of them knew. That was how Jackson felt now, climbing up the stairs to the second floor of the main house.

Two days had passed. Two days since something lifelong and vital had ended, along with something flourishing. Jackson hadn't been allowed to see Ashley since. First he had been outraged, convinced this was Nana's way of punishing him for letting things get out of hand, but then she'd told him it wasn't her request that he not see Ashley. It was Ashley's. He had been placed in one of the guestrooms for recovery—probably against his own will—and it killed Jackson to know Ashley was right there, where he couldn't see Ashley's recovery as planned.

But that was going to change. If Ashley didn't want to see Jackson, he was going to have to tell it to his face. Enough with Nana playing the messenger.

And she was very adamant about playing her part right.

"Sorry, Jackson. You know how it is," she said the moment he reached the landing. She sat on a sofa at the end of the corridor, a book laid open in her lap while she spoke to Jackson without even looking up at him. "He doesn't want to see you."

Jackson bristled and headed for the door regardless of Nana. "Then we'll let him explain why." Maybe it was vanity. Maybe Ashley feared Jackson would think less of him now that Ashley's run had demanded days of rest.

"If you open that door, I will wash my hands of whatever destruction you two create," Nana called after him.

Jackson stalled by the door, staring down at the handle. Was he really ready for another confrontation, even if it was just a verbal one? He still walked with a limp, and though there were no serious injuries, his pride had taken a massive blow, one he doubted would heal any time soon.

Still, Ashley was worth it.

He knocked on the door, and after hearing Ashley's somewhat crestfallen invitation to enter, he did just that. And as soon as he opened the door and stepped inside, Ashley's face went grave with disapproval.

"I told you I don't want to see you."

"Yeah, you did." Jackson closed the door behind him, now prepared for that very confrontation he'd hope to avoid. "Would you care to tell me why?"

Ashley sat on the bed, a blue sleeveless shirt and black sweats looking far too common next to the colorful tapestry Nana so persistently favored. His light hair was tousled, amber eyes fiery with annoyance, as he stared at Jackson.

"How's Harvey?"

Jackson didn't see that coming.

"What?"

"You know... That double-crossing, asshole of a friend of yours."

"He's... fine, I think." Now Jackson moved a bit more cautiously, not sure where this was going. "He's going to be okay."

"Undoubtedly," Ashley muttered and looked away. He cocked his chin up a bit in a way Jackson had seen countless of times before, and even without saying a word, Ashley spewed poison in the air with every single breath. He was not happy.

"How are you?" Jackson asked, now standing by the bed. It hurt him not to be able to touch Ashley. Feeling him close had become a basic need within the past few weeks, and now, being apart from Ashley felt like someone was twisting a knife in his chest.

"Nana said you passed out when you got to the house."

"Your grandmother talks too much."

Watching the determined posture—whether intentional or not—Jackson realized this wasn't vanity. This wasn't self-pity either, though that was hardly something Ashley would stoop to. He was angry. Not annoyed, not aggravated, but genuinely angry to a point where just looking at him showed how hard it was for him to contain his temper.

"What did I do?" Jackson asked and sat down next to Ashley. He tried to wipe a few of those messy waves from Ashley's face, but his hand was shoved away.

Confused, Jackson pulled back. “Come on... What’s this about?”

Ashley swallowed visibly, then turned to Jackson. “If I had done what he did, would I still be here?” he asked. “Would you tell him not to tell anyone about it?”

“Is that what this is about?”

“What did you think this was about? You thought I pout for the fun of it?” Ashley jeered. “Did you really think I’d be okay with this?”

Jackson stared back, trying to see some of the familiar softness in Ashley’s eyes he was used to seeing, but it seemed Ashley had gone back to his old ways. That precious softness was gone, and what stared back was years of resentment and disapproval.

“Don’t do this now.” Jackson sighed and stood up. “Don’t make such a big fucking deal out of this.”

“Of course not. Let’s just let it slide like everything else you and Harvey have done over the years.”

“What *I* have done?” Jackson turned to Ashley. “I haven’t done anything!”

“So you didn’t know?”

“Of course I didn’t! I told you that.”

“You said a lot of other things too, which don’t seem that real right now.”

“You’re calling me a liar?”

Ashley just shrugged, staring at something on the opposite wall while Jackson became more and more furious, despite knowing getting into an argument with Ashley was never the right thing to do.

“When have I ever lied to you?” he demanded. “So, yeah, when Nana took the keys, Harvey did talk about scaring you off. And yes, I thought that was a great idea. But I thought he was joking. I didn’t know he was actually going to do it. I thought it was funny, and that’s wrong, I know, but it was before. Before you and me, before us. Before I realized who you really are. You want me to apologize for every time I’ve ever thought about how great it would if you just up and left and never came back? ’Cause if you do, it’s going to take fucking forever before I’m done.”

Not even a blink. That mask of blankness had slipped onto Ashley’s face, and there wasn’t even the tiniest crack Jackson could see through.

He spoke emotionlessly. “You just don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

“Etta should know.”

“I told you I’ll talk to him, okay? I’ll take care of it.”

“It’s not your job to take care of it,” Ashley barked. “You’re not the leader of this pack, Jackson. Your grandmother is. It’s her job to know stuff like this. What Harvey did was not cool, and you’re approving it by keeping it a secret.” Ashley swung his feet on the floor and stood up gingerly. “If Etta says Harvey can stay, and this thing is brushed off, then fine. But it’s not your call to make.”

Ashley looked Jackson square in the eye, disappointment so evident Jackson could taste the bitterness.

“Just this one time I wanted you to be on my side. Have *my* back, not his.”

“I am on your side.”

“No you’re not. You’re on your side,” Ashley said tiredly. He shook his head and stepped back, distancing himself completely. “It’s easier this way, right? You don’t have to deal with it.”

“I *will* deal with it, but what do you want me to do? He’s my oldest friend, my—”

“And what am I?” Ashley asked, searching Jackson’s face. And just like that, he gave up. He breathed deep and looked away, a lost stare in his eyes as he circled the bed. If he’d cried, he wouldn’t have looked any more miserable.

Jackson walked to him and pulled him close, relieved when he wasn’t pushed away. “You’re more than anyone,” he murmured.

Ashley stayed between his arms, quiet and still, while Jackson kissed the side of his face. There was no response, not even a sound, until Ashley shrugged Jackson’s arms away and stepped back.

“I almost started feeling like this really is my home. Now I feel like I’m fifteen again, and you won’t stop him making my life hell no matter how badly I need you to.”

Ashley had told Jackson about the first time he came to Etta’s, about what it felt like to have a home for the first time in his life and trust in the people who told him it wasn’t going to be taken away. Looking now, Jackson could see that trust crumbling right before his eyes.

Under Ashley's sad stare, something squeezed Jackson's throat, and he couldn't find the right words. Ashley shook his head, smiling sadly. "I've waited my whole life for you to be my friend. Why is that so hard?"

Bright amber eyes moistened with tears before Ashley brushed them off angrily. He walked past Jackson, making sure not to touch him even by accident.

"Just go away, Jackson," Ashley muttered.

Jackson turned after him, still lost for words. "Ashley..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Don't tell Nana." He snorted, shaking his head as he staggered into the bathroom. "Don't worry. I won't."

The door closed silently, and after a moment Jackson could hear water hit the tiles. The sound of the shower buried the ghastly silence, but it didn't take away the hurt in Jackson's heart.

He left the room, still unsure what to do or where to go. Days were endless now that he couldn't work, but they were harder just because Ashley wasn't by his side. Seeing Nana sitting on the sofa with that overly important frown on her face didn't help Jackson's failing mood.

"It didn't go too well, I assume?" she said. "Judging by your face you still weren't welcome."

Jackson watched in silence for a few moments, then left without saying a word. The only ones he was expected to speak were the ones he couldn't get out. He heard Nana's heavy breath as he walked down the stairs, and the sound reflected his spirit perfectly.

Out in the yard, whoever he met eyes with seemed to shrink back. Just yesterday, Nana had told Jackson that he was slipping back into his constant ailing mood. Maybe she was right. Just the sight of Harvey's house made Jackson's hackles rise, and he had yet to confront him. Harvey's wounds were minor, but he, too, was told to take it easy for a few days. What Harvey was doing during his recovery, Jackson didn't know. He was a no-see around the estate, much like Ashley. It seemed people only paid notice to Harvey's absence, as if they didn't even care Ashley wasn't there.

So, Jackson went to the only place where he knew for sure Ashley would be missed. And, as expected, he was welcomed with reserved optimism.

Ollie met him by the open doors, brows raised in a wishful gaze. "Did you see Ashley?"

“Yeah... Why?”

“Is he doing better?” she asked. “I went to see him this morning, and he barely said two words.”

“He’s just tired, I guess.” Lying was so easy it was disgusting. “He’ll get better.” Or so Jackson hoped. Maybe, once Ashley was back on his feet, they could have a talk, maybe work things out.

Ollie nodded, stalling by the doors. “I hope so. It sucks that he’s not here.”

Jackson looked around. Though he rarely came here, even he could see something was missing. “Yeah... I know what you mean.” They shared a brief smile, then Jackson stepped inside. “What are you doing?”

“I was going to take Fay on a walk. Ashley usually does it, but since he’s not here, I thought I’d try my luck with her.”

Jackson nodded and grabbed a bridle from where they were left hanging over the door of Fay’s stall. “You want company?”

Ollie’s brows rose, and she chuckled surprisingly. “You wanna come with us?”

“I might as well.”

She nodded timidly. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Looking down at the mess of leather in his hands, Jackson cleared his throat. “So how does this work?” he asked, gesturing the bridle toward the mare ogling him from the stall. For some reason Fay didn’t look convinced.

Ollie smiled happily and walked over. “Here, let me help you.”

“I’m not an invalid.”

“No, but you do still need help with certain things.”

“Not with my laundry.” Though the amount of dirty clothes he’d fished from under his bed tempted Ashley to ask someone to do the cleaning for him. “Seriously, Ollie, stop hovering.”

She stepped back and gave Ashley room to carry the stack of clothes into his small bathroom.

“That’s kinda gross, you know,” Ollie muttered. “Do you even have clean clothes in your closet?”

Ashley shot her a glare. “You’re an inch away from getting thrown out.”

Ollie raised her hands and stepped back. “Fine, I get it. You don’t need my help.” She sat on Ashley’s bed while he carried one load of laundry after another into his tiny bathroom.

“Are you sure you won’t come over tonight?” Ollie asked, for the hundredth time. “The first students come in tonight.”

Ashley rolled his eyes; they weren’t *students*. The same people came every year right after summer break, but Ollie still insisted on calling them students. As if they needed riding lessons. Ashley was convinced that was her way to psyche herself into doing her best while helping with everything that the “students” needed help with.

She pouted pathetically. “I’d really appreciate it if you came over, just to see if everything goes okay.”

“You’ve seen me deal with them a thousand times. You know what to do. Just make sure the paperwork is done properly and that they’ve got the equipment.”

Ollie frowned. “And that they don’t fall off or break their necks or stuff like that...” She glanced at him, but when she realized he wasn’t going to play her game, she sighed. “Okay... I guess I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can.” Ashley shoved the clothes in the machine, his other hand reaching for the detergent.

Ollie cleared her throat. “You should really separate the whites from the...” She closed her mouth when Ashley glared at her.

“Half an inch.”

“Okay.” She looked away, probably struggling not to point out how Ashley’s household skills were lacking.

“Oh... Did I tell you Jackson’s been coming to the stable a lot lately?” she asked suddenly.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Oh, okay. Well, he has. He’s been going on walks with Fay and me.”

“Good for him.” Ashley started the machine, feeling old habits sneak back. He almost smiled, just hearing Jackson’s name. He knew Jackson had been at

the stable. Yesterday Ashley had gone to see Fay, and instead he'd found Jackson by her stall, chatting nonsense to the amusingly uninterested mare.

