Trials and Tribulations

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Summary

Aster's in love, Jack can't sleep, Nick's oblivious, Sandy's amused, and Ana's about ready to kill them all.

Notes

This is a sequel to my story, For the Kids, go read that first or you will be very confused! Also, as in that story, Bunny's name will be Aster Wilder and Tooth's name will be Ana Romoli.
Aster stepped back from the canvas and gave an appreciative grin before turning to look at the extremely boarded female sprawled across his bed and ask, "What’d ya think?"

Ana didn't even bother to look at the painting, choosing to reinterpret the question instead. "I think you should call Jack, since, you know, he actually likes watching you paint."

A crimson flush stole over tan skin and Aster looked away from his smirking companion before gruffly replying, "Jack's busy."

Ana sat up and crossed her arms, her smirk transforming into a frown. "Aster, what's going on? Did you two fight or something?"

"Nothing's going on! I… just drop it, okay?" Aster hunched his shoulders, pointedly ignoring the pitying gaze of his violet eyed companion, and returned to painting. With a sigh, Ana pushed herself off of the bed and came to stand behind him, then wrapped her thin arms around his torso and leaned her head against his back, feeling him reluctantly relaxing into her touch.

"Aster, come on, tell me what's wrong?"

The artist removed his brush from the canvas and struck it into a cup of water, gently swirling it around in the clear liquid and watching as the paint created swirls of frosty blue that turned his traitorous thoughts to the captivating eyes of a certain albino. Once the brush was clean, he removed it from the water and tenderly dried it on a rag before whispering, "Alright."

Ana let go of him and returned to her seat on the bed, patting the spaced beside her expectantly. Aster sunk down onto the spot and rested his head against his right hand, tilting it to the side so that he could look at her. After a moment's hesitation, he nervously began, "I thought I could control myself around him, but then New Year's happened and now… now I think he knows. I just can't… I don't … oh, you know!"

Ana had stopped listening at the words "New Year's," focusing instead on trying to figure out what event at the Wilder’s New Year's party could have caused Aster to think Jack knew about his little crush. She couldn't think of anything he'd done in front of Jack other than, wait, "Oh you've got to be kidding me. That's what has you acting so weird?"

Aster's room, normally the picture of pristine neatness, was a mess of scattered clothing and he still didn't know what to wear. With a frustrated groan, the Australian teen slumped down amidst the chaos and slowly ran a hand down his face. This was not going well.

The banging of little hands pounding against his door drew his gaze away from the mess as a toddler's voice cried out, "Aster! Aster! Let Sophie in!"

The teen smiled, stood up, and pulled the door open before scooping up his baby sister as Sophie let out a happy squeal of delight and wrapped her chubby arms around his neck. Once he'd been properly hugged, Aster deposited the toddler back on the ground and said, "Sorry, Soph, I need to finish getting dressed before I can play."

Sophie tilted her head to the side, took in her brother’s outfit, and then giggled. "Aster need pants."
"Yeah, I know ya lil' ankle-bitter. I need a shirt, too." He replied absentmindedly as he scanned the clothing warzone before him.

Before he could choose another outfit to reject, Sophie was rushing into the mess and grabbing a pair of jeans. She examined the garment for a moment and then held them out to her brother with a cry of "These!"

Aster looked at the jeans and shrugged. Why not, it wasn't like he was going to be able to pick an outfit by himself. Once the jeans had been pulled over his lanky form and properly buttoned, Aster crouching down to his baby sister's level and asked, "Okay, what else, Soph? It's gotta look really good on me."

The little girl nodded, clearly understanding the seriousness of her task, and began to dig through the piles of clothing. After rejecting several of the paint splattered t-shirts that dominated her brother’s wardrobe, she finally held up a wrinkled, hunter green, button down shirt that was miraculously unaffected by his artistic pursuits. He took the shirt from her with mild amusement. It seemed like Sophie's latest obsession with dress-ups actually had its uses. Then he frowned. A two year old was doing a better job of dressing him in three minutes than he had in the last hour. How pathetic was that?

"Emerson Aster Wilder, what in the world happened in here?"

Aster whirled around at the loud exclamation, only to find that his mother was standing in the doorway, staring in shock at the state of his room.

"Just trying to look my best for the party, mom," he replied with a sheepish grin as Sophie made her way through the clutter to her mother’s side.

Once there, she hugged the woman's leg and looking up at her with wide, green eyes as she said, "Sophie help!"

Mrs. Wilder picked up the child and nuzzled her nose. "I bet you did, sweetie. Now you're going to come with me and get all dressed up while your brother cleans up this rat's nest."

Sophie giggled and nodded as their mother gave Aster a pointed look and left the room.

Once they were gone, Aster sighed and began to pick up the mess.

"Don't you look nice," Ana commented as she entered Aster's freshly cleaned room. "One might even think you're trying to impress someone."

Aster blushed, refusing to look at her as he stared at his reflection, trying to simultaneously ignore her and decide if his hair was neat enough. Maybe it was a bad idea to go without one of his bandanas; Jack might notice something was up. That thought made him sigh in annoyance. Bloody hell, when had he started acting like a love struck puppy? He’d thought he had this crush thing under control. Apparently not.

Ana smiled at his obvious nervousness and she moved to stand by her friend's side before taking his hand in hers and dragging him away from the mirror saying, "Come on, stop worrying, silly. I'm sure your Romeo will be here and looking for you soon enough. Now let’s head out there so you can be there to greet him, unless you were hoping for some alone time and wanted to wait for him back here?"
Aster's blush deepened at the suggestive tone of his friend's words and he let out a whine of, "Ana, you promised."

"I promised not to tell anyone, but I made no such promise about making you blush."

"Promise not tell anyone what? Aster, have you been keeping secrets?" The bickering pair stopped their feud and looked towards the source of the familiar voice. Leaning against the wall of the hallway they'd just entered was Jack Frost, Aster's crush. The white haired teen had obviously dressed up for the event, trading his normal outfit of ratty jeans and a hoodie for formal black pants, a dark-blue button-down shirt, and a formal, black jacket.

Aster thought he looked incredible.

"Only the secret that he's a total let down at parties!" Ana replied quickly, glaring mockingly at the teen whose hand was clasped in her own. "Look at this, even I have to drag him out of his room!"

Jack laughed and pushed off the wall, grabbing Aster's free hand in his pale one, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Well then, allow me to offer a helping hand."

Ana grinned at the albino as Aster's blush deepened and, together, they pulled the Australian down the hall towards the sound of voices and music.

The three teen's plan to sit around and gorge themselves on cookies in the kitchen was quickly sidetracked by the appearance of Sophie and Baby, Ana's little sister, both of whom begged Jack and the others to come and play with them. A demand the trio found hard to resist due to the irresistible powers of wide eyes and pouting lips.

So it was that Aster found himself following after Jack into his family's playroom where the snowy-haired teen immediately bent down and asked the little girls, "So, what are we playing?"

"House!" Baby decided and Sophie readily agreed as Jack nodded sagely, treating the decree with the upmost respect.

"An excellent choice, Baby. What are our roles?"

After a moment's consideration, Baby pointed at Jack and proclaimed "You get to be the daddy!" just as Sophie pointed at Aster and cried, "Aster daddy!"

An argument immediately began.

"Jack should be the daddy, I said it first and playing house was my idea!"

"No, Aster daddy!"

Before things could get ugly, Jack moved over to Aster's side and wrapped his arms around the Australian's neck, leaning his head against the taller teen's shoulder as he said, "That's okay girls, we can both be the daddy."

Shocked, Aster immediately shook Jack off and stepped back, staring at him with a growing blush as the little girls giggled.

Jack laughed along with them and didn't comment on the action, but he didn't try to touch Aster again all night and had given his friend several odd glances throughout the evening.
"Aster," Ana said in a comforting voice that made Aster feel like a child, "I doubt Jack even remembers that you shrugged him off like that."

"You do, though!"

"First off, I'm a girl and we pay attention to tiny details. Secondly, even if he does remember, he's a boy and that means he's at least somewhat emotionally stunted and has no clue how to pick up on subtle cues. Thirdly, on the off chance he both remembers and actually realizes what's going on, you can always make it all better and just ask him out."

Aster shook his head and crossed his arms. "No, no way. I am not degrading myself like that."

The motherly Ana was suddenly replaced by a fierce one. "Degrading yourself? Seriously?"

She abruptly stood up and stalked to the door, but stopped with her hand on the knob. "Aster, you're my best friends and I'll listen to you, but you need to bring that ego down a few pegs if you ever want Jack. And next time you want someone to watch you paint for three hours, ask the one person who both we know actually likes doing it."

Then she was gone and Aster was falling back onto his bed as he let out a groan. Ask Jack out? Not bloody likely.
Aster let out a tired yawn and watched sadly as Ana rushed along the sidewalk well ahead of him. He could’ve caught up to her easily if he wanted to, but she had made it abundantly clear that she didn't want to walk with him today, a thought that made his frown deepen. He hadn't realized she was this mad at him. When was the last time he'd walked to school without her by his side? He honestly couldn't remember it happening before (other than the few times over the years when she’d been too sick to even leave her room) and not having her by his side felt wrong. Was what he'd said yesterday really that bad? It had to have been to get this kind of response! As the school came into view, he began to mentally rehearse the apology that he knew was needed for her to forgive him.

When he reached the edge of the building's parking lot, his mental musings about appropriate apologies were cut short. From here he could see that Ana’s plan hadn’t been to just walk to school alone. She was getting into the passenger's side of Nick's jeep. That was Aster's spot! And if she was sitting there, that meant he was going to be stuck in the back with… Aster let out a growl of annoyance as he realized the full extent of her plan and he ran across the parking lot to side of the cherry red vehicle. Once he’d reached his goal, he grabbed the passenger door's handle and tugged, but she'd locked it. All he could do was glared in at her through the window and snarl when she gave him a smug wink. This was not fair.

"Ana, get the bloody hell outta my seat!"

She shook her head and pointed to the back of the car, causing Aster to let out another low growl. Then he pulled at the handle once more and giving Nick a pleading look, but the other teen merely shook his head in befuddled amusement and laughed. There was no way he was getting involved in this little spat. Besides, just because it was traditionally Aster’s spot didn’t mean the Australian was guaranteed it. Ana had claimed the seat fair and square.

With a final tug followed by a defeated sigh, Aster opened the car's backdoor and grumpily slid into Ana's usual spot beside Sandy as he said, "I hope you know you're only gonna be able to pull this off once."

Ana merely grinned wider as a familiar figure with a head of snowy white hair came into view at the far corner of the building and made his way towards the parking lot.

Aster saw him too and slumped down in his seat. He could deal with being around Jack just fine, but there was a difference between just being near each other and sitting with their bodies pressed together in the bloody backseat of Nick’s ruddy car. He was going to kill Ana.

Jack Frost was lost in a world of his own, his thoughts revolving around a rather upsetting phone call he'd received the previous evening that had led to a rather disturbing nightmare which, in turn, lead to him getting barely three hours of sleep. He was so wrapped up in gloomy thoughts that he didn't notice the strange adjustment to the sleigh's traditional seating arrangement until he opened the door, ready to greet Ana, and found an embarrassed looking Australian in her place.