Ashley had left quickly, unwilling to have another heart-to-heart with Jackson. He'd almost managed to convince himself that ship had sailed, but now that Ollie mentioned him, Ashley had to admit he wasn't that far yet.

Still, he wouldn't let it show. Ollie watched him like a hawk as he crossed the living room and started cleaning clutter from every flat surface.

"Have you two had a chance to talk?" Ollie asked casually.

"A few days ago."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much." Ashley cringed at the layer of dust on his coffee table; okay, so yeah, it was gross. Maybe he should accept Ollie's help after all.

She hopped off the bed and came into the living room. "Are you two fighting?"

"No."

"On a break?"

"Nope."

Ollie gasped quietly. "Did you break up?"

Ashley straightened up and looked at her sideways. "Quarter of an inch." He continued going through the stacks of magazines and random sheets of papers he didn't even remember saving. He'd only stayed at Etta's for a few days, and already his home looked like a dump.

Ollie followed him, fiddling with her hands. "You wanna tell me what happened?"

Now Ashley couldn't help the chuckle when he looked at her. "Seriously?"

"Sometimes it helps... to talk, you know." She sat on the couch and folded her legs under her. "Everything seemed to be going so well."

Sighing, Ashley moved to the bookshelf, which held very few books and mostly just junk he didn't really need. "People always say that about other people... like they actually know what's going on in someone's relationship. But, you know, unless you're actually in that relationship, you don't have the first clue of what's really going on."

After a moment, Ollie asked tentatively, “So... are you saying things weren’t going well?”

“I’m saying it’s none of your business, and I’m not going to talk about it.”

It wasn’t like Ollie to get offended, and she brushed off Ashley’s jab with a sigh. “You just seemed so happy for once. You were out there more, and you stopped huddling over here or down at the stable all the time.”

“Still not talking about it.”

“I think he’s making an effort, you know.”

“Ollie...”

“He wouldn’t see Fay every day if he didn’t think he’d get to see you that way.”

The pile of old newspapers banged on the coffee table when Ashley turned to Ollie. “Since he’s so fascinated with the horses, why don’t you ask him to help you at the stable tonight? Or tomorrow night, or the night after that. I bet he’s got nothing better to do.”

Ollie looked back calmly, as if she saw right through his demeanor. Which she probably did.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to meet him in the middle,” she said, standing up.

“Thanks for your opinion, but you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ollie tossed her head while walking past Ashley. “And whose fault is that?” With that, she sauntered out of the room and soon out of the whole building. Ashley stared down at the pile of newspapers, annoyed that she was right. Was it a female thing, coming to the right conclusion in all the wrong moments?

He left the papers and went back into the bedroom. There, he walked to his closet and pulled out an old duffel bag he had stashed at the very end of the bottom shelf. It weighed very little when he picked it up and placed it on the bed. The once-bright red was now faded into an ugly shade of orange, and the clothes inside smelled dank when he opened the zipper.

It was his runaway kit. He’d packed that bag a dozen times throughout the years, every time convinced this would be the time he actually grabbed the bag and left without ever looking back. Every time, Ollie had come to him, or Etta, both oblivious to what was going on Ashley’s mind. Just their presence had been enough to change his mind, but now he no longer knew if anything was worth staying for.

He couldn't even see Jackson without his heart trembling with pain. How could he get over the betrayal? The more he thought about it, the pettier he felt. But then he remembered Jackson's pleading look at the woods when he had asked him to spare Harvey. *Don't tell Nana.*

In Ashley's eyes, nothing had changed. He could still be thrown under the bus if only it served some grand purpose only Jackson understood. Only this time Ashley really didn't want to put up with it anymore.

Ashley heard the front door close quietly, and immediately his annoyance perked.

He sighed and closed the zipper. "Ollie, I appreciate your concern, but you're not going to get anything more out of me."

"Ollie's halfway to the stable by now."

Ashley turned and saw Jackson standing by the door, his hands in his pockets and the look of years of tiredness in his eyes. His skin looked pale next to the dark cotton wrapped around him, and buried under the angles and sharp edges of his face was exhaustion so ugly, Ashley couldn't help but wonder how hard this all had to be on him.

"She said you'd be here."

"Just because my door isn't locked, doesn't mean you can just walk in whenever you feel like it." Ashley's grabbed the bag and dropped it on the floor next to the nightstand. He made a job out of ensuring the zipper was really closed—anything to keep him from looking at Jackson. But even without seeing him, Ashley could sense the frustration and rousing anger. That's what happened when people ignored Jackson. He couldn't handle being overlooked. He couldn't handle disobedience either. He couldn't even handle a simple "no," as Ashley was starting to realize.

Still, despite the foul mood, Jackson appeared keen on keeping the conversation friendly. "How are you doing?" he asked.

Ashley glanced over, not sure what to make of the pretentious calmness. "Small talk? Really?"

A little bit of that polite surface cracked, and Jackson paced by the door. "Just making sure you're okay."

"You don't need to worry about me." The bag was calling out for Ashley, but he left it and brushed right past Jackson as he exited the room. "If that was all, feel free to get out."

Ashley had always appreciated the compactness of his home, but now the space felt far too small for them both. He couldn't move without sensing Jackson moving somewhere behind him, and every time he so much as glanced to the side, there Jackson was, watching him.

"Can't we just talk about this?" Jackson asked, slowly moving a few steps behind Ashley. "You're going back to work in a couple of days. It's not like you can continue avoiding me any longer."

"I can try." To keep himself busy, Ashley grabbed the papers he'd haphazardly piled a little earlier. He turned to take the pile onto the porch, maybe to get rid of it later, but Jackson stood right behind him, blocking Ashley's attempt to escape.

"I'm just going to keep coming at you until you talk to me."

It was painfully obvious Jackson meant every word. Looking at him now, Ashley could see the remnants of the self-sufficient asshole he was so used to dealing with. A part of him expected Jackson to toss one of those old taunts on the table, call Ashley a mutt or look down on him with scorn. And maybe it would've been easier that way.

"I'm thinking about going away for a while." The decision felt more solid now that he said it out loud. It felt a lot better, too. "For a week or two."

Jackson chuckled disbelievingly. "You're not going anywhere."

"I don't answer to you, Jackson. If I want to leave, I can leave. End of discussion."

"Like hell it is," Jackson argued. "You're not going."

"Oh, yes I am."

"No, you're not."

"Why's that?"

Jackson straightened his posture, gaining at least an inch or two. "Because I say so."

Ashley stared at Jackson for a second, stunned. Then he barked out a laugh. "Oh, that's funny." He shook his head and mimicked, "Because I say so."

"Laugh all you like, but you're not going anywhere." Jackson took a stance in front of Ashley, hands fisted on his hips and face screwed into a determined

frown. He probably didn't know he had grass in his hair and that this alpha-look didn't make him any more amiable in Ashley's eyes.

"You should be happy," Ashley said. "You're finally getting rid of me."

Jackson's determination withered, replaced by disbelief. Ashley gloated in the victory. "I'm doing you a favor, really." He passed Jackson and carried the papers onto the porch. The space looked dirty and stained with dried mud and hay covering the floorboards, and papers fell into a sheet of chaos the moment they hit the floor.

"Is this about your parents?"

Ashley turned, too stunned to speak when Jackson went on. "You think I'm just gonna give up if you keep acting like this? Because they gave up on you?"

"Don't talk about that," Ashley warned and moved closer. "You don't know the first thing about my parents."

Jackson nodded, seemingly relaxed, but the sharp edge was back in his gaze, speaking of alertness and anger. "Yeah, 'cause you never talk about them. You call me a coward 'cause I can't talk about Danny, but you've never once mentioned your family."

"So, what? You think we're gonna bond over my shitty childhood now? That's none of your business."

Jackson followed when Ashley went back into the bedroom, his words like whiplashes as he stalked after Ashley. "We don't just drop people in this pack. It's not like you can run away and think that's it. Just because your family didn't want—"

Ashley turned and shoved Jackson back when he stepped too close. "Don't talk about my family." He barely managed to move him, but it was enough Jackson no longer came closer. "You think just because you got in my bed a couple of times, I *owe* you an explanation? Are you fucking kidding me? I trusted you once, and where did that get me? I'm expected to play nice and keep my mouth shut so that you can continue being the little prick that you are. That's really typical of you, Jackson. Just bend the rules so that you get what you want. I'm sure Harvey's really grateful."

Instead of offense, which in all honesty was what Ashley had aimed for, Jackson smirked with contempt. "So this *is* about Harvey?"

“No. I don’t give a shit about Harvey. I don’t care if he leaves or if he stays. This is about me trusting you, and then you picking him over me when I needed you to be on my side.” Confessions were never easy, but admitting the hurt now was even more painful than Ashley had thought. He took a step back, trying to distance himself from Jackson. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to live in a place where no one wants you? It doesn’t matter what I do or what I say, people still look at me differently. I still don’t belong here. I have bent over backward for you, for years, and I thought this time you would actually get it, but you don’t.”

“What don’t I get? I know you’re hurt, and I’m trying to deal with this, but you’re not even giving me a chance.”

Ashley snorted and went back to work, searching the room to locate anything he could keep his hands busy with. “I’ve given you plenty of chances.” Eventually he grabbed the bedclothes and carried them into the bathroom, Jackson hot on his heels. The moment the sheets were out of his hands, Jackson grabbed him and turned him around.

“Please, stop doing this.” Jackson’s plea was so sincere, so unbelievably sweet, Ashley was easily lured back into that blissful oblivion he’d floated in for weeks. Then Jackson’s hand curled around his, and all Ashley could imagine were claws piercing his skin.

He pulled away and moved past Jackson and picked up the discarded sheets, shoving that stupid state of happiness aside. It was gone, anyway, buried somewhere under the sand in a place where everything changed for them both.

“I’m not doing anything. You are. You’re the one who’s turning this into a problem.”

“There wouldn’t be a problem if you’d just hear me out,” Jackson said. Ashley didn’t care. He didn’t care for the mess or the dust on his shelves or the pang of guilt twisting his heart when he saw Jackson’s need reflected in gray eyes.

Standing by the bed, Ashley stared back, empowered by the hurt look meeting his own. “Anything you want to say to me, I don’t want to hear, because it makes no difference. I don’t care if you’re sorry. I don’t care if you want things to be okay again and you feel bad for what happened. I do not care about what you have to say to me.” He crossed the distance between them, something resembling satisfaction bubbling in his chest as each passing second brought more of that desperation into Jackson’s gaze.

Ashley stilled right in front of Jackson, shamelessly proud of the sudden upper hand. “I’ve spent nearly my entire life worrying about what you think of me and how I could possibly be good enough for you, and I just don’t care anymore. You picked your side, Jackson. You can’t take that back.”

It was funny how simple it was. For years Ashley had tried to beat Jackson at every single game the male had ever thrown at him, and here they were, with the tables suddenly turning. What Ashley saw looking back was exactly what he’d felt for years: hurt, shame, and loss.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Jackson said. The words were spoken with a broken voice, and maybe some time ago it would’ve changed everything for Ashley. Now it no longer made a difference.

“I don’t care about that either.” With sickening satisfaction Ashley witnessed Jackson’s resolve give in under the blatant rejection. So what if he lied? Caring had only gotten him hurt with this male. One more chance, one more disappointment, and Ashley didn’t know where that would leave him.

Jackson reached out his hand and gave one more pleading look, but Ashley pulled away before the touch ever reached him. “Stop begging,” he said coldly. “It’s embarrassing.”

He had to look away when he saw his words hit their target. Regret welled up, but he ignored it. He crossed his arms over his chest as he stared over Jackson’s shoulder, just waiting for Jackson to get the message. And when Jackson did, his whole posture stiffened and his face darkened with something Ashley couldn’t even name, and then Jackson turned and walked away, Ashley’s wolf howled out its grief. It fought for a way out harder than any other time, and it was all Ashley could do not to run after Jackson and say he was sorry.

Chapter Seventeen

When you've done the same thing at approximately the same time every single day for twenty-plus years, it's hard to let go of that habit. Though it had been quite a while since Jackson last enjoyed a pleasure run in the woods with Harvey, every morning his feet took him in the familiar direction before his brain finally caught up. Then he'd stand out in the yard, staring ahead confusedly while trying to change the route of his thoughts.

This time, though, Jackson continued ahead, ignoring the hesitation once it crept up and took over. Seven days had passed since the confrontation in the woods. Seven days of no work. Seven days of no Harvey.

Seven days of no Ashley.

To be honest, Jackson didn't know which he missed more: the runs with Harv, or the rest of his time spent with Ashley. If only he could get the normality of his relationship with Harvey back, Jackson felt things would smooth over and things would settle. Only he knew that would never happen. It couldn't. Too many things were said and done, and even though he was sick to his stomach knowing what was going to happen, he now realized there really was no other way.

It seemed Harvey had come to the same conclusion.

Most of his things were packed away, piles and piles of boxes lined along the walls. Jackson stood by the open front door and looked at the emptying space.

Harvey appeared from the small kitchen, seemingly unsurprised to see Jackson standing on his doorstep. He watched Jackson peacefully, hands pushed in the pockets of his jeans while he leaned back against the doorframe and waited.

For what, Jackson didn't know.

"You're leaving?" he asked.

The corner of Harvey's mouth curled up a bit. "Isn't that why you're here?" It was a humorless smirk, a look Jackson was used to seeing. But only now he realized it had never been about joking or having fun. It was a bitter grin, displeased and unhappy, like the look of someone who had fought for something but could never reach the goal.

Leaving the door, Jackson looked around. “It doesn’t have to end this way, you know.”

“Yeah, it does.” Harvey strode across the room and grabbed a handful of opened envelopes from the mostly empty shelf by the bedroom door. “Your grandmother may look soft and cuddly, but she’s all steel on the inside. I think we both know what she’s going to do.”

The envelopes ended up in a box, alongside other papers. Harvey moved around the room, packing things away. None of this seemed to affect him in the slightest, while Jackson was getting more and more troubled watching his friend leave.

“I haven’t told her,” he said, and went on when Harvey glanced at him. “Ashley hasn’t either. I was hoping we wouldn’t have to.”

Harv chuckled and shook his head, still continuing to pack away what little was left in his cottage. “You think your boyfriend lets things go that easily? Come on... You’ve seen how he is. You said it yourself; he doesn’t know how to let go.”

Ashley’s leaving. Jackson bit his tongue not to spit it out. Maybe in some other life this would’ve been one of those times when he punished the punching bag in a fit of rage, and Harvey would be the voice of reason when Jackson spilled the ugly details of his conversation with Ashley. If it were anyone but Ashley, this wouldn’t now be happening.

And still, as Jackson watched Harvey, he realized this had nothing to do with Ashley.

Harvey stared down at the open box, then after a moment turned to face Jackson. “I won’t be a part of a pack where males like him get put on a pedestal.”

“No one’s doing that. It’s about giving everybody a fair chance.”

“He doesn’t deserve one.” It was scary how emotionlessly Harvey could talk, even now. His voice was flat with indifference, like he honestly didn’t care. “You used to think that too. You still remember that, don’t you? When did that change?”

“When I realized it’s not always other people who are wrong.” A part of Jackson wanted to reason, try to make Harvey see things his way, but looking at his friend now, Jackson realized it was of no use. That friend was gone, replaced by a stranger who looked back with nothing but contempt.

Harvey turned back to the box and picked it up from the table. “Your brother changed when Ashley came here. You’ve changed too. He softens you people, makes you weak. Weak people don’t survive in this world. He’s like cancer, makes people sick to the core.” He lowered the box on top of a small pile, then grabbed an empty one and carried it to the table. “I don’t want to be a part of a pack that fends for frailties like him.”

“I don’t want to lead a pack that doesn’t.”

Harvey nodded, glancing at Jackson sideways with a hollow grin. “There you have it then,” he said. “Time for me to go.”

The last of what was still left on the shelves was placed inside the box, Harvey’s movements calm and controlled as he continued evicting himself from Jackson’s life.

The hardest part was not watching him leave. The hardest part was realizing it meant nothing to Harvey. This was the male who’d stuck by Jackson when Danny died, sat next to him that day when Jackson thought his head would explode under the pressure. He’d been there for Harvey when his parents passed away, certain he’d never leave his friend’s side. Now that silent promise was going to come to an end.

Were there even right words for something like this? If he thought things could go differently, Jackson might’ve stayed. Watching Harvey erase himself from this pack was too painful for Jackson to want to see it unfold. He left the cottage, each step determined and strong, while he crumbled bit by bit on the inside the farther he got. Ashley was a distant memory in his mind now, though even the smallest sight of the male had brought hours of nightmares through the past week. All Jackson could muster now was a controllable level of nausea. Maybe that was the weakness Harvey had talked about.

Jackson found Nana in her garden. She was tending to her roses, murmuring to the flowers like others would speak to a pet.

“Nana,” Jackson called out, moving into the shadow of the porch. “Do you have a minute?”

It was impossible to pass the confusion circling the courtyard. It curled around Ashley’s throat the moment he reached the fountain, a dozen or so eyes aimed at him as he came into the bright daylight from the cool shadows of the trails.

Despite the constant ache in his back, he'd returned to work a couple of days ago. He'd made sure not to run into Jackson, and while avoiding him proved to be surprisingly easy, avoiding everybody else's curious glances turned out to be a lot more difficult. Ashley often left his cottage well before anyone else roamed the land, and he only returned home when he was sure the pack was either on a run or finishing with their daily chores elsewhere. Today was an exception. He'd slept in and had rushed out, sure he'd be the last to arrive at the stable. That thought was gone now, though.

He looked around, confusion blanketing his mind as he met eyes with males and females, all watching him with odd directness. He was so used to being stared at, looked down on, that seeing such openness in others was baffling.

Ashley barely noticed the sea of golden wheat waving in the gentle wind as he crossed the yard. He quickened his steps toward the stable and searched through the view, hoping to see Ollie or Shawn by the building, but movement in the cottages lining the edge of the woods caught his attention.

Harvey's truck was parked on the narrow gravel road leading to the small buildings. The front door of Harvey's cottage was open, and he moved expertly and without trouble as he carried boxes and bags to the car. Not once did he look to the direction of the main house or the courtyard, where people's gazes now fell more often on him than on Ashley. Harvey seemed oblivious to the attention he was gaining. Or maybe he just didn't care.

Ashley's walk came to a halt, and he joined the others, as he too became transfixed by Harvey's movements. From the corner of his eye he saw Ollie rush to him, but even as she reached him in obvious state of distress, he couldn't tear his eyes off Harvey.

"What is he doing?"

Ollie huffed. "Like you don't know."

Now Ashley looked at her, confused. "What?"

She made a strangled noise, glowering at Ashley. "How could you not tell me? Or Shawn? He's pretty beat up over this, you know... Thinks you don't trust him at all." Her bright ginger braid had already loosened, strands of hay peeking from the messy weave as she turned and watched Harvey lock the front door. "I can't believe he would sink that low."

"Who would?"

Ollie rolled her eyes, now facing Ashley. “Everybody knows, Ashley. No point in hiding it anymore.”

Now he was getting anxious, not sure what Ollie was talking about. “What the hell is going on?”

“He’s leaving.” Ollie nodded at Harvey. “Etta was there this morning. Shawn said he didn’t hear anything, but apparently Etta was furious when she left.” She sighed, her gaze softening when she looked at Ashley. “Why didn’t you tell us? Did you think we would laugh at you?”

Still confused, Ashley watched Harvey climb into the truck. “Jackson told her?”

“Of course he did. The rumor is that they had a really long talk last night, and by this morning *everybody* knew. It would’ve been nice to hear it from you, though.”

Ashley nodded, a little regretful now that he could hear the hurt in Ollie’s voice. But he still couldn’t stop looking at Harvey. He started the car, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he just left. He drove the car across the yard, pass the bystanders who watched him in silence. Their eyes met when he drove pass Ashley, and Harvey’s gaze was so cold and empty Ashley’s insides hurt a little.

Ollie continued chiding him, but Ashley barely heard her. His mind was racing, confusion clashing with awe, as he imagined the conversation. Had Etta blamed Jackson for keeping things a secret? Had she been upset? Angry? Why did he even tell her? Ashley had been so sure this thing would be forgotten, just like everything else.

Little by little people continued with their chores. They still glanced at Ashley as they walked by, but some of the tension melted slowly. Ashley glanced at Jackson’s cottage, but the hut seemed quiet. He looked over to the garage, and after a little while, Jackson emerged and moved to the front of the truck parked partly outside. Even from a distance, the dark overalls looked dirty and smudged, and Jackson’s brows were knitted tightly as he leaned under the open hood, seemingly undisturbed by the mellowing havoc still covering the air.

As if sensing Ashley’s gaze, Jackson looked up, and their eyes met for the briefest moment. To Ashley it felt like eternity. He didn’t know what to expect, but the cool indifference aimed at him hurt far more than any words ever had.

Jackson looked at him like he was a stranger, not a single emotion in Jackson's gaze.

Ashley was left watching. When Jackson went back to work, his focus was solely on whatever dilemma he was facing with the vehicle. Two weeks ago he would've smiled, maybe winked or made some stupid face Ashley couldn't have helped but to laugh at. Now he was brushed aside just like that, like he was even less than what he'd been his whole life.

Ollie moved to stand right next to Ashley, and she lowered her voice when she spoke. "Was that why you two broke up?"

Without thinking, Ashley nodded. Then he looked at her sharply, but untypically of her, she didn't smirk in victory. She just nodded solemnly.

"That sucks," she retorted dryly.

Ashley chuckled with an equal amount of amusement. "Yeah, it does."

Ollie sighed and twined her arm with Ashley's. She hugged herself against his side. "I still don't like that you didn't tell me, but I'll forgive you. You're heartbroken and all, so it's not like I can stay mad at you for long."

Ashley meant to say he wasn't heartbroken, but one look at Jackson made him shut up. Why lie?

He wheeled Ollie around and started toward the building. "We need to get to work." His feet took him forward, but his mind told him to turn and run to Jackson. Why? He didn't know. It was unlikely he'd come up with the right words, but somehow this whole thing was even a bigger mess now that Harvey had left. Jackson was alone now. And however much Ashley would've liked to celebrate the fact that now Jackson finally knew what it was like to lose someone close to him, he couldn't even smile at the thought. All he felt was regret and heartache.

"What do *you* think I should do?"

Jackson tilted his head back and looked at the mare happily munching down one of the apples he had brought along. Fay looked back, eyes gleaming, and stole another apple from the pile on the ground next to Jackson.

"You're just interested in the food, aren't you?"

Fay nudged Jackson on the head. Maybe that meant "yes." Who knew.

Jackson's social circles were starting to suffer due to his sudden state of withdrawal. Nana had made it clear she was deeply disappointed in the way Jackson had managed the situation. Her way of punishment was far worse than Jackson would've liked, but it was not his job to argue. His job was to shut up and go with it. Still, having a horse as his confidant was even sadder than he'd thought, especially when she rarely answered any of his questions.

"I'm pathetic, aren't I?"

Fay snickered, which probably meant "yes."

"Your company sucks, you know that?"

The last apple was snatched from the ground, and as the mare realized nothing else was up for grabs, she headed over to where the rest of the herd grazed peacefully.

Some friend she was.

Jackson watched after her, thinking of nothing in particular. Days had passed since Harvey's departure, and it seemed the pack was finally settling again. Soon no one would point out Harvey's absence, but it was unlikely they could ever really forget he had been there. The incident and the turmoil that followed would be a permanent crack in the safety of their homes. Something like this *could* happen, though they'd all thought this was a place of comfort and safety for them all.