"Morning Jack!" Ana called from her stolen seat as the new arrival treated his female friend to a curious glance before returning the greeting and climbing into the car.
"Not that I'm complaining or anything," he said, with another confused glance between the scowling teen at his side and the grinning one in the passenger's seat, "but why's Aster sitting in the back?"

"Because he's had his special privileges revoked," Ana replied, winking at Jack while Aster growled out the words, "Don't ask."

Jack chuckled, deciding he probably didn't want to know. "Alright then, forget I asked."

Then he leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth as an enormous yawn escaped through his pale lips.

"Up late reading, again?" Ana asked as Jack treated her to a tired smile once the yawn was finished.

"Yeah, something like that. Just couldn't get a story off my mind." Namely the story of my impending doom.

Sensing that there was more to the tale than Jack was letting on; Sandy tilted his head to the side and gave his frost eyed friend a pointed look. Jack pursed his lips and refrained from glaring at the diminutive teen. Trust Sandy to call him out on a half-truth. Why did Jack even bother trying to lie around him anymore?

"Okay, so maybe I wasn't exactly reading anything."

Now he had the attention of the entire gang.

"I," Jack stopped and looked around at their curious faces before bringing his hand to rest at the nape of his neck. As he nervously fiddled with the short, white hair that grew there, he averted his eyes and continued, "I got a call from the Burgess Police department yesterday."

He stopped talking, trying to figure out what to say next, but Sandy had already realized out where this was going. The golden haired teen mimed an image of a judge pounding down a gavel and the others quickly connected the dots.

"Oh." Ana looked troubled now. "You're gonna have to go to the trial, aren't you?"

Jack glanced up at her for a second before looking back down at his jean covered legs and bobbing his head lightly. "Yeah, the video testimony idea was dismissed since I'm the star witness. Looks like I'll be seeing him again a lot sooner than I'd hoped."

Though she'd noticed that Jack had pointedly avoided saying Pitch's name, Ana didn't mention it. Instead, she reached out and laid a gentle hand against Jack's knee and asked, "Are you gonna be okay?"

A shrug and a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes formed the tired albino's halfhearted reply.

Ana desperately wanted to hug Jack and was suddenly regretting deciding to change places with Aster today. As another yawn caused Jack to close his eyes, she gave her tan friend a pointed look, hoping that he would man up and do what she couldn't.

To her delight, the Australian took a deep breath and wrapped an arm around Jack, pulling the albino close. "You know we'll be there for you, mate."

Jack smiled at him, their eyes meeting, and Aster found himself fighting a blush as Nick added, "Anytime, anywhere, just say the word!"
Now Jack laughed, picking up the subtle reference and turning his gaze from Aster to the front of the car. "Thanks Kim, I think I'll be fine, it's just still sinking in."

Aster knew that was probably a lie. They'd all been hurt by Pitch, but Jack had been put through hell by the demented teen and he couldn't imagine what the idea of being forced to see Pitch again was doing to his crush. Then he realized he still had an arm draped over Jack's shoulders. In order to avoid yet another blush, he quickly removed the appendage from its perch and gave his crush a light punch on his shoulder along with a warning of "Yeah, well, don't push it."

This time Jack's grin really did reach his eyes as he gave Aster a mocking salute and said, "Yes sir, whatever you say."

Beaming at the sight of the two finally acting like they normally did, Ana decided to move the conversation on before either boy had a chance to clam up again. "In other news, I got a call from Mr. Kaufman last night."

The boys looked at her with interest. They hadn't heard much from the older man since the Christmas fair due to the busyness of the holidays.

Happy to have their attention, Ana continued. "The inspector finally came and examined the shed. It's been officially declared structurally sound. That means we can clean it out and see what survived the fire whenever we want. So I motion that we go this weekend and do it! Easter is only three months away now and that means we've gotta start getting ready for the Easter egg hunt, right Aster?"

The Australian grinned, excitement overtaking bashfulness and annoyance as he replied, "You better believe it!"

She smiled back and then began to talk about the details. The four boys did their best to follow along as she listed their current fund balance, what supplies they had available, past attendance records, and all the other data that she could think until it was time to go to class at which point the five friends headed off to their respective classrooms, promising to see each other at lunch.

Aster was always the first one to arrive at their lunch table and today was no exception. While he waited for the others to join him, he began to doodle in his latest sketch pad as he munched on a carrot stick.

As was also the norm, Jack arrived second and plopped down into a seat across from the sketching artist. When Jack took that seat, though, there was a brief moment where their feet brushed together. As soon as Aster felt that fleeting touch his heart began to pound. This was getting ridiculous; only their shoes had touched. The thought made Aster glower and he began to sketch faster, not even paying attention to what he was doodling as he furiously tried to get his emotions in check.

Jack, who had initially planned on reading, didn't. He was far too busy watching Aster with a growing fascination. What in the world was the other teen drawing? He rarely saw Aster get so into his work when he was merely doodling.

Curious to see what had his friend so engrossed, Jack quietly got up from his seat and came to stand behind Aster, looking down at the doodle. The image made him smile. "Getting into the abstract, are we?"
Aster immediately returned to reality and looked at what he'd been drawing. A collection of random lines and circles covered the paper, forming the loose image of a human face. A distinctively male face. He mentally groaned, knowing exactly whose face had been on his mind as he sketched, but outwardly he only gave a noncommittal shrug. "Just trying something different. It's pretty stupid, though."

Then he tore out the page, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it towards the nearby trashcan. Jack made a strange noise and grabbed the paper ball in midair with an exclamation of, "Hey, I think it's neat! If you're just gonna toss it, I'll keep it."

As the albino began to smooth out the wrinkles in the paper, Aster could feel the blood rushing to his face. Not good. He quickly turned back to his sketch pad and resumed doodling, mumbling the words, "Sure, keep it, I don't care" as he did so.

Jack's absentminded reply of, "I think I'll hang it up in my room," only made Aster’s blush worse and it took all of his self-control to get his face back to its normal tan shade by the time the albino had turned to look at him once again.
Chapter 3

Nick had always known Ana was stubborn, but not *this* stubborn. This level of stubborn deserved some kind of prize or maybe medical treatment. All week long, she'd arrived at school unusually early, often before Nick had even got there himself, just to make sure she could take Aster's seat. After the third day of this silliness, he'd tried to ask the members of the battling duo what was up, but they'd both told him not to worry about it and, eventually, Nick had just stopped asking. Jack seemed just as clueless about the matter, but the way Sandy smiled when he looked at Ana sitting proudly in her new spot made Nick think that the smallest member of their group knew what was happening. Then again, when did Sandy ever *not* know what was going on?

Back to his main point: a week of getting up early was one thing, but this bordered on ridiculous. It was the day of their trip to Burgess and Ana was standing outside of Aster's house, waiting. Apparently she wasn't letting Aster have his spot back today, either.

"You know, I could have just picked you up first if you'd just asked."

Ana put her hands on her hips and gave Nick a look. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but it was probably supposed to implicate that he wasn’t trustworthy or something.

"That is leaving far too much to chance. What if Aster called you and asked you to pick him up first instead? Now, unlock the car."

Yep. That’s what it meant!

"No, not until you tell me what this is all about."

Sandy, who was silently watching the drama unfold from the back of the car, rolled his eyes. Wasn't it obvious?

Ana took her hands from her hips and crossed them over her chest, giving Nick a disbelieving look as she said, "Frankly, if you haven't figured it out by now, then I don't think you deserve to know."

Nick turned to ask Sandy what he thought of the matter, but the golden haired boy was nodding in agreement. Nick's face transformed into a pout as he unlocked the car, allowing Ana to climb in just as Aster rushed out of his front door crying, "Not again!"

He was too late. With a defeated sigh, Aster crawled into the back and slumped against his seat as Sandy giggled. He never should have challenged Ana's ability to permanently steal his seat. Maybe he could swipe it back when they got to the Overland's house. He hoped so, because he didn't think he could handle an hour long drive pressed up against secret crush.

They arrived at the Overland’s just as Mrs. Overland was unloading several bags of groceries from her car. Hearing the car behind her, she turned, smiled at the teens, and waved. "Hello kids, I just got home. I was wondering if you’d already come and gone. I guess this means you haven't! Go right ahead inside, I think Jack's up in his room."

Ana turned around in her seat, grinning evilly, though maybe that was just Aster's interpretation of the look. He couldn't be sure.
"Aster, why don't you go in and get Jack?"

Yep, definitely evil.

"Why me?"

"Because if I go, then you'll steal my seat."

Nick opened his mouth to ask why they didn't just call Jack, but then he caught sight of Sandy shaking his head. The meaning was clear: they should stay out of this one. Nick closed his mouth and nodded, leaving the duo to settle the argument themselves.

It ended rather quickly with an annoyed Aster throwing open the car door and starting to stalk towards the house while Ana grinned in triumph. The Australian teen stopped just long enough to grab a particularly heavy bag of groceries from the hands of the struggling Mrs. Overland and then marched in through the garage door to find Jack.

Why did Ana insist on doing this? Aster wondered as he set the groceries down on the kitchen table and walked up the staircase to the house's second floor. What did she think this was going to accomplish?

As he climbed the unfamiliar stairs, he realized that he'd never been in Jack's room before. He also realized that he could hear the sound of someone singing as he climbed.

"You make me smile like the sun, fall out of bed..."

He followed the sound of the melodic tenor, which he now recognized as Jack's singing voice, to a door that was hanging slightly open about halfway down the hall. When Aster peered into the room through the crack he saw that Jack had on a pair of ear buds and was singing while twirling around the room and putting away a pile of laundry. The artist could feel his heart racing at the sight, he loved listening to Jack sing, but he quickly pushed those thoughts away and opened the door to its full width, drawing the albino's attention away from his chore with a call of, "Hey, Jack!"

Jack turned from his task, stopped singing, and grinned, blushing lightly at being caught mid-song. "Oh, hey Aster! I didn't expect anyone to come up and get me. I figured you guys would just call me when you got here."

Aster almost swore out loud. Trust Ana to distract him from the obvious course of action with an argument. He really needed to work on keeping his head when he got mad.

"But I'm glad you came up so I could show you what I did with it!" Jack added, motioning to his wall.

Aster's picture was hanging up on the wall right next to Jack's bed. Jack's singing had made his heart start to race, but now it was doing the hundred meter dash. He didn't know what to say, so he just grinned and did his best to keep from blushing again.

"I've never had a poster before," Jack continued, motioning around the room. It was true. There wasn't much in the room that would indicate anyone lived here. The only personal touches Jack seemed to have added were a picture of his real family on the bedside table, a densely packed bookshelf by the door, and a very old looking laptop computer sitting closed on his desk.
"Why not?" Aster asked, sudden curiosity giving him back control of his mouth. The jungle green walls of his own room were covered with pictures of his homeland and an assortment of prints from his favorite artists.

Jack merely shrugged and walked towards the doorway. "There aren't many posters for books and I've never been much of a decorator."

As the two teens made their way down the stairs, Aster asked, "Don't you have a favorite TV show or movie, though?"

Jack shook his head. "The Overlands don't have a TV. They're not big fans of technology."

"Yeah, but you've still seen movies, though," Aster countered as they reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped to let Jack put on his shoes.

"At school, sure."

"School? No, I meant like at a theater," Aster explained, giving Jack a curious look.