Jackson yanked a stack of dried grass from the ground and tore it to bits, his eyes still on the herd now grazing toward the edge of the pasture. There had been no runs since the altercation, and the horses were kept outdoors around the clock. Jackson figured Fay would be taken indoors for the night now that Nana had decided it was time to move on and continue life as usual. Jackson would not take part in the runs; Nana was very persistent about keeping him on a short leash for the time being. He didn't mind, though. He dreaded the moment he would have to lead the pack again, without Harvey by his side. Though he couldn't forgive Harvey for what he'd done, it still felt like someone had cut off Jackson's other arm. It was impossible to grow up with someone and not miss them when they were gone, no matter what happened. Now he felt useless without his friend.

And still, somewhere so deep inside he couldn't even think of the place, he knew his longing wasn't solely aimed at Harvey. It was Ashley he truly missed, the feeling of having that someone. Now that someone felt miles away, though

they crossed paths briefly every now and then. The talk in Ashley's cottage was still fresh in Jackson's mind, disappointment still seeping through the open wound Ashley's words had caused. Maybe it was alpha pride that kept him from reaching out this time. After all, there was a limit to how many beatings he could take. Jackson had remained hopeful right until the moment Ashley had looked him square in the eye and told him it was over. Even knowing that he had lost a friend for good couldn't have dampened his mood when he'd thought he could keep Ashley safe. Only Ashley didn't want that. Ashley wanted nothing from Jackson. Not even that friendship he'd once yearned for.

He passed Harvey's cottage every day, as well as Danny's. The more times he saw the empty porch of his brother's home, the less he liked the idea of the place remaining empty. He'd been fine with it being torn down. If Nana had told him she was just going to leave it like this, Jackson would've protested. It looked completely off with not even a pair of curtains hanging from the windows.

Maybe the place needed someone after all.

Lately, Jackson found himself planning where he could place his couch or which way his bed would fit in the bedroom. Against best intentions, he realized he pictured Ashley's humble belongings in the cottage as well. That was easy. He had two tables, a couch, and a bed. A few drawers. Couple of shelves. Not much more in Ashley's cottage. And even if Jackson knew they would never live side by side like that, he couldn't help the thoughts when they invaded his mind, like sneaky little lies infesting through well-laid plans.

Angrily Jackson chucked the shreds of grass and stood up. He couldn't keep his mind off Ashley, no matter how hard he tried. It was like a haunting nightmare of a fearful stare he'd once met in an old photograph. Only this time spiteful words created the nightmare instead of any stare.

Jackson turned to leave the pasture and was faced with the male himself, Ashley's eyes meeting Jackson's as he stood a few feet from the fence.

"Hi." The greeting sounded bland and pathetic next to the grand speech Ashley had last given, and the way he fidgeted with his hands before finally settling was nothing short of comical. Only Jackson didn't think there was anything funny about this. Nothing funny about getting his heart shredded in pieces all over again.

"Is she behaving?" Ashley asked and nodded toward Fay, who, for once, didn't rush over to Ashley the moment he arrived.

Jackson stepped back, unable to handle the physical closeness, when Ashley climbed over the fence. “She took the food and then bailed on me.” He watched closely as Ashley landed just inside the fence. He moved without trouble, wiping dust from the fence on his jeans while looking over the horses with that dreamy smile of his face. He looked like everything was okay in his world, not even a minor hiccup stirring the peace. Jackson remembered thinking that’s how it should be, that all would be well so long as Ashley was happy. Now Ashley’s happiness hurt Jackson to the core.

“She does that to everyone,” Ashley said, smiling. “At least she didn’t bite your hand off.”

Jackson stared back, unaffected. Little by little Ashley’s smile died, and he fidgeted nervously while inching closer. A few days of rest had done him good, taking away that paleness and the dark circles around his eyes. Jackson wondered if he still looked like he’d spent years indoors without even a glimpse of sunlight. He felt like that, like the world outside was a strange place and he couldn’t fit in no matter how hard he tried. Maybe that was why he sat in the pasture with a horse instead of spending his time with his pack. He’d lost his place with his own people.

“I heard about what happened with Harvey,” Ashley said. “I’m sorry he’s gone. I know Harvey was important to you, and I know losing him is hard for you.”

“I didn’t do it because of you, so don’t apologize.” Maybe there was a bit of an edge to Jackson’s words, but he ignored the pain fleeting through Ashley’s eyes. He didn’t mean to hurt him; it wasn’t his fault Ashley took the words as such.

“I still feel bad, though.” Ashley pushed his hands in his pockets and shrugged uncomfortably. “I didn’t want this either.”

The halfhearted remorse lacing Ashley’s words only fueled the anger Jackson hadn’t even noticed before. Was this Ashley’s way of apologizing? “No? I was sure you’d be happy he’s gone.”

“No. I...” Ashley frowned and wetted his lips, becoming even more nervous. “I never meant for this to be so hard for you.”

“So you thought this could be easy somehow?” Jackson chuckled and shook his head. He walked past Ashley and began climbing over the fence. “You wanted me to choose, so I did. You’re not so stupid you’d think this could’ve ended any other way.”

Ashley watched him speechlessly, and Jackson was happy there was no smart comeback. It was incredibly hard not to plead his case one more time, ask if Ashley could forgive him now. He'd often wondered why Nana never remarried, but she'd always said she'd already found the love of her life, that nothing short of that would do. Maybe this was love, then, this twisting, agonizing hurt in his chest. Jackson hadn't thought it'd be like this, make him sacrifice his pride just to be close to that someone. But even Ashley's quietness couldn't take away the burn from what happened last time.

Ashley opened his mouth to speak, but Jackson shook his head. "I'll be fine," he said, hopeful that those words were true. "Things will smooth over eventually."

He stepped back from the fence, struggling to continue his escape when Ashley followed him to the fence. "About last time..." Ashley began, but Jackson stopped him short.

"I heard you, trust me. Let's just leave it at that, yeah?"

Jackson didn't wait to see if Ashley hoped to continue the talk. He turned and started toward the stable, where he'd hopefully find a remote route back home. His whole body, every bone and tendon, begged him to turn and go back, but his mind held strong.

Just walk away.

So he did.

Chapter Eighteen

Blah. Blah blah blah blah.

Ashley watched Etta speak, her mouth moving under a patient smile as she explained the current situation. Yes, it was time for the pack to be rejoined and for the runs to start off again. Yes, maybe it would be best if the horses were kept indoors for the first couple of nights, just in case the sudden energy caused disturbance.

No, Jackson would not run with them.

Ashley looked at her sharply as her words sank in, but she continued addressing her speech mostly to Ollie, who was lost in conversation and didn't seem to notice how Etta's seemingly innocent comment sneaked right under Ashley's skin. He'd first reacted when Jackson mentioned being secluded for the time being, but Ashley hadn't thought Etta would really go to these extremes.

He held his tongue and waited until the meeting was over. It was understandable Etta was worried, and Ashley appreciated her taking everything into consideration. With Harvey being gone and the males of their pack all searching for their places now, it was impossible to just continue like nothing had happened. They were all now a part of the rotation. Unfortunately that meant they were also getting some helpless, reluctant pack members working at the stable with them.

Ollie looked at him questioningly when she was leaving and Ashley still sat in his chair. "Are you coming?"

"I'll be down in a minute."

Etta sat behind her desk, a little smile playing on her lips as she listened to the brief exchange but didn't interrupt. Only when Ollie left the room and closed the door did Etta lookup.

"Something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Ashley nodded, choosing his words carefully. "I was just wondering how long you plan on keeping Jackson from participating on the runs."

"For as long as I see fit."

Again, Ashley nodded. He had to bite his tongue not to say Etta was being ridiculous. No use in insulting her. But as always, she wasn't fooled by Ashley's pretentious calmness. She leaned back in her chair, light gray eyes firmly on Ashley as she watched him seethe.

"If you have something to say, please go ahead."

"Honestly? I'm trying not to piss you off."

Etta chuckled. "Well, in that case... Speak your mind. I promise there won't be consequences." She prompted her words by gesturing Ashley to speak. It was all the permission he needed at the time.

"Did you really take Jackson off the runs? I saw him the other day and I asked him if the runs were starting soon, and he said he doesn't know. He said he's not allowed to join in. Really? You're keeping him from running with the pack? That's cruel, Etta. You know how much the pack means to him and how much he loves running with the others."

He huffed and sat up a little, tempted to stand up and march over to Etta's desk to shout in her face and make her realize how childish she was acting.

"Is this because of what happened with Harvey? Harvey started it. You should've heard the things he said to Jackson. Jackson was just defending the pack. He was defending what *you* taught him, and now you're punishing him for that? So, what? You expect him to just step back and let someone insult your pack and your family the way Harvey did? You're gonna exclude him from the whole pack the next time something like this happens and Jackson stands up for his pack? You should be happy for what he did, not make it look like he did something wrong. 'Cause he didn't. You're the one who's wrong here, not him."

Shaky and out of breath, Ashley realized he had in fact stood up and was now standing right in front of Etta's desk, his hands clutching the edge as he'd leaned in real close to get his point across.

Etta watched him calmly, then nodded toward the chair. "Why don't you sit back down?"

Ashley peeled his hands off the desk and retreated back into his chair. Feeling strained and exhausted by the obvious distrust of Etta's choices, he was unsure if he'd crossed the line after all.

“First of all,” Etta started and took off her glasses, “I am not punishing Jackson for defending the pack or for defending what I taught him. I’m not punishing him at all.”

“But—”

Etta held up her hand. “It’s my turn to speak, Ashley.” She lowered her hand and folded the glasses on the desk before her. “What happened between Harvey and Jackson in the woods is forgotten. It is what it is, and things like that happen in any pack. I’m just glad no one got seriously injured. As for keeping Jackson off the runs...” Etta shrugged. “It’s a decision I made as the pack leader, and I don’t owe an explanation to you, or to Jackson, or to anyone else in this pack. Your only job is to listen to what I say, act accordingly, and hopefully trust my judgment enough to not question my decisions.”

She breathed deep, held her eyes on the pair of glasses for a few long seconds before she suddenly smiled and looked at Ashley. “Do you realize that this is the first time in nearly two decades that you actually defended my grandson?”

Under her knowing stare, Ashley clammed up. He cleared his throat, feeling uncomfortable as she continued watching him. Etta apparently took it as a sign of agreement.

“If I’d known all it takes is a little bit of rivalry for you to stand up for him, I would’ve planned this scenario years ago.”

Ashley gaped at her. “Please, tell me you’re joking.”

Etta shrugged. “Maybe.” She smiled contently and stood up, then gestured Ashley along when she left her desk. “I think this calls for a cup of tea. Don’t you think so?”

Ashley followed suit, though he didn’t feel like drinking tea. He should’ve been at the stable by now, but it seemed Etta wasn’t done with their conversation. She guided him into the kitchen and motioned for Ashley to take a seat while she started the tea.

“I appreciate your concern, Ashley.” She placed cups and small plates on the table. “It means a lot to me that you’re worried about Jackson.”

“I’m not worried about him. I just don’t want him to get in trouble for something he didn’t really do.”

“Yes, well... Like I said, he’s not being punished.” Etta fetched cookies from the pantry and placed the small, round, hand-painted box on the table next

to the dishes. Then she went back to the kettle she'd placed on the stove, speaking over her shoulder. "But certain actions need to be taken in order for this pack to function properly."

"So by disallowing him to do what he needs to do, you think your pack works better?" Ashley asked. "People don't know what to think. They're used to seeing him every night and having him lead the runs."

"And what do you think they would think of a male they're used to seeing lead the runs with confidence and certainty, who's now lost and confused?"

Ashley blinked, thrown off. He watched Etta pour the tea, place the kettle on the table between their cups and plates, and take a seat opposite of him. "I don't understand."

"If Fay died, or if for some reason we'd have to sell her, would you rush to work each morning?" she asked.

"No," Ashley said without hesitation.

"No, you would not. And we would understand that." She added a little bit of sugar in her tea, then a bit of milk. "Harvey was always going to be second in command. It was never said out loud, but it was obvious by the way he and Jackson interacted and shared things. Now that confidant is gone. They were friends for twenty-seven years. You can't help but to bond with a person in twenty-seven years. The last thing I want to do is throw Jackson out there for everybody to watch and evaluate when something so crucial is taken away."

She sipped her tea, then grimaced and added a bit more sugar before she continued. "Everybody understands a male mourning over the loss of a close friend. But if Jackson continued as usual and made bad choices out in the woods and someone got hurt, do you think this pack would be as understanding?" She cocked her brow when Ashley frowned. "It isn't a punishment, Ashley. I'm just giving him and the pack some time to adjust."

She pushed the jar of sugar in Ashley's direction. "You should drink your tea before it gets cold."

His eyes never leaving Etta's, Ashley pulled the jar closer and added a few teaspoons of sugar. Nonchalantly he said, "I thought you said you don't owe me an explanation," before stirring his tea.

Etta made a face. "I'm not explaining myself to you, Ashley. I'm only trying to make you understand how this place works."

“I know how things work. I just don’t want to see him hurting.” He tasted his tea, and it tasted tolerable. Tea was never his first choice, but it seemed it was impossible to get a decent cup of coffee with Etta.

Etta held quiet for a moment, then tapped the side of her cup while watching Ashley. “You do realize it’s not only Harvey he’s missing?” she asked. “And I doubt Harvey’s the one he misses the most.”

When Ashley didn’t comment, she sipped her tea and continued with expertise. “It would be a lot easier for him to sort things out if he didn’t have to do it alone...” She had the nerve to raise her brows and grin. Ashley found it highly inappropriate.

“It’s easier said than done.”

“Things worth having are rarely easy to achieve. But if you want it bad enough, you should be willing to make some effort for it.”

She nodded knowingly and finished her cup. Ashley stared at her, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Love, Ashley. Isn’t that what you’re talking about?”

“No. I’m...” He shook his head. “No one said anything about... that.” It was a bad word. Love. Sneaky and lethal, like poison. But it had a nice ring to it when he wasn’t alone, in the middle of the night when all he had to do was turn and arms would wind around him in a second. Now those arms were gone, and the pride of kicking Jackson down for the first time in his life had washed off days ago.

Ashley tasted his tea once more, then pushed the cup away. He stared at the barely touched liquid, not sure what to say to Etta, who just sat there, waiting.

“I think I fucked up,” he finally admitted with a sigh.

“Language, Ashley.”

“Sorry. But I... messed up, and I don’t think he’s the kind of person who’ll forgive just like that.”

“I’m sure you two will find a way to work things out.”

“No, Etta. I really screwed things up.” Ashley leaned closer. “The things that I said to him... You know, if he said stuff like that to me, I would never forgive him.”

Etta chuckled dismissively. “Of course you would. And he will too. But he’s not going to if you two continue avoiding each other.”

Ashley shook his head in defeat. “I’m not avoiding him. He just doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“And you’re going to let something like that stop you?” Etta shook her head and poured herself another cup. “You disappoint me, Ashley. I never took you for a quitter.”

“I’m not a quitter.”

“That’s not what I heard. Thinking of leaving and not telling me about it... Shame on you,” she chided him gently.

Ashley groaned. “He told you about that, huh?”

“Of course he did. I bet he’s hoping I’ll talk you out of it. Which I will not, mind you.” She watched him through narrowed lids, looking thoughtful. “I wonder if I was as silly when I was your age.” She laughed and shook her head. “Oh, to be young again.”

The way she looked now, smiling with a distant stare in her eyes, made her look half her age. Ashley had seen old pictures of her, and something from that younger Etta peeked through the painting age had left on her face.

“Do you ever miss him?”

Etta looked at him, brows raised. “Who?”

“Stanley?”

“Oh, every day. But it’s different now than it was when he passed away.” Etta looked down at her hands, probably eyeing the ring she still carried on her finger as a sign of the love she’d shared with her late husband. “Back then I was sure I couldn’t go on, that I couldn’t carry on with the life we built together.”

She had a sneaky grin on her face when she looked up at Ashley. “There was a time when I thought about leaving, too. I figured why stay when no one wanted me to? After all, I was nothing but the widowed wife of the former alpha. Many people insisted I remarry, that a lone female could never lead a happy, healthy pack. But you know what?” She waved her finger at Ashley like she was lecturing a child. “When I met my Stanley, I was nothing but a low-ranking female in my pack, not something anyone thought an alpha would ever

choose. But he chose me regardless, not for my status or the legacy I would carry along, but for what I could give him. Yes, of course there were people who protested, said it was uncalled for and shameful, but he didn't care. So why should I?"

She looked at Ashley like she actually expected him to answer, and Ashley shrugged awkwardly. "You didn't?"

"Absolutely not. I built this place, right alongside with Stanley. I made this place his home, not the males who said I was a no-good leader. If he trusted me to enough to choose me, who was I to question his decision? So I stayed. I lost many, but I gained a lot more." She grabbed her cup again and emptied it with one quick sip. "I know not everybody agrees with my leadership, but I chose my path, and I'm sticking with it. I could demand Jackson to choose a mate from a neighboring pack somewhere, have children, build and grow this pack. That would be the proper way in some people's eyes. But if I did that, I would be like all those people who said I'm not fit to lead a pack. I would be just like Harvey. But because I'm the shrew who refused to obey when males older than me told me to step down, I'll let my grandson be with the one he chooses. Assuming that male forgets all about those silly thoughts about leaving..."

She smiled meaningfully and reached her hand over the table, taking hold of Ashley's. "Stanley taught me never to be ashamed of where I come from. If it's the only lesson I pass on to my family, then I'm happy. And if you want to leave, you can leave. But don't leave because you feel this is not the place for you, because this is. This *is* your home, and you were born to be a part of my family."

She patted his hand and leaned back. "It would be nice if fate handed us our perfect mate, the one we're made for, but that's not how it goes. There are no perfect spouses, no soulmates just waiting to be found. Sometimes the one you love is the one your wolf can't stand, and then sometimes you get lucky and you find someone who completes you, both human and wolf. Either way, love is still something you have to *do* every day, even if you sometimes think you no longer feel it. It doesn't come easy, and it's even harder to hold on to, but if it's that easy to walk away from, it wasn't worth having in the first place."

Ashley thought he'd get a simple cup of tea. Instead Ashley was lucky enough to sit through Etta's lecture on something much more meaningful than petty argument over her decision. But Ashley heard her, loud and clear, and he understood every word.

He nodded and stared down at his hands. Leaving was the furthest from his mind now, especially when he saw Jackson detach himself from the pack. Jackson spent far too much time on his own these days, and though Ashley knew how good privacy could be, even he had felt lonely sometimes. He couldn't even imagine how hard it really was on Jackson.

"You'll just have to make him listen to you. Believe me, he will if he has no other choice," Etta finally said.

It was scary how conniving she could look if she really wanted to. Ashley had no doubts she'd plot the whole thing with him if he asked her to, but for now he hoped to find a way to get to Jackson without Etta's assistance.

"It wasn't that bad, was it?"

Ollie practically draped herself over Jackson's shoulders, a wide smile on her face as she watched the polished stable. At least *she* said it was polished. It still looked ragged to Jackson.

"I bet everybody's going to be lining up to give us a hand now that you've been working here."

Jackson kept his mouth shut. He doubted anyone was any more eager to give a hand now than they were before, but Ollie's enthusiasm was such a change to the low spirits hanging above their pack, that Jackson had no interest in dampening her mood.

She stepped back with a sigh, then waved him off while grabbing a bridle from the wall. "You should go. I'm just going to get Fay, and then we're all set."

Jackson glanced over to the yard. People were already gathering by the woods, waiting for the evening run. Now that Nana was leading, they were less frantic and much mellower. She didn't even call it running; she called it bonding time. In her case that was probably true. For Jackson it had always been a way to show the grounds and see how the pack worked together. Maybe her motives were different.

Turning back to Ollie, Jackson stayed by the doors with no attempt to flee the scene. "I can get Fay if you want to join them."

She glanced outside, making a face of disinterest. "No... I had a talk with Etta, and I said I'd stay back for a few days. I promised Ashley I'd take the

reins now that he's..." She fell silent, frowning uncomfortably. She cleared her throat and turned away, speaking over her shoulder, "You know... leaving."

It shouldn't have been a surprise, but Jackson couldn't help the bang of pain in his chest.

"So he's leaving after all?" he asked nonchalantly and shrugged when Ollie glanced at him. "It's been a while since he brought it up, so I thought he just threw it out there on a whim."

Ollie frowned confusedly before she spoke warily, "Ashley would never say something like that unless he meant it." With little more assertiveness, she went on. "You should know that."

She looked displeased as she walked past Jackson and headed down the road toward the meadow, where the horses had snuggled together under the shelter. Light rain still moistened the air, but it was nothing but a drizzle compared to the downpour they'd had earlier. Jackson had looked out to the pasture and asked Ollie if they should take the horses out of the rain. She'd laughed and asked him if he thought the horses seemed to be in a hurry to get indoors. They hadn't. They'd looked pretty content, regardless of the fat drops beating the ground.

Jackson followed Ollie down the road and quickly caught up with her. "So he's leaving you in charge once he's gone?"

"Me and Shawn both. But because of the rotation, Shawn's been busy with other stuff, so I guess it'll be me, mainly." Ollie reached the fence and smacked her lips loudly, calling for Fay. The mare glanced over, her tail swishing from side to side, before she turned away.

"She doesn't look like she's ready to come inside," Jackson said.

Ollie walked along the fence, watching the herd as she headed for the gate. "She's picky. If Ashley was here, she'd come running."

"Or maybe she just doesn't want to come inside." Jackson smiled reassuringly when Ollie glanced at him sharply. "Come on... Have you guys ever even tried to let her stay outside?"

Ollie stalled by the gate, looking thoughtful. "She freaked out pretty badly once..."

"And that was how many years ago?"

Jackson glanced over to the yard, which was now empty. “The pack’s already out there, and she still looks pretty calm to me.”

Ollie looked over to the yard, then back at the horses still snuggled up close under the shelter. She chewed her lip nervously. “Ashley always says she should be taken indoors.”

“Ashley’s not here, now is he?”

With a deep frown, she said, “You’re just trying to get me in trouble.”

“Look... He left you in charge, right? Whatever decisions you make, he can’t argue with.” Jackson walked up to Ollie. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as he steered her focus back on the herd. “Now look at them and tell me they don’t look happy.”

Ollie looked, and though there was no way she could mistake that calmness enveloping the herd for anything other than what it was, she still hesitated.

“Ashley always—”

“Not here, remember?” Jackson gave her a firm look, then stepped away. “Seriously... You people should have some faith for once. One night outside isn’t going to kill her, even if it turns out she’s not a fan of night air. You might as well lock her up for good if you’re never going to give her a chance.”

It was Ollie’s turn to stare at him. “Since when did you become an advocate for animal rights?”

“Since I realized some people are really stuck in their ways.” He yielded a little when Ollie raised a brow. “Me included.” He stepped back, gesturing at the pasture. “You do what you do... I was just giving you some friendly advice.”

“You’re getting me in trouble, that’s what you’re doing.” Ollie waved him off. “Go. I’ll stay here for a little while.” She glanced at him quickly, then leaned on the fence. Jackson heard her mutter, “Just in case,” but her words were clearly not meant for him.

Jackson returned to the stable and got his sweatshirt. He picked up his phone from where he’d left it a couple of hours earlier when he and Ollie started clearing the space of stuff she said wasn’t needed at the moment.

Jackson was instantly alarmed when he noticed there were five missed calls. Then his concern turned into annoyance when he realized each call was from Ashley.

Either Ashley really didn't get a hint, or he was just very persistent.

Jackson was tempted to just ignore him. Maybe shut down the whole device and pretend no one had tried to reach him. But when he started toward his cottage, the place now filled with packed boxes and bags filled with papers and other litter he was planning to get rid of the next day, his phone burned in the bottom of his pocket.