The albino thought about it as he finished tying his left sneaker before replying, "Not really. I never knew what was coming and, well, I didn't have anyone to go with so I never bothered. I think the last movie I saw in a theater was something my parents took me to when I was a kid."

Shoes tied, Jack hopped to his feet and headed out to the waiting sleigh, leaving Aster to recover from his minor shock and follow after him. The artist caught up just as Jack was opening the jeep's door and, without thinking, he asked, "Well, do you wanna go and see a movie with me, then?"

The rest of the gang stared at them. Ana was looking absolutely thrilled, Sandy looked impressed, and Nick looked thoroughly confused, but Jack didn't notice any of this. He had already turned back to face Aster, grinning happily as he replied, "Sure, it's a date. You can introduce me to the wonders of modern cinema!"

Aster’s mouth began to open and close as he tried to think of a reply, but no words came out. What was he supposed to say to that anyway? Especially when it meant that everyone thought he'd just asked Jack out!

Great. Just great.
None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for that ruddy smile. Sure, Aster had always known Jack was cute, but that hadn't mattered. Boyish charms did not make up for years of pranks and mischief. They especially didn't make up for the events of the previous Christmas where Jack and Pitch had almost destroyed all of the props he'd spent weeks designing and painting. Then Aster had learned about Jack's past and he'd found himself starting to care about the albino.

Suddenly, he wanted to get to know Jack, to make him feel welcome. Maybe the crush had started then, but he didn't think so. He knew the moment he'd realized he had one, though. It was the first time Jack had smiled at him, really smiled. There was something about that damn smile that made Aster's head spin.

He'd done a good job of hiding the crush at first, of pushing it to the side and just being Jack's friend, but then Jack had gone missing. That was the night Aster had realized this pounding in his chest might mean more than a little crush. A lot more.

After they'd found Jack and gotten him to the hospital, the Australian teen had gone home and collapsed on his bed while fighting back the urge to punch something or collapse into a fit of tears. He was so afraid Jack was never going to open his eyes that he could barely sleep. By the time Jack woke up, Aster knew he done for. He was totally, completely, one hundred percent, head-over-heels in love with Jack Frost.

He wasn't pleased with that fact either. In fact, he'd spent the next few days trying to convince himself that this was just a phase. Jack was merely a good friend and that was all they'd ever be. These feelings were just there because of how worried he'd been. His heart wasn't racing from love, but from fear.

He'd repeated these thoughts over and over until he almost had himself convinced that they were true. It had worked pretty well, too. He'd still had to fight the occasional blush, like when Jack taught him how to ice skate, but he was content to be Jack's friend and leave it at that. Then Ana happened.

They'd been walking home from school the Monday after the Christmas fair when the blonde had asked him, "Are you gonna ask Jack out now that everything's starting to die down or did you two already talk about it when you were painting those booths?"

Aster still wasn't sure how to describe the sound he'd made when she said this. It was something between a very manly squeak and the word “huh.” As he'd stood there like a deer in the headlights, Ana had begun to laugh. She didn't stop laughing until he was bright red and stammering out denials, but it had done no good. She knew and, with that, Aster's carefully constructed world of denial had crumbled to ash.

Something about knowing that Ana knew had made his secret feelings startlingly real in way they'd never been before. Suddenly he was fighting blushes and stammering every time Jack was around. Two embarrassing habits that were made even worse by the fact that Jack had decided to hang out at the Wilder house as much as possible over winter break.

After a few torturously awkward hours on the first day, when only Sophie’s constant babbling had saved him from exposure, Aster had started painting. He’d only meant to do it for a couple of minutes, so that his nerves could settle while Jack played with Sophie, but he’d soon lost track of time. It was only when his mother called out, “Is Jack staying for dinner?” that Aster even registered that close to four hours had passed since he’d started.
His immediate reaction had been to turn to his friend and apologize, but the words had died on his lips when he saw Jack sitting on his bed with one of those damn irresistible smiles on his face. As it turned out, Jack was perfectly okay lying on Aster's bed and reading or even simply watching the Australian while he painted. That had only made the crush worse. Cute, great with Sophie, loved to watch him paint, amazing smile, it was like Jack was doing everything in his power to make himself into Aster's dream guy.

The day that Jack had chosen to read a book by Aster’s favorite author instead of the one he’d brought along was the day the Australian had finally given in and realized there was nothing he could do but resign himself to the fact that Jack had his heart. It was also the day he’d decided that, even if his feelings were totally one sided, at least he could enjoy the pieces of Jack he was able to access as the frosty-eyed teen's best friend.

Then he’d gone and messed it all up by having his worst, Jack-induced, moment of stupidity yet. More specifically: asking Jack out in front of the entire gang. No, it wasn't really a date, but they didn't know that! How was he supposed to explain to the wide eyed audience of this disaster that this was just an "as friends" date-like thing without embarrassing Jack? Especially since Jack had been the one to use the word date… Jack didn't think it was a date, right? He had said that word, not Aster. For a moment, the Australian started to hope that maybe someone up there had decided to be nice to him for a change.

The hope immediately disappeared when Jack turned back towards the watching gang and asked, "Do you guys wanna join us?"

Aster resigned himself once more to a lifetime of pining as Ana's joy transformed to confusion and she asked, "Join you?"

"Yeah!" Jack replied as he scooted into the car and made room for Aster to get in after him. "It'd be fun to go and see a movie as a group. That's what people do when they go to the movies, right?"

Ana nodded, pursing her lips in annoyance as she and the others realized that Aster's little invitation hadn't been for anything more than a friendly outing. (At least as far as Jack was concerned.)

As Aster slid into the seat beside Jack, he decided that it was probably for the best that the albino hadn't actually meant anything by his use of the word date. That would have made for quite the awkward afternoon of stolen glances and mutual blushes. Though, Jack did look adorable when he blushed. Those pale cheeks turning pink and rosy… Aster shook his head, clearing away the distracting thoughts, and said, "Ya, it'd be great if you guys wanted to come along. Turns out Frostbite here hasn't seen a movie in years."

Before Nick could reply that he'd love to join them, Ana turned the offer down. "Nah, that's okay. Aster's the real movie lover; the rest of us just aren't that into them."

Nick stared at her while Sandy held back a fit of laughter. That was about as far from the truth as you could get! Sandy and Ana were the movie buffs of the gang while Aster normally just tagged along to check out the artistic style used for the settings and to complain when the actors botched up Australian accents and slang. He'd been a nightmare when they went to see Kangaroo Jack.

At least Jack didn’t seem to notice the others’ reactions as he shrugged and settled back into his seat while Aster mentally began to consider all the different things he wanted to say to his meddling, female friend when they were alone. If Nick and Sandy hadn't known about his crush before they had to have figured it out by now.
Aster had been right about the car ride being his own, little slice of hell. Every time Nick took one of those stupidly sharp turns of his, Jack had been pushed into Aster's side, often times almost falling into his lap. For once, the Australian wasn't sure if the sick feeling in his stomach was due to his friend's driving skills or the butterflies happily fluttering around from being so close to Jack. It was probably a mix of both. Damn hormones.

When they finally reached the rec center, Aster practically flew out of the car and into the building, desperate to get somewhere where he could give his poor nerves a break. Luckily no one followed him inside, so he took the opportunity to lean against a wall and just let his body tremble for a bit. How he had managed to actually talk to Jack about what movie they should go to for half of the ride without turning into a stuttering pile of mush was beyond his understanding and the idea of suffering through the return trip home had his already queasy stomach doing an impressive series of acrobatics. Ana had better give up this stupid game by then or he was going to crack.

After he'd finished his mini panic attack, Aster pushed off the wall and walked to Mr. Kaufman's office. The older gentleman was sitting behind his desk and working on paperwork of some kind, but he pushed this aside the minute the artist entered.

"Hello there, Aster. I'd imagine you're here to retrieve the key?"

Aster nodded and forced his lips into the semblance of a smile while Mr. Kaufman retrieved the familiar metal object from its resting place in the top drawer of his desk.

"I hope it isn't too bad. I'm afraid I haven't made it out to look into the shed myself since we got the all clear, too much snow for these old legs to plow their way through."

"Oh, do you need us to do some kind of inventory for you?"

Mr. Kaufman laughed and handed Aster the key with a sad smile. "Nothing that complex. Just let me know what all's out there that I can still use. Feel free to throw out anything that you think is junk."

"Alright, thank you, sir."

Aster turned to leave, but Mr. Kaufman called after him, "Oh, and Aster?"

The Australian stopped and turned back around. "Yes sir?"

"You're all more than welcome to use the ice rink when you're done."

Of course they were. An image of Jack holding onto his hands and gently helping him skate popped into Aster's head and the teen had to bite his lip to keep from groaning at the idea of a repeat performance. It had been hard enough to undergo that torture when he was still able to keep his emotions somewhat in check, but all he said was, "Thank you sir, I'll be sure to tell them."
Chapter 5

When Aster opened the shed door to reveal the wreckage, everyone's mood instantly soured. It wasn't a pretty sight. The booths that they'd spent all those weeks working on were either reduced to ashes or nothing more than blackened wood. The shelves full of Easter baskets looked like they'd all been caught up in the blaze as well and the smell of charcoal permeated the interior of the tiny building. It was with grim faces that they all made their way inside to inspect what was left. Everyone, that is, save Jack.

While the others entered the shed, the pale skinned teen remained standing in the doorway, breathing in raspy gasps, his blue eyes glazed over and wide with fear as the images that had been plaguing his dreams as of late suddenly sprung to life once more. All he could smell and taste was the poisonous and choking charcoal that was wafting around him on the breeze. All he could see were flames. All he could hear was laughter. That cold, terrible laughter...

It took a few seconds for Aster to realize that Jack was no longer by his side and, when he turned around to see where the pale skinned teen had gone, he immediately saw that something was wrong. Without bothering to ask what was up, the artist quickly left the shed, grabbed Jack's arm, and dragged him away from the scene, only stopping when they'd reached the side of the shed where the smell of charcoal wasn't so strong. Here, the Australian released his hold on Jack's arm and watched with worried, green eyes as the albino slumped gratefully against the stone wall and tried to regain a little control over himself. By the time his breathing had returned to normal, the rest of the gang had joined them and were waiting in nervous silence for Jack to speak.

When he did, his voice came out breathless and shaky, barely sounding like Jack at all. "Sorry… sorry about that. I'm okay now. Go… go on and… go ahead and get started, I'll join you in… in a minute."

This suggestion was not well received.

Nick and Aster exchanged worried glances as Sandy folded his arms across his chest and gave Jack a stern look. Ana merely scoffed and replied, "Not a chance, Jack. You are obviously not okay."

The albino laughed, but it was clearly forced. "Really guys, don't worry."

"You ought to know better than to issue commands like that to us, mate." Aster laid a hand on Jack's shoulder as he said this and smiled at his crush. "Come on, we can do this later. Mr. Kaufman's given us a standing invitation to use the rink today and some of us haven't gotten to see you skate before."

The fact that Jack immediately nodded in agreement and didn’t even trying to argue with Aster was proof enough that something was terribly wrong, but no one mentioned it as they relocked the shed and trudged back to the rec center.

"Wow, he's incredible!" Ana cried, watching as Jack landed some form of spinning jump and zoomed off across the frozen surface while skating backwards. Aster just nodded in agreement, watching silently as Jack skated around the rink, loosing himself to the ice. It seemed like the freak out was truly over. Bringing him here had definitely been a good
idea. Now if only they could figure out why there’d been a freak out in the first place!

As he thought back to Jack's worrying reaction, Aster realized that they didn't have a clue what happened the night of the fire. Sure, they knew Pitch had set fire to the shed and somehow gotten Jack blamed, but the albino had never told them the details and they'd never thought to ask. As he watched the white-haired figure fly across the ice, Aster suddenly found himself wondering why Jack had been taken to the hospital. The gang had been told that he went into shock, but what had caused it? What exactly had Pitch done?

Ana appeared to be having similar thoughts since she lowered her voice and asked, "Did Jack ever tell you what happened that night?"

He shook his head and whispered back, "No" just as a grinning Jack slid to a stop before them.

"Hey, are you two just gonna stand there and whisper or are you actually going to skate?"

Ana shrugged at Aster, giving him a look that clearly meant “we’ll talk about it later,” and then pushed off from the wall.

Though she didn't have Jack's grace, Ana was more than capable enough to keep herself from falling down. Aster, on the other hand, still needed a lot of work.

When Jack noticed that his friend was still clinging to the wall of the rink, he grabbed the Australian's hand and pulled him away from the plastic surface with a grin. "Come on, you did just fine last time we were here!"

Worries for Jack's well-being were instantly replaced with a rush of happy thoughts, but Aster quickly reigned in those emotions in, forcing his face into a scowl as he tried to hide any trace of his true feelings from the teen whose hand was currently wrapped around his own. It was this urge to hide his feelings that lead Aster to unthinkingly stammer out the words, "Why'd ya have to do this every time we’re here?"

Jack's grin instantly faded and Aster knew he'd done it again.

The pale hand that had been tightly holding onto his own tan one quickly let go as its owner let out a forced laugh and quietly said, "Sorry. I thought… Sorry."

Across the rink, Ana had stopped skating and was glaring at Aster, her violet eyes alight with fury. Sandy and Nick, who’d just entered the rink, didn't look too pleased with him either and Aster was mentally screaming at himself for being such a massive jerk. Well, there was only one way to fix this.

Before Jack had the chance to skate away, Aster grabbed one of his crush’s hands and said, "No, I'm sorry, mate. I'm just nervous."

Jack smiled shyly at the admission and turned his hand so that their palms were touching. "Hey, have I let you fall yet?"

Aster shook his head, trying very hard to ignore the fact that they were holding hands, as Jack’s smile grew a little brighter.

“Besides, I kind-of deserved that,” he continued. “I should’ve given you a bit more warning before I dragged you off the wall."

Aster laughed, desperately trying to ignore the distracting way Jack’s eyes were shinning, and
nodded his head in agreement. "That woulda been nice."

“So, do you actually want a skating lesson?”

“Yeah, just don’t expect to make much progress.”

“Oh, I have faith in you,” Jack replied, grinning once again as he resumed pulling Aster along the ice.

They continued skating hand-in-hand, with Jack giving him careful instructions all the while, until it was time to go.

The ride back to Narvon started out pleasantly enough, but soon grew silent and thick with tension. Now that they didn't have something to distract them, everyone's thoughts had turned back to the image of Jack leaning against the shed, clearly terrified by an unspoken fear. No one knew how to ask the obvious questions, though, and Jack wasn't offering any explanation.

Aster, who had ended up in the back once again, kept stealing nervous glances at his crush. Jack didn't look good and his breathing has been steadily getting more uneven ever since they left the rec center. About the time that they had pulled out of Burgess and onto the highway, his frosty eyes had glazed over once more and now he was starting to tremble every few seconds. As another tremor coursed through his crush's thin body, Aster pushed aside his own emotions and wrapped an arm around the other teen, pulling him close.

The glazed look disappeared as Jack looked up at Aster curiously, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he smiled softly, leaned his head against Aster's shoulder, and closed his eyes. Within minutes, the pale teen was fast asleep.

The tension dissipated as the sound of Jack's deep breathing reverberated through the car, filling the whole gang with a sense of relief and, when the slumbering youth unconsciously cuddled closer to his pillow, Aster was surprised to find that Jack being this close didn't make his heart pound. As he gazed down at his sleeping crush he realized that all he felt was an odd sense of calm and a fierce urge to protect. He didn't even mind when Ana glanced back and gave him a suggestive wink.
Chapter 6

Burning. Everything was burning. He could feel the heat against his skin and taste the sulfuric bile in his mouth as he tried to find the key. He had to find the key. Where was it? He didn't know and the flames were getting closer by the second.

His search grew more and more frantic as the smoke made his eyes water, blurring his vision and forcing him to search by touch alone. As tears streaked down his sooty face, Jack reached out in blind desperation, grasping for his salvation. His hand closed around burning wood instead.

Jack woke up to find himself biting back a scream, his eyes blown wide and his limbs trembling. For a moment, he swore he could feel the flames, but then reality sunk in and he realized it was just a dream. Just another, terrifying dream. He fell back onto the bed and closed his eyes, allowing his racing heart to calm down as he breathed in the sweet, cool, lilac scented air.

Wait, lilacs? That didn't make sense. His room never smelled like flowers.

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes once more and actually looked around, taking in his surroundings. The white walls and floral-print bedding were as worryingly unfamiliar as the smell. This wasn't his room. In fact, this was a room he'd never seen before. He could feel the terror starting to course through him again as he glanced around, desperately looking for a hint as to where he was, when a slip of white paper lying on the bedside table caught his eye.

He reached out and picked it up, reading the fire truck red lettering that spelled out his name as he did so. Flipping it over, he found a neatly written note:

Jack,

You looked so tired that we didn't want to wake you up, so we let you lay down in my family's spare room. We'll be down the hallway in my room.

Btw, don't worry, the guys took off your clothes, not me. They left them sitting on the dresser.

~Ana

Jack looked up from the note to the neatly folded pile of clothing sitting on top of the dresser and smiled ruefully. At least they'd had the decency to leave on his jeans. With a sigh, he dropped the paper back onto the bedside table, folded his hands behind his head, and lay back on them, thinking. He wasn't sure he really wanted to go be all chummy just yet.

He knew that he owed the gang an explanation for what had happened that morning; especially since he was pretty sure there was a good chance that it could happen again. A light groan escaped his pale lips at that thought; couldn't things be easy for him just this once?

"Aster, glancing at the door every five seconds is not going to make him come any sooner. Now, make your move!"

Aster frowned, but obeyed Ana’s demand, turning his gaze away from her bedroom door and grabbing a white card from the pile.

Seeing the Australian's frown deepen as he looked at his fate, Sandy leaned over and glanced at the
card before giggling in amusement.

"What'd you get?" Nick asked, suddenly hopeful.

"Candy Cane Forest" was the annoyed reply as Aster threw the card onto the discard pile in and moved his little, green playing piece across the colorful board to the pink square marked with a tiny candy cane. From first place to last in a single card draw, wasn't that just his luck?

The sound of the door opening drew Aster’s focus from his glaring match with the game and he turned to see Jack entering the room. The sleepy-eyed teen had obviously just woken up and his white hair looked even more disheveled than usual as he treated them all to a tiny, tired smile. "Morning."

Then his gaze fell on the game the gang was currently sitting around and Jack’s smile widened into a grin. "I didn’t realize I’d find you guys in the middle of such a fierce competition. Who’s winning?"

"As of two seconds ago, Nick," Ana replied. "You just missed Aster drawing the candy cane forest card."

Jack made a sympathetic noise and sat down by Aster's side, draping an arm across the Australian's shoulder as he said "Well, you can't win 'em all."

A forced grin was about all Aster could manage as he bent his will to fighting off the wave of happy thoughts that came with the sight of an adorably, sleepy-eyed Jack this close to him.

Luckily, Jack didn't seem to notice as he looked around and asked, "So, what did I miss while I was off in dreamland?"

Ana shrugged and picked the top card off of the pile before moving her blue piece ahead to the next purple square. "Not much. We only got home, like, twenty minutes ago. I didn't expect to see you for a while with how out of it you were. What woke you?"

Aster could actually feel Jack's whole body tense at the question, but no one else seemed to notice it.

"Nothing, I just woke up. I guess I wasn't as tired as you thought."

Ana and Sandy exchanged pointed looks at the admission and Aster found himself more than a little annoyed that they'd figured out something about Jack before he did. He got the picture soon...
enough, though, when Ana asked, "Jack, have you actually had a full night's sleep since you found out about the trial?"

The whole group fell silent as Jack suddenly bowed his head, refusing to meet their eyes, and moved his hands to rest in his lap. When he realized no one else was going to speak he took a deep breath and murmured the words "It's really not that big a deal."

Ana frowned and crawled across the floor, coming to rest cross-legged before Jack. Once she’d settled into her new spot, she reached out and took her nervous friend’s hands in hers as she said, "Jack, you do realize that the whole 'suffering in silence' thing isn’t allowed when you have friends, right?"

Jack's lips quirked up into a tiny smile, but he kept his gaze fixed on the carpet when he replied, "It's honestly nothing. Even if it was, it's not like you guys can do anything about it, so don't worry. I'll get over it."

Ana scowled at the nervous teen and Aster could tell she was using all of her will to keep from chastising Jack. He was actually legitimately impressed that she managed to keep those feelings out of her tone when she spoke again, saying "It's obviously not nothing if you're having trouble sleeping and freaking out on us, Jack."

Her words made the albino wince and he actually blushed as he looked up at her and said, "I guess I do owe you guys some kind of explanation after what happened at the shed today, huh?"

Ana shook her head, her scowl turning into a motherly smile. "You don't own us any explanations, Jack. We're your friends and we only want you to tell us if you're ready. We're here to help, not gossip."

The boys remained silent, letting Ana enact her motherly magic on Jack with soft words and a gentle smile. They’d all experienced some form of this treatment over the years and had long ago learned to just let Ana do her thing. It was apparently working, too, since Jack let out a tiny laugh and leaned forward, resting his head against her shoulder.

"I don't know if I'll ever really be ready to talk about that night, but I'll give it a shot if you wanna know what happened."

The gang remained silent with anticipation as Jack took a deep breath and began. His voice was unusually soft when he began his story and Aster had to strain to hear what he was saying.

"I haven't even told the police the full details of what happened that night. They know the basics, but I get the feeling I'm gonna have to go into a lot more detail for this stupid trial. I'd rather tell you guys first than a bunch of strangers.

"I guess it all started when I left Pippa's concert. I walked the mile or so from her school to the rec center and made my way to the shed to get his camera. Maybe he was watching me the whole time, maybe he just got lucky, I don't know, but he showed up at the shed right after I'd unlocked the door and gone inside."

Jack had squeezed his eyes shut as he lost himself in the memory and his voice was starting to quiver, but the others were too focused on his words to notice. "He hugged me. I… I knew right away that something was wrong because he never hugged me unless I hugged him first. I asked him why he was there and he said he was 'giving me a chance to make up for last year.' I didn't get what he meant until he threw me a bottle full of gasoline and a lighter."
Ana gasped tightening her grip on Jack's hands as Nick growled and Aster started to image just how nice it would feel to punch Pitch squarely in the jaw. Sandy, on the other hand, had focused on a different part of the story. What exactly did Jack need to make up for? There was a story there for certain, but now was not the time to ask about it.