Jackson dialed, an ember of a headache resonating in his left temple from just the possibility of another argument.

Ashley answered almost immediately, but instead of the argumental banter Jackson was prepared for, he heard hesitance and worry. "Where are you?" Ashley asked, sounding rushed.

Jackson slowed his pace, looking around confusedly. "Um... going home." He glanced over to Ashley's cottage and found the hut dark. "Where are *you*?"

"By the river. Waiting for you."

Now Jackson stilled completely. "Did we have a date I didn't know about?"

"You've been here every night, so I thought I'd find you here, but obviously you never showed up!" There was that annoyance Jackson had been waiting for.

"I was working," he said defensively, for no reason whatsoever. "Doing your job, by the way. Nice of you to not show up."

"It's my day off. And I thought Ollie was supposed to take care of things tonight. Oh, and I'm stuck out here."

"Stuck as in *stuck*, or just unable to find your way back, 'cause that's pretty normal for you." Even though it was a bit of a low blow, Jackson still complimented himself on finding something witty to say. At least *he* thought it was witty. He only regretted his words when Ashley spoke tensely.

"I'm so glad you find this funny." He sighed, now sounding more distressed than pissed off.

Jackson glanced over to Ashley's cottage again, maybe hoping to find him sitting on the porch after all, like he so often did when the pack went out on a run.

"You can't find your way back?"

"I *could*. It's just..."

Waiting for Ashley to go on, Jackson continued his walk. He took one of the trails instead of the shortcut he used to get to his cottage. “What?”

“I lost track of time and then when I realized how late it was, it was already getting dark. So I came back here.”

“And you’ve been sitting there for how long? You didn’t think to call anyone?”

“I called *you*, didn’t I?”

It was crazy how easily Ashley could pass blame. Or maybe he didn’t try to do it. Whatever his intentions, all it took for Jackson to reach an ailing level of remorse was to hear Ashley’s words. As if it were *Jackson’s* job to make sure Ashley was okay.

You want it to be your job.

Now it was Jackson’s turn to get annoyed, but he tried not to let it ring in his voice as he spoke. “Like I said, I was working.”

“I heard you.” Ashley held quiet for a little while, not even his breaths loud enough to carry through the line. When he finally spoke again, he did it with uncertainty. “Can you come and get me?”

Jackson cursed silently, wondering how he was sucked back in so easily when he’d thought he’d escaped the drama once and for all.

“I’m already heading over there.”

Ashley breathed deep, a bit more relaxed now. “Thank you.”

After following the trail for a little while, Jackson crossed over the neatly kept path. “You know...” He dodged a willow shrub narrowly before he was swallowed by the moist, earthy scent of the wild forest. “Only you can get lost here. It’s practically impossible to *not* find a way out of these woods. All you have to do is walk directly and you’ll find the edge of the woods.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

“No, no. I’m not rubbing it in. I’m just trying to understand how the hell it’s possible for you get lost here *twice*, when no one else has ever managed to do it even once.”

“You know what? I changed my mind. Just leave me here.”

Jackson snorted. “And have Nana stare me down with her evil eye again? Yeah, I bet you’d love that.”

Ashley snickered quietly. “You deserved it.”

“I didn’t leave you there *on purpose*.”

“Well, I didn’t know that back then, now did I? And what are you whining about? You didn’t even get grounded. I got a cast on my arm for a month and a half, not to mention lifelong traumas.”

“No, but I got to carry your shit around for six weeks. That’s always fun.”

“Poor Jackson... Must be hard to get called out for your wrongdoings.”

Jackson came to a halt, staring ahead blindly as he muttered sourly. “Maybe I should just leave you there.”

The line remained eerily quiet, and Jackson wasn’t sure whether it was because Ashley was making obnoxious faces at his phone or because he thought Jackson was turning back right this second. Either way, Jackson was back on the move within the next second, already hating himself for sinking this low.

He added quietly, “I’m not going to,” and picked the quickest route to the river.

Ashley remained quiet for a moment before his voice echoed through the line. “I know.”

The next few moments were spent in silence. They might as well have ended the call, but neither showed any signs of wanting to cut the other from the line. Jackson hadn’t even realized he was worried, until he understood that having Ashley on the phone—talking or not—made him feel a little bit better.

“How’d you know I’d been at the river lately?” Jackson asked when the quietness had stretched so far even he couldn’t handle it.

“I’ve followed you.”

With a dismissive snort, Jackson rolled his eyes. “You have not.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Jackson’s wolf didn’t take kindly to being told something had passed under its radar, but what reason did Ashley have to lie?

“Did you shift?”

“Every night.” Ashley chuckled dryly. “If I hadn’t, I’d probably be home by now. I tried shifting when I realized I wouldn’t make it home before dark. I think I’ve stressed my system too much this week.”

The idea of Ashley following him in the woods, Ashley's silvery coat blending badly with the dark green and brown of the forest and still remaining unseen, made Jackson cringe. "I can't believe I didn't notice you."

"You've been distracted. That's understandable."

"You stalked me in this forest and I didn't sense you? That's *not* understandable. That's pathetic."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Jackson," Ashley said softly. "You had other things on your mind. No one can blame you for that."

I had you on my mind.

Nearly speeding up a small cliff, Jackson brushed the thought aside. He'd done everything in his power to stay away from Ashley. He'd stayed away from the stable, from Nana when he thought Ashley might be there. He'd made it his business to lock himself in his cottage and stay out of Ashley's way, but regardless of his efforts of avoidance, he couldn't keep him out of his thoughts.

In all honesty, he feared the day Ashley walked away. It seemed that day was coming fast. Now Jackson tried convincing himself this one final confrontation was for the best. He'd get to see Ashley and prove to himself that he, too, could walk away.

Pretending everything was okay was the easiest thing in the world when you didn't have to face whatever you were missing.

Still, one single breath shuddering through the line dashed Jackson's thoughts into chaos.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah... I'm cold, that's all."

Looking up, Jackson could barely see the darkening sky through the thick ceiling of branches spreading above him. Under the trees, he could no longer feel the rain, but he smelled it in the air as he made his way toward the riverside.

Ashley was probably soaked. Soaked and freezing and lost. And scared, though Ashley would never admit he was afraid. But if he wasn't, he wouldn't have called Jackson. He would've waited until Nana answered her phone and asked her to come get him. No one would ever know, and Nana would never mention it to a soul.

“I’ll get you home this time,” Jackson promised, quickening his steps just a little.

Ashley hummed quietly, then spoke with certainty. “I know you will.”

It felt like absolution, like Jackson was actually forgiven for what happened years ago. He’d apologized and the past was over and dealt with, but now he actually felt like he no longer had to carry that burden. That guilt. He’d been a stupid kid that day, but he’d been wise enough to understand the reality of the situation. That acid taste of horror still flooded his mind when he remembered the moment he’d realized Ashley really wasn’t coming back. He could taste it in his mouth now, thinking of Ashley sitting in the sand, maybe under a birch tree, knees hugged to his chest while he tried to stay out of the rain.

“Last time was different,” Jackson said absently. “You went into hiding, and we had no idea where to look for you.”

“It’s fine, Jackson. Old news.”

“Yeah.” Yeah. No point thinking about it. Only Jackson couldn’t stop now. “Were you serious about the traumas?”

“Well... I still hate the dark, so... You do the math.”

“You’ve been out there in the dark before,” Jackson said, thinking of the last time they’d left Ashley’s cottage well before dawn, just to get to the riverside before the sun came up. Jackson had thought it was romantic, and only when they’d sat on the sand side by side and watched the lightening sky color the water dark orange and light pink, had he realized Ashley probably didn’t give a crap about romance.

“That’s different,” Ashley mumbled. “I was with you.” He cleared the needy ring from his voice before speaking. “A lot of things were different then.”

Tell me about it.

Jackson didn’t respond. He crossed over another hill, on guard in case he ran into the pack. Knowing Nana, she probably kept the pack near the houses, but she went crazy sometimes and ran like mad in a spree of forgotten youth. Even Jackson had a hard time keeping up with her then.

Now, though, there were no signs of the pack. The rain was picking up again, and Jackson could hear the melodic sound of raindrops tapping against the leafy grove. Without giving it another thought, he decided he’d make sure Ashley got warm and dry before they’d go their separate ways that night.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah?”

The line sizzled with silence for seconds on end before Ashley finally went on. “I’m sorry for what I said.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not. It’s bad enough I said it to hurt you, but it wasn’t even true. And I get that you’re mad at me—I’d be too if I were you—but all I really wanted was for us to talk. Or even if you don’t want to talk to me, just hear me out.”

Jackson had crossed well over half of the journey. The darkness had fallen over the bright of the day, and standing in the darkened forest, it was easy to understand how someone might get lost here. Or feel afraid. Just a little while longer, and Jackson would reach Ashley. Only now his steps slowed, until he barely moved.

“I’m listening.”

After a moment of silence, Ashley blurted, “Now?”

“Yeah, now.” Jackson stilled completely, not sure why he had to stay frozen while listening to what Ashley had to say. Maybe he still hoped it would make a difference, that a few simple words could wipe away that terrible feeling of being crushed in the hands of someone he’d learned to trust and know unlike anyone ever before.

“I...” Ashley breathed, then chuckled. “I can’t come up with anything.”

With a shake of his head, Jackson stated, “Oh well, you had your chance...”

“No! No, just wait...” Ashley scoffed. “You think I had a speech laid out or something?”

“It’s the least you could’ve done...”

Ashley’s muffled curse brought a smile to Jackson’s lips. Banter was something they’d always been good at. Only recently had he realized there were other things they could complete with such efficiency, but so far this aspect of their relationship was the only one they both seemed willing to revive.

“You know... I always hated that about you,” Ashley said. “One word and you get me so riled up I wanna break something. No one else does that.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Yeah... maybe.”

Jackson stood under a pine tree, bare apart from the very top, where long branches spread with sparse twigs of needles. The forest wasn't a large one, but the very core was like a world of its own. Trees gave way to a mat of burgeoning and budding shrubs, and the world on the outside couldn't be heard from here even on a clear day. Now Jackson thanked whatever powers had lead him here; if he had to have a talk with Ashley, he was glad he could do it in a place where no one would come after him and witness his possible downfall.

“I never meant to fall in love with you.” Ashley's words were so unexpected Jackson still hadn't quite grasped them before Ashley went on. “And I don't think I ever realized that I had. Not even when we came here for the first time... Because everything Harvey said that day, was real for me. 'Cause that's how it's always been. I'm like second best for whoever doesn't get what they really want. And that's fine... I don't expect anything more. But with you...”

Jackson held his breath, afraid to make a sound. Tainted air burned in his lungs when he waited for Ashley to go on. Ashley seemed to think hard on something, not even the smallest sound piercing through the line, until he let out a flood.

“You made me feel like I was your first choice. I've never felt that way before. And it was so hard for me to trust you, and when that didn't work out, I just wanted you to hurt as much as I was hurting. That's really petty, I know, and the worst thing is that you never meant to hurt me. You just didn't want to lose a friend. If anyone should understand what that's like, it's me, and I'm sorry I didn't get it. I'm sorry you lost a friend, and I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I know it's no excuse, but I don't take disappointments well. When you told me to look the other way that day, I felt like you were willing to sacrifice me just to keep someone like him safe.” Even through the phone line, Jackson could hear the repressed sadness in Ashley's voice. “It made me feel like I was your second choice. I didn't think I'd ever feel that way with you.”

Jackson breathed deep, his head dizzy as he got back on the move. “Is that why you're leaving?” he asked, a hint of anger in his words. “Ollie said you're leaving now.”

Ashley cleared his throat. “Tomorrow.”

“So... What's this, then? One last chance to make things right?”

“Something like that,” Ashley spoke boldly. “I tried talking to you before, but you walked away.”