"I refused, of course, and told him there was no way I'd do that to you guys. He... he got mad then." Jack’s voice was barely more than a whisper now, but he continued anyway. "He pushed me to the ground and, before I could get back up, the booths were... they were starting to burn. I think he started to laugh then, or maybe it was after..."

Jack stopped, his whole body was shaking now and his breaths were turning into gasps.

"Jack, you don't have to..." Ana started, but he cut her off.

"No, no, I do. I do need to do this." His knuckles were white with how hard he was gripping onto Ana’s hands, but she didn’t complain. If Jack was holding that tightly, it was because he need to. "After he set fire to the booths he..."

Jack stopped and for a moment the gang thought he’d given up. Then the words rushed out, as if Jack was trying to throw the memory out with them. "He locked me inside with them. "He locked me inside with them."

Aster's mind went blank. Locked Jack inside? As in, with the burning booths? Suddenly, Jack's strange panic attack made terrifying sense.

"He was definitely laughing by then. He even bragged about how he'd taken the key and my phone when... when he'd hugged me so that I'd, I'd be helpless. Then he pushed a piece of burning cloth under the door and left."

Jack was rushing through the memory now, his words short, fast, and harsh. "The key was inside the cloth, but I couldn't use it. It was too hot. I had to wait. Everything was burning. I couldn't stop it. There was so much fire. So much heat. It took forever for the key to cool. I almost lost it in the smoke and it was so cold outside. I called for help. He'd left my phone there, you see. I used it to call, but then... I think there were sirens..."

No one said a word. They all just stared at Jack in horror as his breathing grew too ragged for him to continue. After a few minutes, though, he slowly began to calm down and his breathing grew stronger, but there was still a quiver in his voice when he spoke again.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. If I hadn’t... I knew what he was capable of and I..." Jack stopped speaking to wet his dry lips and then continued. "I should have known better. I wanted to believe and so I... I should never have trusted him again. Not after last year. Not after what he tried to do. I just, well, there's no excuse and I'm so, so, sorry."

Ana gently began to run her thumbs along Jack’s hands in a comforting gesture as she said, "It's okay, Jack. You're not the first person to think the best of a friend."

At the word 'friend' Jack glanced up from the ground and gave her a look that was practically unreadable, but the laughter that followed sounded desperate, crazed, and hopelessly lost.

At first, Ana was simply confused by this reaction, but then the light went off and she pulled back, letting go of Jack's hands so that she could cover her mouth in a mixture of shock and alarm as she breathed out the words, "Oh, Jack..."

He only laughed harder at this, leaning back against the wall and curling his arms around his legs, forming his thin body into a tight ball.
Sandy's golden eyes widened in realization as he, too, connected the dots, but Aster and Nick remained clueless until Ana took her hands away from her trembling lips and asked, "How long were you in love with him?"
Years. Jack had been in love with Pitch for years.

Anger and sorrow swirled together as Aster leaned against the wall, quivering with the desire to punch something or to jump up and run out of the house, but at the same time, he felt unable to move from nausea. It felt like it had taken all of his strength just to leave Ana's room and slump down here in the Romoli's hallway.

He was still sitting like that – back pressed against the wall, arms dangling limply at his sides, head tilted back and staring at the ceiling – when Ana stormed out of her room, slammed the door, pulled him to his feet, pushed him down the hallway, and forced him into the guest room. Only after she'd closed the door behind her did she turn to glare at him, violet eyes ablaze with fury, and whisper, "What exactly do you think you're doing?"

He half-heartedly glared back for a moment before sighing and turning away from her, his shoulders slumping. "Leave me alone, Ana."

She didn't even consider the request. Instead, she grabbed his arm again and turned him around, looking like she wanted to slap him. "I will not leave you alone! Do you realize that Jack probably thinks you hate him now?"

Aster started to protest, but Ana cut him off.

"You ran off the second he told us he was gay!"

"Who cares if he's gay?" Aster was trembling again, his entire body ridged with the effort it was taking to keep from shouting. "I ran off when he told us he was in love with a psychopath! Or did you miss that part?"

Ana made frustrated sound and threw her hands wide, a sarcastic smirk twisting her pretty face into an ugly mask. "Hey, at least you know you have a chance now!"

Aster stared at her for a full minute before letting out a mocking bark of laughter. "Yes, because I'm totally Jack's type! Why didn't you ever tell me that I was a sadistic bastard?"

Now she did slap him, hissing out the words, "I don't know about the sadistic bit, but right now you have the second part down perfectly."

They stood there in silence, staring into each other's eyes, engaged in a mute argument until Ana sighed and the anger in her violet orbs drained away.

"Aster, Jack needs you."

The artist's green eyes filled with confusion as he tried to understand the meaning behind these words. "Why would he possibly need me?"

"You're his best friend, Aster, and he thinks you've rejected him. I left him with Nick and Sandy, but there isn't much the three of us can do. You understand what he's going through better than we possibly could," Ana explained as she gently laid a hand against her friend's shoulder.

"Huh? How can I possibly understand this?"
In spite of the heavy emotions surrounding the pair, Ana broke into a wide grin. "You know, whoever said that gay men are sensitive and good with reading emotions really needs to spend a day hanging out with you."

"Ana…” he spoke her name like a warning, but her only response to that was a simple shrug.

"Well it's true! Just use your head for once and think, okay? Yes, Jack was in love with Pitch, but the key word there is was! I'm sorry your little fantasy where Jack is secretly madly in love with you has been shattered, but welcome to the real one! You're the only one of us who knows what it's like to deal with an unrequited crush."

A look of surprised comprehension flashed across Aster's face before he quickly returned his features to a moody scowl. It was a momentary thing, but it had lasted long enough for Ana to know that she'd won once again.

Now that the argument was over, Ana stepped forward and hugged him as she said, "I know this whole delicate emotions thing is hard for you when you don't have a paintbrush in your hand, but can you at least try?"

Aster sighed and hugged her back, the calming smell of Ana's floral shampoo draining away most of his remaining tension. "Alright, I'll try, but don't get upset when I mess this up."

"You won't," she whispered, smiling into his chest. "After all, I think he could use a good dose of love right now. Try to keep from kissing him, though, okay?"

Aster cracked a tiny smile at the jibe and squeezed her tighter. "Okay. Just do me a favor and get the guys out of the room, alright? If I'm gonna make an idiot of myself I'd rather do it without an audience."

Ana pulled back and grinned. “I think I can do that.”

They knew.

The though made Jack wish he could just curl up and disappear. How messed up did they have to think he was now? But he couldn't lie, so he told the truth in a broken voice and looked up just in time to watch as Aster's face turned ashen. Jack wanted to say something, but he didn’t know what. So he just remained silent as the artist got up and bolted from the room.

As the door slammed behind the fleeing teen, Jack hid his face once more, unwilling to watch as the others abandon him, too. He couldn't blame them, either. He could only blame his stupid heart.

Pitch had been his whole world, his only friend in a sea of loneliness, the only one who saw Jack as something more than a trouble making weirdo. He hadn't meant to give Pitch his heart, but the dark-haired boy had stolen it away all the same and Jack had never thought to steal it back.

It seemed insane now, but at the time it couldn't have been more natural. Just another step along the road as the only person Pitch let near him. After all, it seemed like he'd given Pitch everything else. His memories, his fears, why not his heart? He'd never told his former friend about his feelings, but he'd planned to.

Then Pitch had tried to burn those props. Despite his feelings, Jack couldn't let him do that.
He'd thought Pitch would understand, would see that Jack was right and that they were going too far, crossing some invisible line that Jack never wanted to cross. He hadn't. Pitch had abandon Jack for his action, breaking the fragile albino's heart in two. The one person who understood him, gone. It had hurt Jack more than he cared to admit.

Then it had gotten even worse. Instead of eventually forgiving Jack, Pitch had kept coming back to his once friends with new schemes. Every time he told Jack that it was either do this or stay his enemy. Jack didn't want in some scheme, he just wanted his friend back, and so he'd refused every time. Hoping that this time, this time, Pitch would decide he missed Jack too much to keep demanding something in return for his friendship, but it had never happened. Jack had almost given in and followed after Pitch when the school year started and he'd seen him again. He'd been so lonely, but he'd held firm and then he'd gotten involved with the people Pitch hated the most.

Jack had thought that would be the end of it, that he'd lost his crush forever, but then Pitch had come back. It hadn't been because he wanted Jack to be part of some new scheme or to poke fun at him, either. He'd come back because he'd missed Jack. He'd even cried.

When Jack had seen those tears, his heart had leapt with joy. Pitch really did care. What a fool he'd been. Pitch hadn't cared about him for a minute and that only hurt worse.

These troubled thoughts swirled through Jack's mind as silent tears soaked his jeans. Though he could feel a small hand rubbing tiny circles on his back and hear comforting words being murmured in his ear, he didn't look up. He didn't want to see the revulsion in their eyes. Then the tiny hand left, the comforting words stopped. In their place came a meaty arm that wrapped around his shoulders, a soft hand placed against his own, and loud words about food. He'd ignored these, too. The last thing he wanted was to eat.

Now these things were leaving as well and it seemed like nothing was taking their place. Jack had known this was coming, but that didn't make it hurt any less. His heart ached with the knowledge that he would soon be alone again and the tears began to fall faster, but then strong arms were wrapping around his body and someone was silently stroking his hair. That felt… oddly comforting. He'd never had someone play with his hair like this before.

Aster stared down at the softly crying Jack, nervously running his hand through his hair. He really wasn't good at these things. Last time Jack had cried, he'd been able to stop the tears before they really started to get going, but that wasn't an option this time. Well, when Sophie got upset she liked to be held and have her hair stroked, maybe that would work here, too? He really hoped so because there was no plan b.

Attack plan decided, Aster fell to his knees and took a deep breath before leaning forward and grabbing his crush as hard as he could in a powerful hug. He didn't say anything, he just held the crying teen in his arms and gently ran his fingers along the hair on the back of Jack's neck, waiting for the tears to stop.

As he waited, he marveled at how soft that snowy mane was. It was like silk. Really, really fine silk. Was it naturally like this? Jack didn't seem like the type of guy who would care that much about his hair, but there was no way hair could actually be this soft without some kind of product. Lost in his musing, Aster sort of forgot about the fact that Jack was crying as he ran his fingers through those white tresses. It was a lot shorter than his, but so much softer. He found himself wishing that Jack's hair was a bit longer so he could play with it better.
Then he noticed the tiny giggles emanating from his crush and the red-rimmed, but happy eyes looking up into his and sparkling with amusement. Instantly, Aster realized what he was doing and pulled back, his face bright crimson, and watched as Jack's giggles turned into chuckles and then to full on laughter. It didn't last long and, when Jack stopped laughing, he looked a little sad.

"Why'd you stop?"

He realized what he'd said only when Aster's eyes widened and, soon, Jack's face was just as red as his friend's.

"Sorry! I mean, wow, not that I…"

Aster ran a hand through his hair nervously and said, "It's okay."

They sat together, Aster's knees resting against Jack's bare feet, both blushing crimson until Jack managed to stammer out the words, "So, where did the others go?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, they went to get food. I think they figured you'd be pretty hungry by now. Well, Nick figured, the others just went along with it."