“Yeah, well, I still wasn’t sure whether you were just really stupid, or if you actually wanted to carve my heart out to believe you already tore it to pieces.”

Jackson’s feet took him over rocks and small streams with ease. Now he hurried. The rain was getting harder, and the closer to the river he got, the sparser the woods. Fat drops landed on his face every time he glanced up, and he wouldn’t slow his pace until he could see the clearing peek through the thicket waiting ahead.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Ashley said miserably. “I’m... sorry. That sounds so lame I don’t even want to say it anymore. But I am. Sorry, I mean.”

Jackson nodded, but said nothing. He rushed the last of the way as quietly as possible, and finally he weaved his way past the last of the trees before he reached the sandy riverbank.

Ashley sat under a tree, exactly how Jackson had imagined him. He was trying to shield himself from the rain, but water had soaked him from head to toe. Blond hair had dried a bit, strands now falling in a damp mop around Ashley’s face. He still held the phone to his ear, now frowning. “Jackson?”

Moving from the shelter of the forest to the wet sand, Jackson ended the call. “Yeah?”

Ashley looked up, the phone still clutched in his hand. Slowly he lowered the device and stood up just as slowly. “Hey.”

His pale blue shirt was glued to his skin, jeans dark with water. He sniffed a little, then took a step closer. Looking at him standing there, soaked from head to toes, brought conflicting thoughts to Jackson’s mind. Ashley sprawled across the bed with a content smile on his face. Ashley laughing over frozen pizza at three in the morning. Ashley dozing on the couch in the middle of the night after watching reruns for hours.

Ashley speaking coldly over three feet of distance, saying he didn’t care.

But when he took another step, breathing shakily while he looked at Jackson with pain-ridden eyes, it was almost impossible to hold on to that anger.

“I’m...” Ashley began, but shook his head. “You know.”

Jackson nodded. “Yeah, I know.” He reached Ashley with a few long strides, not sure why he needed to be so close or what he’d do once he got there. One miserable look later, Ashley was tucked tightly between Jackson’s arms, moisture from his clothes attacking Jackson’s semidry ones. Neither of them cared.

Ashley clung to Jackson as if he were afraid he’d be shoved away. He hid his face in the crook of Jackson’s neck, skin moist and cold against Jackson’s. He murmured another apology, his voice laced with so much regret it hurt Jackson’s heart. Still, to have him this near after keeping him at an arm’s length for so long, felt better than Jackson would’ve dreamt. It was then that Jackson realized there was no way he’d let Ashley leave. Not for a week, or even for a day. Hell... Not sleeping next to him tonight would be a real task.

Jackson felt the shudders, and he feared they were tears, but he soon realized Ashley was cold to the point of shaking. Holding on a little tighter for a few more seconds, Jackson spoke gravelly. “You need to get dried up.”

“I’m fine,” Ashley said between shaky lips as he pulled back. “Really.”

He brushed the hair from his face, breathing slowly as he seemed to gather himself once more.

Jackson grabbed the hem of his sweatshirt. “Here.” He pulled the thing off. “Put this on.” The air felt cold on his bare arms, but at least the sleeveless shirt he still had on was dry. Ashley fought to get out of his wet shirt, and his skin was red in places when he finally managed to get out of the soaked fabric.

Jackson watched him change—telling himself he didn’t care for the amount of naked skin displayed for his eyes only—and felt a little better when Ashley had the sweatshirt on.

“Better?” he asked, smiling in reassurance when Ashley nodded. He wrapped the end of one sleeve around his palm, where he still held on to his phone. Jackson took the wet shirt from Ashley, then took his hand and started steering them back into the woods.

“Let’s go home.”

Ashley followed a step behind, squeezing Jackson’s hand tightly. “Sounds good.”

Chapter Nineteen

The bathrobe smelled a little earthy and lemony, too weird to be owned by Jackson, but Ashley was happy he had something to sink himself into after the shower. Hot water, fluffy terry cloth and warm air surrounding him were quickly making him sleepy, but with everything else happening, there was no fear of falling asleep.

He stirred the liquid in the small kettle, trying not to burn it. Next to him Jackson was stirring sugar into his tea. Strawberry. The smell alone made Ashley cringe.

“Can you give me that?” he asked and gestured at the box of cocoa. Jackson complied and then went back to his steaming cup.

There was a time when they could’ve sat in silence for hours, and it still felt okay. This was not one of those times. Ashley wasn’t even sure why he was here; Jackson had barely said two words since they walked in the door. Other than being guided to the shower and told to put on the robe once he was done, Ashley had heard nothing else from him.

Time and time again Ashley’s eyes went to the boxes lining the walls in the living room. All the shelves and tabletops were empty, and he had a feeling a drawer was missing. He didn’t dare ask. Was it even his business anymore?

He fixed himself a big mug of hot chocolate, then washed the kettle by hand as he waited for the drink to cool off a bit. Jackson had moved to the end of the countertop, where he stood and watched as Ashley moved around the kitchen. It wasn’t a friendly look either. Not one of those patient, dreamy gazes Ashley had sometimes seen when Jackson was lost in his thoughts. Nope... This one was sharp and observant, Jackson’s eyes following even the smallest motion Ashley made.

Ashley placed the kettle on the drainboard and turned to look at Jackson. “Am I doing something wrong?”

Jackson raised a brow and sipped his tea. “Why?”

“You’re staring at me.”

Jackson’s lips curled into a tiny smile. “Watching. There’s a difference,” he said over the brim of his mug.

Ashley rolled his eyes and took his mug. “If you say so.”

The bathrobe soon lost its perks when Ashley became more and more aware of being naked under the thing. Jackson had showered too, but he was dressed in a pair of pants and a shirt that had seen better days, but it was still a shirt. Ashley’s skin was becoming sensitized with no provocation whatsoever. A layer of proper clothing would’ve probably helped that.

“Are you feeling better?” Jackson asked.

Ashley nodded. “Yeah... I’m warming up.”

Another one of those grins, and Ashley had to look away. He fiddled with the front of the robe, searching for words. “This looks new.”

What the hell are you babbling about?

Almost too embarrassed to speak, Ashley clamped his mouth shut and breathed in relief when Jackson shook his head. “No, I got it for Christmas. Three years ago, I think.”

“Oh.” Ashley glanced at the white fabric. “It looks like it hasn’t been used.”

Seriously? Could you be any more pathetic?

“I stashed it in the closet... Robes aren’t really my thing.”

“Doesn’t smell like it’s been in a closet for three years.”

Please, just stop talking...

Ashley was ready to stuff the whole mug of hot chocolate into his mouth, but Jackson suddenly came closer. He was so close Ashley could see every lash framing Jackson’s eyes as he leaned his head down and smelled the collar of the robe.

He leaned back, smiling thoughtfully. “That’s lemongrass.”

Ashley blinked. “What?”

“It’s one of the satchels Nana got me.” Jackson returned to his tea, while Ashley stared at him like he’d gone nuts.

“You do not have a satchel in your closet.”

“Sure I do. It gives a nice odor to fabrics.” Jackson continued downing his tea, looking at Ashley with a seriousness that couldn’t be faked. When Ashley couldn’t speak—he’d known Jackson was domesticated, but he hadn’t thought of *this*—Jackson asked, “Don’t you have one?”

“A satchel? No, I don’t.”

“You should get one.” Jackson emptied his mug and went to pour himself another one.

Now mildly offended, Ashley asked, “Are you saying I smell bad?”

Jackson laughed. “No. I’m saying your work clothes always smell a little dank, even after you’ve washed them.” With a new batch of tea steeping in his mug, he turned to Ashley. “I like your scent. Except when you’re scared. I don’t like that smell. But other than that, you smell pretty nice. Good, actually.”

Feeling like he’d just skipped at least twenty minutes of conversation, Ashley frowned. “What is this?”

“What?”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Would you like it if I were?”

Confused, Ashley sought his mug from the counter and found the liquid cooled enough for his fingers to remain safe as he wrapped his hand around the dish. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

Jackson shrugged and stirred the tea leaves in his mug. “What do you think I’m doing?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re trying to seduce me.”

With a throaty chuckle, Jackson nodded. “That’s one way of putting it.” He added sugar to his tea, watching as his hands moved. “Is it working?”

Ashley was dangling somewhere between infatuation and irritation, not sure if he was being made fun of or if this was Jackson’s way of telling him... what? That things were cool?

“Really, Jackson... What is this?” he asked. “One last hookup before I leave? I can’t do that.”

The grin faded from Jackson’s face, and he looked at Ashley solemnly. “So you’re still leaving?”

“No one told me not to.” Ashley had bared himself, and Jackson hadn’t said a word about it. Now Jackson looked like he was thinking intently about something, brows knitted as he picked up his mug and sipped the tea.

He left the countertop without addressing Ashley's earlier confession. He went to the boxes, glancing at Ashley. "Did Nana tell you I was moving?"

The sudden change of topic left Ashley dumbfounded, and he shook his head. "No. She didn't say anything about that."

Jackson nodded and picked something from the topmost box. "To Danny's old place." He glanced at Ashley as if to see what he'd think about that. "Nana never had any intentions of having the place torn down. It was all just a plot to make me change my mind."

"Well, it worked."

"Yeah, it did."

It was a framed picture that Jackson now held, the people in the picture remaining a mystery to Ashley until Jackson tilted the picture and showed it to him. "Our parents. I tried giving these photos to Nana, but she wouldn't take them."

Ashley remained quiet. He drank his hot chocolate, watching over the brim of his mug, as Jackson went from one box to the next.

"Do you have any pictures of your parents?" Jackson asked. It was such an innocent question. Only Ashley knew it was anything but.

"No, I don't," he said. "All I've got is that box of pictures you gave me."

Jackson nodded and left the frame on the coffee table before he turned to Ashley. "Do you remember what they look like?"

Now Ashley really wanted some clothes on. Preferably his own, so that he could walk out.

With a sigh, he placed his mug on the counter. "No, I don't." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the counter as he looked at Jackson. "That's why I don't talk about them. I don't remember them, so there's not much to talk about."

"That's kinda sad, don't you think?" Jackson spoke nonchalantly.

Ashley balled his fists, trying to tame his temper, but he couldn't keep the edge off his voice. "Actually, I don't. They conceived me. That doesn't make them my family. It's hard to miss something you never had."

"Do you think they left you because of the scars?"

Taken aback, Ashley chuckled. He needed a breath or two before he managed to speak properly. “Thanks for the discretion.” He shook his head confusedly. “I... don’t know. One doctor said I was really little when I got the scars. He said it was probably just a nibble. But they always knew I wouldn’t manage my first shift until I was in my late teens, and that I’d probably fail—which I did. So... yeah. Maybe? I haven’t thought much about it. Makes no difference to me.”

For what felt like forever, Jackson just looked at him. Ashley could feel the stare on him even across the distance. He’d lost all desire of sipping his hot drink; this conversation was getting so uncomfortable all he wanted now was to get out.

“Is that why you’re leaving?” With the tea barely touched, Jackson returned to the kitchen and left the mug next to Ashley’s. “Because you think we’d drop you just because someone else did?”

“I’m leaving because you don’t want me.”

“Is that what I said?”

It was starting to feel more and more like a game, one Ashley didn’t know how to play. Jackson stood right in front of him, cornering him against the counter without a single touch.

“The last thing you said to me on the phone was something about tearing your heart to shreds.” Ashley cocked his chin up a bit, mostly just to boost his own confidence. “I don’t really know how to make up for that.”

Jackson’s breath smelled sweet and sugary, and Ashley couldn’t take his eyes off him. Jackson brought his hand up and wiped a few tangled strands of hair from Ashley’s face. “Don’t broken hearts heal with time?” he asked.

Ashley shook his head faintly. “I don’t know... Do they?”

Jackson shrugged, focusing his eyes on Ashley. “I’m willing to find out.”