"No, not really. I actually feel a little queasy, but that was… nice of them."

The awkward silence was back again and Aster didn't know what to say to break it. He opened his mouth to ask if Jack was alright, but instead the words "Why him?" popped out.

Jack regarded Aster nervously as the Australian tried to hide the fact that he was mentally screaming at himself for asking such a moronic question.

"Well, there wasn't anyone else, was there? He was my only…"

Jack let the sentence trail off. He looked so vulnerable, sitting there and staring at Aster with his pale face full of fear, that the green-eyed teen found himself fighting the urge to hug him again. Instead, Aster scooted so that he was sitting next to his crush with his legs splayed out across the floor and his arms pressed against the ground to keep himself upright. As he moved, he thought about what Jack had said. It did make sense in a twisted sort-of way and he admitted that with a simple statement of "Okay, yeah, I, I get it."

Jack sighed and rested his head against his knees before saying "You’ve probably had to deal with the same thing, huh?"

Now how did Jack know that? Had Ana told him? If she did…

“I mean, if I swung that way I’d probably have a crush on her, too.”

Wait, back up.

“Huh”

Sensing his friend’s confusion, Jack looked over at Aster and smiled softly before saying, “Ana. I mean, she’s the only girl above the age of seven that you hang out with, so I figured…”

Oh boy. How was he supposed to respond to that? He could just say no, he’d never thought of Ana that way, and then let the conversation die, but he’d promised to comfort Jack… Could he really trust the albino to keep that secret? Of course he could. Emotional bonding. Right…

“No, I’ve never had a… thing for Ana.”
“Oh.” Jack looked embarrassed again and started to turn away, but then Aster finished his statement.

“Now Nick, on the other hand…”

Jack whipped his head back around so fast that Aster wouldn’t have been surprised to find that the smaller teen had given himself whiplash. He had to admit, the embarrassment of that little confession was almost worth the sight of Jack Frost struck speechless.

“Nick?”

Well, almost speechless.

“Yeah, not my finest hour. Ana got a real kick out of it, though.”

“Aster could feel that heat of a blush climbing across his cheeks. Emotional bonding, comforting Jack, keep calm, don’t yell.

“Well, I was thirteen and it’s not like it lasted that long.”

“You liked Nick?”

Okay, screw emotional bonding.

“Yes, I liked Nick! Now rack off!”

They both stared at each other, a little shocked at Aster’s outburst, but then Jack smiled. Aster couldn’t help but grin back sheepishly and the smiles turned to chuckles which then transformed into full-blown laughter.

Soon, the two teens were leaning against each other, almost crying with laughter, though neither of them was quite sure why.

When Jack had calmed down enough to speak, he said, “I’m sorry, I just can’t see you mooning over Nick!”

“Be glad you didn’t! I’ve been reliably informed that it was not a pretty sight.”

Jack giggled again and he turned to look at Aster, about to make another comment when the real meaning of the confession sunk in.

“Wait, you’re gay?”

“Brilliant deduction there, Sherlock. Nice to see you were paying attention.”

“I never… you’re gay?”

Aster had really hopped they’d be able to glance over that little fact, but apparently not. Great. Just great. He did not want to be having this conversation; he didn't even know how to have this conversation! Sandy, Ana, and his folks had just figured it out. He didn't know how Nick had gotten the memo, but he suspected a certain blonde busybody had been involved. Now his first time officially "coming out" to someone would be to his heartbroken crush who was possibly still in love with a psychopath. Lovely. Emotional Bonding. Kill Ana when this was over. Right.
Biting back swear words, Aster turned away from Jack and murmured, "yeah."

"Really?"

The artist's gaze shot back to Jack, a glare of annoyance plastered on his face. "Yes, really! I don't just go around saying I like other guys for the fun of it, ya whacker!"

It was only after this little speech that he noticed Jack was smiling at him. Not just any smile, either, it was that stupid smile that made Aster's whole body heat up and turn to jelly.

"I never woulda guessed. But, then again, you're an artist, so maybe I should have known?"

"Just because a guy likes art doesn't mean he's gay!" Aster tried to sound annoyed, but failed miserably because it was impossible to be annoyed with Jack when he was still giving him that adorable, sexy, amazing smile.

"But you're an artist and you're gay, so I wouldn't have been wrong." Jack pointed out, still smiling as his blue eyes shinned with mirth.

Aster gave up and leaned back against the wall for a good ol’ fashioned pout, but stopped when he felt Jack lean against his shoulder.

"Sorry, that was a little mean of me. I was just surprised, that's all," Jack whispered.

Aster didn't speak. He knew anything he tried to say at this point would either come out as a garbled mess or the words "I love you" and neither of these was a desired option. He almost breathed a sigh of relief when Jack finally pulled back and turned to look at him.

“Thanks for telling me, though. I won’t say a word to Nick.”

Well that was a relief.

“Good. You’re the only person who knows, other than Ana.”

“Speaking of Ana, when do you think they’ll come back?”

Aster shrugged and said, “Who knows? Not until Nick’s made something sickeningly sweet for you to eat, probably.”

Jack frowned, clearly not excited about the idea and a thought popped into Aster’s mind.

“Wanna get outta here?”

“Huh?”

“Listen, mate. I get the feeling you have no interest in dealing those three all trying to mother you at once, so I’m suggesting a jailbreak.”

Jack’s frown slowly morphed into a smirk.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, as I recall, I own you a movie.”

"If you’re…” Jack stopped mid-sentence, as if suddenly realizing something. Then his pale skin turned crimson once more and he started to stammer an apology.
Aster was lost. What did Jack think he'd done now?

"...so, sorry! I didn't mean to use the word date like that! I know you weren't asking me on a date. It was just a joke! I didn't know it was even an option and, I mean, I'm so sorry! That must have been so embarrassing for you! I..."

Oh. Aster grinned at his blushing crush. He knew he shouldn't be enjoying this, but Jack looked positively adorable.

"It's okay, mate. I know what you meant."

Jack stopped babbling, but still looked embarrassed as Aster pulled out his phone and checked the time before saying, "It's only four o'clock. If you want, we could make a five o'clock showing."

Jack considered the offer for a second before asking, "Should we leave a note?"

Aster put away his phone and shrugged. "Sure, if you'd like we can waste time doing that. Just know that, if they make it back here before we get out, Ana's gonna go into mama mode when she sees your red-rimmed eyes, Nick's gonna try to make you eat at least half of the food in the Romoli's kitchen, and Sandy isn't gonna be able to stop them. I've offered you an out, but once they're here, that option is gone. Your call, mate."

Jack gulped as his eyes widened. "...we can just send them a text when we get to the theater, right?"

Aster grinned and rose to his feet before offering Jack a hand up as he said, "Wise choice."
Chapter 8

Aster was grinning as they left the theater and it wasn't because they'd seen a comedy. No, his amusement stemmed from the wide-eyed look of awe on his companion's face.

"So, what'd ya think?"

Jack came out of his stupor almost instantly and a smile briefly spread across his pale lips before he started to babble about the film as they walked across the parking lot. Aster tried to pay attention, he really did, but the albino wasn't exactly being coherent in his praise. Jack hadn't been kidding when he'd said he hadn't seen a movie in years!

The Australian laughed lightly before holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Whoa, mate, slow down!"

Jack stopped his rant and smiled, looking a little sheepish as he said, "Sorry! I’d forgotten how much fun movies were."

Aster smiled and nodded, secretly hoping that Jack didn't want to talk about the film in detail because he hadn't actually paid that much attention to what was happening on screen. He’d spent most of the film watching Jack instead.

It hadn't been a conscious thing; he'd merely glanced over at Jack a few minutes into the film and found himself fascinated by the look of wonder on the smaller teen's face. He'd planned to look back at the screen, but watching his crush react to the movie was much more interesting than watching the movie itself. It was only when the lights came on and people started to exit the room that he'd realized that he'd spent the entire film watching Jack.

"So, what'd you think?"

Drat. Aster almost panicked before a clever idea popped into his head.

"Oh, that was definitely worth the price of admission."

Jack grinned and started to babble again when a loud roar stopped him mid-sentence. The albino glanced at his stomach before laughing and saying "Maybe I should’ve let Nick force feed me after all."

"No way, Nick has terrible taste in food. That loony thinks fruit cake tastes good. I'll show you a real corker of a meal!" the Australian exclaimed as they arrived at his car and he pulled his keys from his coat pocket.

“A corker of a meal, huh?” Jack asked as Aster unlocked the car and the couple hopped inside.

"Yeah."

It was only when he noticed Jack's amused grin as he went to turn on the car that Aster realized what the albino had been asking.

"Oh. Corker means good."

Jack chuckled lightly as Aster pulled out of the parking spot and then said, "What does whacker mean?"
The artistic teen glanced over at his passenger while he pulled the car to a stop at the parking lot's exit. This wasn't the conversation he'd been expecting to have after the movie, but at least he knew all the answers.

"Whacker means idiot."

Then he pulled out of the parking lot and started to head towards his favorite burger place, assuming the conversation was probably over. It wasn’t.

"What about good onya?"

What was with this sudden obsession with Australian slang?

"It's a term of praise like good job or well done."

"How about rack off?"

Now Aster was laughing, but he still managed to say "I should bloody well think that one was obvious, mate."

Jack crossed his arms and stuck out his lower lip, looking remarkably like Sophie did when she was pouting. "Well, yeah, but I wanna make sure I got it right."

"Rack off means go away or get lost," Aster explained, still chuckling at his mental comparison of his crush to a toddler.

"What are some other ones?"

Aster pulled the car to a stop as the light before them changed to red and turned to stare at Jack. "Okay Frostbite, what's going on? Why are you suddenly so interested in this?"

The albino looked a little embarrassed as he replied, "Because I realized you know all of this stuff about me, but I don't really know that much about you."

Oh. That was true. Aster was a private person and didn't really go around sharing bits of information about himself. The idea of sharing those things with Jack made his heart flutter as the light changed to green and Aster refocused his gaze on the road. He didn't even glance at Jack as he muttered the words, "I'm really not that interesting."

"Come on, give me a go, mate."

Jack did his best to mimic Aster's accent on the last word, making the Australian smile.

"Your accent is terrible."

It was a lie, just something to say to keep the conversation flowing. Jack was actually able to pull off a pretty decent imitation.

"I don't care if I sound a right whacker to ya, mate, this is too much fun to stop." Jack replied, continuing to endeavor with his attempt to sound Australian.

"If you wanna sound like an Aussie, you might as well say too much of a crack instead of fun."

"Crack?" Jack looked confused and the accent was gone.

Aster flicked on his turn signal and pulled into the parking lot of a tiny diner. "That one's hard to
A crack is like a good time, but it's also used in other ways. Like, 'what's the crack?' or 'what's crackin'?' You yanks use it a bit, too. Ever heard of a crack shot?"

He parked the car and faced Jack once more, enjoying the confusion on his friend's face.

"Slang's not so easy to learn, is it mate?"

Jack shrugged and smiled as he said, "I guess not. We're eating here?"

Aster nodded and pulled open his door, stepping out into the chilly, night air. "Yep! This is my favorite restaurant."

The smaller teen got out of the car and followed Aster into the building. Inside, a waitress in tan slacks and a black shirt that read "Laura's Diner" guided the two to a booth at the back of the restaurant. Then she introduced herself as Amanda and handed each of them a black menu, promising to return quickly with drinks.

After she'd left, Jack looked around the room. He'd always known this place was here, but he'd never actually been inside. An old fashion soda bar surrounded the kitchen and aquamarine booths, like the one he and Aster were currently seated in, lined the walls. It was all very retro, like something from the 50's.

There weren't many people here tonight, though. The only other patrons were a lone man reading a book at the bar and an older couple sitting at a booth on the other side of the room.

Across the table, Aster had flipped open the menu and was deciding what to order. As he debated between a hamburger and the diner's always available breakfast combo, the Australian felt a piercing gaze focusing on him. He looked up into the confused, blue eyes of his crush and felt a blush begging to steal across his face.

"What?"

"This is your favorite restaurant?"

"Yes?" Aster replied, his voice taking on a steely tone and his posture hardening from relaxed to defensive as he waited for Jack to make some joke.

Instead, the albino merely said, "Interesting" and flipped open his menu, apparently considering the conversation over.

Aster wasn't okay with that.

"What's wrong with it?"

Jack's eyes flickered from the menu to Aster before returning their gaze to the plastic list of food. A smirk stole over pale lips, but all he said was "Nothing."

Aster was getting annoyed now and his posture grew even more ridged.

"You can't make a big deal about this being my favorite restaurant and then not tell me why, Frostbite."

Jack looked like he was going to reply, but then Amanda returned with two glasses of water and asked if they were ready. Jack said he was and Aster resigned himself to waiting a bit longer to finish the discussion.
An order of two hamburgers and a chocolate milkshake later, he was staring across the table at his "date," waiting for an explanation.

Jack merely grinned at him and waited for Aster to re-ask the question he was obviously itching to hear the answer to.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Okay, so why is it 'interesting' that this is my favorite restaurant?"

Jack thought about it for a second before saying, "Because it's so you."

Aster wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

"It is?"

The albino was smiling now.

"Yeah, it is. It's peaceful and quiet. I bet you like coming here because it's a good place to draw."

Aster smiled now, fighting back another blush as his posture relaxed and he sunk into his seat.

"My dad works in the building next door. When I was a kid, I used to walk over here in the summer, order a milkshake, and draw until he was done with work. Then he'd come over here, get me, and we'd walk home together."

Jack nodded, clearly pleased with how right he'd been. Then he said "mine's a rock" and Aster was lost again.

"Huh?"

Amanda was back, placing a malt glass full of thick, brown liquid in front of Jack. He thanked her and Aster accepted her offer of a water refill before returning his attention to Jack.

The pale youth took a sip of the drink and made a happy sound before continuing. "There's this rock in the woods behind the high school. It's a good place to go and think. If I liked to draw, that's probably where I'd do it."

Amanda returned and filled Aster's glass from a pitcher of water. He absentmindedly thanked her, but never turned his gaze from Jack. Once she was gone again, he ran his hand through his hair and asked, "Do you go there often?"

Jack took another sip of his shake and shrugged. "I used to, but then I started to hang out with you guys. I haven't been back there since…"

Jack trailed off and Aster knew they'd entered a memory Jack wasn't comfortable talking about. He didn't push the matter, instead moving the conversation onto a different path.

"So, how are the twins?"

Jack was happy again. He eagerly started to tell Aster all about his visit the previous weekend and how Jamie and Pippa had asked him to go skating with their friends the following one as well. "This weekend was Mrs. Bennett's birthday, though, so I figured it was best if I stayed out of the way, but I promised I'd visit next weekend."

"It seems like they're happy you're around, huh?" Aster noted with a grin. He was truly enjoying
watching Jack talk about his siblings. It was nice to see his crush so fully of joy after the earlier waterworks.

Jack smile softened at the comment, looking almost a little shy. "Yeah, they really are. I never dreamed they'd actually want me to be such a big part of their lives, but Pippa is super excited to have me sitting in the front row at her next concert and Jamie's been bugging me to teach him how to ice skate. I think he's got a little crush on Pippa's friend Amber and wants to show off for her."

"You learned all this in the space of two visits?" Aster asked, eyebrows raised.

Jack grinned and shook his head. "No, they call me to talk every couple of nights. Pippa started it the day after the Christmas fair. I guess she wanted to make sure I was real and not just a dream. Normally I get roped into telling them a bedtime story, but I don't mind. The Bennets seem to be okay with it, too. I'm like a dial-a-babysitter of sorts."

"I wish I was as good with stories as you are. Sophie's started to beg me for them and I always end up telling her some well-known fairy tale."

Amanda returned again, this time with their food, and the boys began to eat. Aster held back a laugh as he watched Jack wolf down his burger hungrily. He hadn't been lying when he said the food was good.

He was just leaning down to take a bite of his own burger when Jack paused his munching and asked, "So, why Easter?"

Aster placed the burger back on its plate and looked at Jack, raising an eyebrow in confusion. "Elaborate a bit, please?"

Jack set down his meal and did so. "I mean, I know why Nick is so into Christmas, it's obviously a family thing, but why are you so into Easter?"

Aster grabbed his burger and took a bite, thinking as he slowly chewed. He only swallowed the bite when he was ready to reply. "That's kind-of a long story."

"I've got time," Jack replied before resuming chowing down on his own meal.

Aster took another bite, thinking. Why Easter? Now there was a question that no one had ever bothered to ask before. When his mouth was once again empty, he began. "I didn't want to move here, you know. I liked Australia."

Jack didn't say anything, he just sat there and listened as Aster talked.

"The worst part was that we moved here at the beginning of April. I went from sunny beaches and shorts to freezing cold highlands and a winter coat in the space of a day. I was certain that I wasn't gonna make any friends and that I was gonna hate this place. Then came Easter Sunday."

"They were holding an Easter egg hunt at the park and, despite the cold, my mom made me go. I just knew it was gonna be the worst time of my life. We'd only been here a week at that point and I hadn't even started school, so I didn’t know anyone. I was going to be the only kid at the hunt with no friends.

"As I was waiting for the lady who was running the event to tell us we could start searching, a little girl with bright-blonde hair came up to me and said 'hi.' I ignored her at first, but she had a will of iron when it came to what she wanted and, apparently, what she wanted was me as a friend."
Aster was smiling at the memory and, across the table, Jack was grinning. He had a pretty good guess who that little girl was.

"By the end of the Easter egg hunt I was firmly cemented as her friend and was being introduced to the two boys she had been hanging out with before she met me. When I learned that she lived on the same street as me, I knew that there was no way I was gonna escape being a part of the gang. I didn't really mind, though.

"They've talked about that day before, but I've never told them that I didn't wanna be at the Easter egg hunt and they've always just assumed it was my favorite holiday even before they met me. It wasn't. Easter's my favorite because it lead me to them. I throw that hunt every year in the hope that some other lonely little ankle-biter can find his new beginning, too."
"Don't tell them that story, okay?"

Jack blinked in surprise as Aster's voice suddenly lost its warm tone and grew serious.

"Why not?"

The Australian ran a hand through his hair, something Jack had started to notice that he only did whenever he was nervous.

"It's just, I've never told them and it'd be weird if they suddenly knew."

"You mean you don't wanna look like a big softy."

As Aster started to protest Jack laughed and ran a hand across his heart in the symbol of an x.

"Your secret's safe with me, but I think they'd be honored if they knew. Nick might actually appreciate Easter a bit more."

"Not a chance, mate. Just drop it," Aster replied before digging into his waiting burger. Jack merely chuckled in amusement at his friend's embarrassed behavior and resumed working on his own meal. They ate in comfortable silence until Amanda returned once more, this time with the bill.

"Is this a split bill or is one of you two paying for both?"

Jack snatched a credit card out of his wallet and handed it to the waitress. "It's on me today."

She nodded and took the card away before Aster had time to protest. Once she was gone, though, the Australian teen folded his arms across his chest in annoyance and grumbled out the words, "You didn't need to do that."

"I know, but I wanted to. Consider it a thank you for everything you did today. You didn't have to waste four hours hanging out with me and making sure I was okay, but you did," Jack replied with another one of those god damn smiles.

Aster blushed a light pink and turned to gaze out the window as Amanda brought back the credit card and a slip of paper. Once she was gone, though, the pale youth asked, "Are you gonna sit there and act huffy all night or are we heading out?"

Aster looked at him moodily, pursing his lips in what could almost be called a pout.

"Come on, you can pay for me next time if you're gonna be such a baby about it."

"I'm not being a baby!" Was the annoyed reply as Aster grabbed his own coat and stood up, following a laughing Jack through the room and out of the diner.

"Maybe not a baby, but certainly a whacker."

Jack's return to his imitation accent made Aster smile in spite of himself. As he unlocked his car, he looked across the vehicle into the grinning face of his crush and declared, "You know, you're a corker of a cobber, Jack, you really are."
Puzzled, Jack opened the passenger's door and swung his body into the car as he asked, "Is that a good thing?"

Aster nodded and started up the car.

"So, do I get to know what a cobber is?"

The artist pulled the car out of its parking space and replied, "Let's see if you can guess it."

Jack thought about it for a minute before jokingly asking, "Annoying white-haired kid who I'm stuck hanging out with?"

Aster's only response was to laugh and shake his head.

"A man of excellent wit and charm?"

"Nope."

"Someone with dashing good looks?"

Aster glanced over at his grinning passenger and rolled his eyes. Even though it was a perfect description of Jack, he wasn't about to admit that. "Try again."

"Friend?"

Aster grinned and jokingly replied, "Hey, it only took you a couple goes, but you got it eventually!"

Jack didn't laugh at the good natured jibe. Instead, he was smiling that damn smile again and laying all of its force on Aster. The Australian gulped and focused his attention on not crashing the car. That smile really ought to be a controlled substance.

"So, a corker of a cobber is a good friend, huh?"

Aster nodded, still focused on the road. "More than a good friend, actually, a best friend."

He didn't even need to look at the other teen to know Jack's smile had grown even brighter.

The next day found Aster lying on his bed doing something he hadn't ever allowed himself to do before: he was sketching a picture of Jack. With the skill of hours spent watching and daydreaming of his crush, the artist was able to masterfully capture the image of the other teen's face in ink. He'd been at this for a good hour, but now he was almost done. When he finished, and let himself study the drawing, he found himself staring into a nearly perfect black-and-white image of a smiling Jack.

Aster just lay there and looked at the sketch for a while. He'd gotten most of it right, but he wasn't happy with the eyes. Jack's eyes were a world unto themselves and Aster wasn't sure anyone could truly capture the beauty of those eyes with a mere sketch. They needed color to really come to life. The smile, on the other hand, was just right. Aster didn't think he could possibly do a better job of capturing those graceful lips.

He found himself wondering if Jack's lips were as soft as he imagined.

The Australian ran a finger along the image’s edge, feeling his heart start to pound. Would it be weird if he kissed a sketch? Probably, but the idea was surprisingly tempting. After all, it was probably the closest he'd ever get to kissing Jack.
No, he wasn't going to kiss his own sketch! So, why was he suddenly holding the sketchpad so tightly in his hands? …Maybe just one kiss? No one had to know.

The door burst open, making Aster jump and drop the sketchpad in surprise. When he looked up, it was to see a wickedly grinning Ana standing in the room's entrance.