There were so many details missing from this convo, Ashley didn’t know which way to turn. He swallowed nervously, afraid he was misunderstanding at least half of what Jackson was saying.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked. He was ready to admit he was scared. Scared didn’t even cover it. There was fear, and then there was *fear*. The latter was what now grew and grew, taking over Ashley’s heart and lungs and stomach, until his body was nothing but a pulsating mess, waiting for some sort of clarity.

Jackson made a bored face, but his eyes were smiling. “I sure as hell wouldn’t like it if you weren’t here in the morning when I wake up.” Little by little the smile reached down toward his lips. “Or the morning after that. Or the morning after that... You get the drill.”

Ashley nodded, confused and thrilled. And a little bit pissed off too.

“I suppose you couldn’t just tell me you’re willing to give it another try?”

“I think it was more fun this way.” Jackson had the balls to smile—an actual wide, toothy, self-sufficient grin Ashley had kinda missed—and he leaned closer, so close Ashley felt lips move against his when Jackson spoke. “You’ll stay, then?”

Ashley pulled back, slowly lowering his hands while he searched through Jackson’s face. “Only if you want me the way I want you,” he pressed. “Only if you love me back.”

Jackson watched him through narrowed lids, seemingly thoughtful. Eventually Jackson sighed, nodding once, but never saying a word.

He stepped back, leaving Ashley gasping for air. He watched as Jackson went into the living room and turned on the lights. “You should probably start packing too. I was thinking about moving next weekend.”

“Jackson.”

Jackson went on like he hadn’t even heard Ashley, checking each box before he started closing them with packing tape he picked up from the empty shelf. “You don’t have much to pack, I’ll give you that.”

“*Jackson.*”

Now Jackson turned, brows raised as he watched Ashley expectantly. “What?”

“Are you serious?” Ashley stepped closer, his feet nearly numb. “Like... really serious?”

“About you moving to the cottage with me? Yeah. Why?”

“I...” Ashley looked around, trying to find the correct words for what he was feeling. Confusion wasn’t it. Nervousness wasn’t either. It was something that came out of a fusion of happiness and paralyzing fear.

Jackson seemed to understand. At least he dropped the mundane act and spoke with directness this time. “You’re not the only one who wants to be

someone's first choice." He turned the roll of tape in his hands a couple of times before sealing another box. "No one sees me the way you do. Hell... *I* don't see me the way you do." He turned to Ashley. "I like being seen the way you see me."

Ashley couldn't answer. He was physically unable to get the words out. He stood and watched as Jackson walked over, relief slowly making its way through Ashley's system as he was beginning to understand this wasn't the end.

"Now, if you could see yourself the way I see you, we wouldn't have a problem," Jackson said. "Forget what I said in the past. I was wrong."

He stilled in front of Ashley; his face morphed into a serious frown. "The only one questioning your ability to be a part of this pack is you." He tugged on the front of the robe, yanking Ashley a little closer. "You gotta give us a chance."

He came closer still, until they stood toe-to-toe. "You gotta give yourself a chance."

Keeping quiet was surprisingly easy when Jackson nudged Ashley's cheek. "Think you can do that?" Jackson asked, speaking so softly his words felt like a caress against Ashley's skin.

"I can try," Ashley said just as quietly. He breathed in the scent of Jackson and tea and shampoo, the last bit of tension melting away. "I can promise that."

"Good."

"Good."

Ashley watched Jackson watching him, feeling ridiculously happy. With a meaningful look, he said, "If everybody saw you like I did, we'd probably have an issue."

Now Ashley could breathe a little easier. He even managed a smile when Jackson raised his brow.

"Oh yeah?"

Ashley nodded, leaning back against the doorframe. "I might not be the most territorial creature on the planet, as you might've noticed, but if everybody thought your postshift scent was hot, I would definitely have a problem with that."

“Really?” Jackson marveled with a grin, blocking Ashley’s way when he made a pathetic attempt to escape Jackson’s outstretched hands. “You think my scent’s hot?”

Ashley dodged the kiss Jackson aimed at his lips and spoke next to Jackson’s ear. “Major turn-on.”

Hands clasped his belt, and Ashley was pulled from the door. “Another secret, huh? Is that one of those private things?”

“Like naked sunbathing?” Ashley taunted. “Definitely.”

Jackson nodded, already opening the bathrobe. “You got a lot of those?”

Ashley stripped out of the robe eagerly, then started pulling on Jackson’s shirt to get the thing off. “You have no idea.”

Against his lips, Jackson murmured, “Any chance you’d be willing to share?”

Ashley smiled and fell back on the bed. He sprawled out shamelessly and watched Jackson undress. “Maybe one for Christmas... One for your birthday...”

Jackson was on him in three seconds, grinning contently. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Epilogue

December 23rd

Teeth nibbled over his shoulder blade before lips traveled up to the nape of his neck. Jackson smiled sleepily, unbothered by the bright light clouding his vision for a moment when he opened his eyes.

“Good morning,” Ashley murmured against his skin. Ashley moved a little when Jackson turned, but returned the moment Jackson was on his back. Still naked, Ashley’s skin was warm and soft to the touch, and Jackson couldn’t have cared less that he was obviously woken up at the crack of dawn when he was woken up with *this*.

“What time is it?”

Okay, maybe he cared a little.

“Quarter to four.”

That sobered Jackson up a bit. He blinked the last of sleep from his eyes and glanced around. The cottage was not on fire. That was good.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

Ashley settled against Jackson’s chest, shaking his head. “No. But I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“At four in the morning?”

“Yeah, I was supposed to do it in the morning, but I couldn’t wait.” Ashley got up so quickly Jackson couldn’t move fast enough to catch him. He did, however, have enough focus to watch Ashley’s naked ass as he exited the room. It was a nice view, after all.

Ashley returned moments later, bringing along one of his photo albums. He’d finally agreed to put his pictures in an album after Jackson had insisted they were worth having. Worth looking at. Not that they looked at the pictures that often. But living with someone who had very limited knowledge of their past, Jackson had learned to appreciate his. Though Ashley still rarely spoke of anything that happened before he came here, those albums were now on the shelf in the living room, next to Jackson’s ambitious collection of frames.

Jackson sat up when Ashley returned to bed. He’d gone serious again, something Jackson had noticed happening a lot lately. Normally he would ask,

but this wasn't Ashley's typical graveness. He was lost in thoughts at times, staring off into the distance for minutes and minutes. Jackson often wondered if they were particularly bad things Ashley was thinking about, but then the moment would pass and Ashley would come to, smiling again.

"Something happened a little while ago," Ashley began, the album now laying in his lap.

"Something bad?"

With a quick smile, Ashley shook his head. "No, nothing bad. Just... unexpected." He looked down at the album and opened it, randomly skimming through pages. "Do you remember when I needed to find a new farrier, and I was told about that new guy who just moved into the city?"

Nodding slowly, Jackson sat up against the bedpost, still unsure where this was going. "Back in October?"

"Yeah." A page was laid open, Ashley's hand planted over it as he looked down at the pictures. He breathed and looked up. "I was looking him up, trying to find a number or something, and I ran into a name... It was this girl I used to know before I moved here."

He turned the album and pointed at a picture of himself, standing next to a tall girl with mile-long dark brunette braids.

"Her name is Annalise, but we always just called her Ann." Ashley looked at the picture fondly. "I didn't know if it was really her. It could be anyone with the same name. So I didn't really think much of it. Until a few weeks later when I went to get that bracelet for Etta's birthday, and I stopped by for a cup of coffee. And she was there."

Jackson looked down at the picture, then at Ashley. "She was there?" he asked, pointing at the picture.

Ashley nodded. "Yeah. I wouldn't have recognized her, but she had this really weird birthmark on her palm. I thought what are the odds that two people have the same mark? So... we talked. And it was her. And she still remembered me." He took another deep breath, looking as if he still had difficulties believing it. "She was there with her kids. Twin girls and a son."

Ashley smoothed his fingers over the picture, over and over again. Jackson put his hand over Ashley's and was rewarded with a quivering smile. There was such sadness in his eyes it broke Jackson's heart a little, and he squeezed Ashley's hand. "Take your time."

He nodded, looking down at their joined hands.

“I don’t know... It was so crazy. I haven’t thought about those people in years, and then first I see her name, and then she’s standing right there. It’s like... meant to be, or something.” He wiped his eyes quickly, then went on. “We exchanged numbers, and she called me a couple of times, but I never answered. It felt like going back, like letting all of that back into my life. And I was... scared.” He chuckled, looking up. “Stupid, right?”

Jackson shook his head. “It’s not stupid.” He rubbed his thumb across Ashley’s hand. “You never spoke to her again?”

“No, I did.” Ashley moved to sit next to Jackson, their bare skin pressing together under the sheets. “I finally got the balls to call her a few weeks ago. And she understood. She said she was nervous about it too, said it was so unexpected she didn’t know what to think of it at first.”

“I guess that’s something you leave behind if you have the chance,” Jackson said. “No wonder it came as a shock.”

Ashley nodded, lacing their fingers as he spoke. “She’s married. They live in a small estate not far from here, actually. No pack, just her family.” Ashley glanced at Jackson quickly, maybe to see what Jackson thought of it. He had no problem with someone choosing to go on without a pack of their own. Living in a group such as theirs wasn’t everybody’s thing. Sometimes it wasn’t even Ashley’s thing, but still he was here, now looking at Jackson.

“I told her about you,” he said with a smile. “I said I’m hooking up with this sexy guy who’s gonna make a pretty good alpha one day.”

“Pretty good, huh?”

“You’ve cleaned up your act.” Ashley’s smile was a lot more relieved now. “Which is why I said yes when she invited us over for dinner.”

“You did?”

Ashley nodded. He watched Jackson expectantly, but when Jackson failed to respond, Ashley’s smile wavered and uncertainty returned into his eyes. “I can call her and cancel,” he rushed out. “It’s not—”

“No, no, no.” Jackson shook his head. “Don’t cancel. You’ve just never really shared this much about that life before. I’m surprised, that’s all.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Ashley looked back with love welling in his eyes. “It wasn’t a bad time, you know. But it wasn’t happy either. Those people were kind and friendly, but they weren’t family. And it wasn’t a home. And I was different back then. I was *alone*. I was... baggage. And I used to think that if I just keep all of that stuff in the past, it can’t get to me. But talking to her, and telling her about you and this place and our family, it made me realize that it really is in the past, and it can’t hurt me. I’m not alone anymore.”

He brought their joined hands up and kissed Jackson’s knuckles—a sign of affection Ashley never gave in vain.

“You’ll still love me even if you see some of that old Ashley.”

Over the lump in his throat, Jackson joked, “Didn’t you once say you don’t do sappy?”

“Yes. I also once said you’re a pompous jerk, so...” Ashley smiled when Jackson pretended to be shocked. “So you’re okay with having dinner with her?”

“Of course.”

“And her husband and kids?”

“I like big parties.” Jackson wormed his arm around Ashley’s shoulders and pulled him closer. He nudged Ashley’s temple, breathing in the scent of soap and warm skin. “And I’m proud to go as your mate.”

Ashley stiffened, then pulled back. He was cringing, lips turned into a grimace.

Jackson frowned. “Not good?”

“Not good.”

“How about boyfriend?”

Ashley’s grimace turned into a foul frown.

“Significant other?” Jackson suggested.

“What happened to the sexy guy I’m hooking up with?”

“I’d liked to be called something a little more dignified, if you don’t mind.”

Ashley sighed pretentiously, rolling his eyes. “Fine... You can pick a title. Just nothing sugary... like babe.” He made a cross face.

Jackson grinned and grabbed the album. “How about sweetheart?” He placed the album on the nightstand and laughed when Ashley made a gagging sound.

“The love of your life?”

“However accurate, there’s no way I’m ever going to say that out loud.” Ashley exhaled when Jackson toppled him on the bed. “At least not in public.”

Jackson looked down on Ashley’s serene face, loving the openness looking back. “Private is good enough for me.”

Ashley smiled. “See how we make a perfect match?”

Jackson agreed.

The End