As soon as he saw her, he grabbed his sketchpad and flipped it closed. He didn't care that Ana knew about his crush, but he was definitely not okay with anyone else seeing that drawing. He was also desperately praying she hadn't noticed what he'd been up to when she barged in.

Even if Ana had known what Aster was hiding, she wouldn't have cared. She was there with only one goal in mind. "Details, Aster! I need details!"

"Details?" he asked nervously, suddenly realizing what this was all about.

"Yes!" The blonde shouted the reply before jumping onto the edge of his bed. Her violet eyes were full of excitement and delight. "How did it go? I'm assuming well since I didn't have to deal with a call from either of you last night."

Aster smiled shyly, memories of the previous night flicking through his mind. "It was really fun."

"Aster, DETAILS! Really fun is a terrible description! You’re an artist, paint me a mental picture!" The evil smirk returned. "Or do I need to ask Jack?"

"No!" Aster's eyes widened in fear at the question. If she started to interrogate Jack there was a pretty good chance that the albino would figure out that something was up. "Just tell me what you want to know, you she-devil."

And thus Ana got to hear the abridged version of the nights events. She cooed and gasped appreciatively at all the right parts, making Aster blush, but when he got to the part where he'd dropped Jack off at home the story ground to a halt and Ana's eyes began to gleam with excitement.

"Did something happen when you dropped him off?"

The thought that Ana really needed something to keep her busy because she was far too excited about his love life briefly crossed Aster's mind, but he answered the question anyway. "I don't know."

She looked really excited now. "Ooooh, what happened?"

Aster sighed, drew one of his legs close to his chest, and rested his head on his knee. "We were talking about Australia and what it was like living there when we got to the Overland's. Once I'd parked, I expected him to just get out of the car and wave goodbye, but he didn't. Instead he smiled over at me, said 'I had an amazing time tonight, by the way' and then he left."

He knew it wasn't as interesting as Ana had been hoping, but to Aster, that little admission had left his heart pounding. 'An amazing time' did not sound like something you said to your friend after a night on the town. It sounded like something you said to a date.

Apparently Ana agreed because she let out a happy squeal and lunged forward to hug him. "Oh, Aster, that's awesome!"

"I'm not going to ask him out, Ana."

He replied as he hugged her back, deciding to cut her off now before she really got going. To his surprise, she laughed and agreed with him.
"I would hope not!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aster asked, pushing her away so he could look into her eyes. Didn't she think he was good enough for Jack anymore?

"There's no way Jack's ready for that yet," she explained. "I told you to ask him out before we found out about the… Pitch situation. Now that we know about that, things are going to be tricky and we have to handle this with delicacy."

As Ana started to lecture him on wooing strategies and subtle ways to make Jack notice him ("First off, we have to get you some clothes that don't have paint all over them. Presentation is key when catching someone’s eye!") Aster hid his face in his hands and groaned. He was at the mercy of a teenage matchmaker with no one to call to his aid. He was doomed.
"Ana, this is the stupidest thing I've ever placed on my body. I'm taking it off, we're leaving, and you are never to speak of this again," Aster declared as he stepped out of the changing booth and glared at his patiently waiting companion.

Ana ignored his grousing and examined the outfit. She was used to Aster by now and knew how to read him. He liked this one and that made him uncomfortable. After years of wearing nothing by ill-fitting jeans and paint splattered t-shirt, the idea that he could look attractive probably had his head spinning, but that's why she was involved.

"Go ahead and turn so I can see the full package," she commanded and Aster complied, though the glare never left his face.


Her companion made an annoyed, scoffing sound, but Ana noticed that he didn't fight her on the matter. In fact, as he handed the clerk his credit card at the checkout, she swore he was actually fighting an excited smile.

Aster allowed himself a one last peak in the mirror and adjusted his green bandana before grabbing his backpack and heading to the kitchen. He still couldn't believe he was wearing this get up to school, but he couldn't lie to himself. He looked good. Good enough to draw the gaze of a certain, incredible attractive, albino? That he didn't know, but he was starting to hope that it would.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, absentmindedly eating a milk drenched Weetabix bar and daydreaming about Jack, when a familiar buzzing in his pocket drew him back to reality. His dreamy smile transformed to a frown as he pulled his phone out, flipping it open to see what had cause the vibrations. It was a text from Ana.

"Are you coming?"

He looked at the message in confusion and then checked the time. Just how long had he been day dreaming? After sending a quick reply of "BRT, eating" he wolfed down the rest of his soggy breakfast and rushed out of the front door. An amused looking Ana was waiting for him at the end of the driveway.

That really surprised him.

"You're walking with me?"

Ana didn't bother to acknowledge the question since the answer was obvious, opting to give an appreciative wolf-whistle instead. "I didn't think you'd be so willing to wear it! I figured I'd have to drag you back inside and make you change. You look incredible!"

Aster tried to look uninterested in the compliment as he walked down the driveway to join her, but he failed miserably. With a last ditch effort to maintain his dignity, he gruffly exclaimed, "Just don't make me regret doing this, okay?"
She giggled in amusement and nodded. "You have my word. Now, let's go!"

After a week of walking to school alone, it was a little strange to have Ana by his side once more, but he wasn't going to complain. Her constant chattering was a welcome sound and made the walk to school fly by.

As the familiar, low, gray building came into view, the two teens picked up their pace, hurrying across the parking lot to where the nice, warm sleigh was waiting for them.

Aster reached the jeep first and opened the back door, sliding into the seat by Sandy just as Ana reached the cherry-red vehicle. It was only when he was about to close the door behind him that Aster noticed that she was laughing and that Sandy was treating him to a look of deep amusement. Nick merely seemed surprised.

"What?"

"It's nothing, really," Nick replied as Ana got into the car. "I'm just surprised that you let her have the front seat."

Aster's whole face lit up scarlet. Oh. The thought of sitting anywhere but where Jack would soon be hadn't even crossed his mind.

"Nice outfit, by the way. What's up with the new look?"

Aster managed to stammer out something about Ana and a shopping trip before she stepped in to save him.

"I made Aster let me take him shopping. Can you believe I had to go over to his house this morning just to make sure he wore it?"

Nick's curious look transformed into one of sympathy. Ana had been trying to get Aster to wear something that wasn't covered in paint for years. As Nick focused that pitying gaze on him, Aster mentally made a note to thank Ana for saving him from trying to explain his sudden interest in fashion. Then, the car door was opening and all thoughts of thanks flew somewhere far away as Aster turned to stare into shocked, blue eyes.

Ana had been right in her guess that Jack would be the type to go for the "bad-boy" look. In place of Aster's normal ill-fitting and paint-splattered artist's chic, he was wearing a tight, white t-shirt that showed off his chest and had a "marvelously low-cut neckline. Over the shirt, he was wearing a warm, black-leather jacket she'd picked out in order to give Aster a bit of 'dangerous air' and, instead of a faded, ratty looking bandanna, Ana had forced the Australian to buy a new, bright-green one that perfectly matched his eyes and made them 'pop'. That was just the part that Jack could see, too. Once he got a look at Aster's new jeans (which actually showed off the Australian's physique instead of hiding it) Ana was betting that Jack would be wiping away drool.

Jack was starting to worry. Yet another nightmare had left him gasping and unable to sleep. How many was that now? He'd given up counting, but knew it was somewhere in the double digits.

The first few hadn't bothered him, he'd even expected them. Nightmares had plagued him after his parent's death, after all, but those hadn't been nightly occurrences like these and he didn't remember having that much trouble falling back asleep.
He sighed and thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans as he trudged towards the high school. Thinking about his nightmares was probably not going to help him get rid of them. He just hoped that the ever observant duo of Ana and Sandy would miss the tell-tail signs that he was exhausted.

As his feet hit the blacktop of the parking lot, Jack plastered a smile on his face and headed toward the familiar jeep. From here, he could see that Nick and Ana were turned around and talking to someone in the back, meaning that his presence had yet to be noticed. The fact that he was early due to being up since 3am probably helped, too.

Oh well, time to make his entrance!

Jack threw open the car door, ready to call out his usual greeting, but the words died in his throat as his eyes widened in shock. Since when did Aster start dressing like that?

Wordlessly, the albino slid into the car, staring at Aster the entire time. Finally, he managed to ask, "What happened to you?" in a stunned voice.

Most people would have noticed the tone of that statement and realized that Jack was more than a little impressed, but Aster was too nervous to hear anything but the words themselves. Jack didn't like it. Yesterday had been a total waste. What had he been thinking letting Ana do this to him?

Ana immediately realized what was happening when she saw Aster's shoulder's slump at Jack's question and it took an impressive amount of willpower to hold back a groan. Honestly, did she have to do everything for these two? After exchanging a brief look of "are they for real?" with Sandy, she focused her violet eyes on Jack and grinned.

"Doesn't he look great? I finally managed to make him go shopping with me."

Jack remained silent, never taking his eyes from Aster while he debated how to answer that question. Ana was right; Aster looked good, really good, but not better, just good in a different way. This look suited the attitude Aster gave the world at large, the gruff exterior he liked to portray, but the baggy jeans and paint-splatter t-shirts were like a part of who Aster really was: the art-loving guy with a heart of gold. How did he say that without insulting Ana or Aster? Realizing that he'd been staring without a sound for long enough to be considered creepy, Jack decided to keep his opinions to himself.

"He looks great, Ana! Nice work."

Ana beamed as Aster stared at Jack in surprise and said, "Really? I thought it was a bit much…"

"No, it looks great!" Jack was back to his normal, grinning self. "Almost as good as that outfit Ana picked out for me."

The makeover queen grinned. "Why thank you, Jack. Maybe I'll even let you come along when I take Aster out again."

The Australian glanced at her in alarm, but Jack's comment of, "I don't think you could make any improvements on this, Ana," immediately had Aster gazing at his shoes, desperately trying to hide a pleased smile and a growing flush.

As Sandy rolled his eyes and Nick glanced between the trio in confusion, Ana held back a triumphant smirk. Good. Now Aster knew step one was going as planned. It was a little depressing that she had to drag the admissions out of Jack, but she'd do what she had to. Now it was time to move the conversation on before Jack noticed anything weird, though.
"True, I did do an incredible job on him. Now, if I could just get you to stop wearing those ratty old hoddies…"

Jack laughed and began to mockingly argue with her about his fashion choices, but Aster didn't hear a word the two were saying. So what if he didn't care much for fashion? If it caught Jack's eye, then it was worth the effort, even if it meant he'd have to change clothes before and after his art periods.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

There's a song in the chapter that I assume most people don't know. The version that I like can be found if you go here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WCd3lQY0o8

Saturday found the whole gang headed to Burgess. While Jack was spending the day with his siblings, the rest of the gang planned to once again try their hands at cleaning out the shed.

In spite of the fact that Jack wasn't joining them, the albino seemed to be a bundle of nerves from the moment he got into the car. The signs were subtle, but they all noticed that he couldn't seem to keep his hands still and, when asked about the day's plan, Jack brushed off their enquiries with jokes and gave no details. Something was up.

Unsurprisingly, Ana had quickly found a way to distract Jack from his nerves by engaging him in a conversation about their AP chemistry homework. Aster, who had opted to take a less demanding science course, tried to follow along, but was quickly lost in a tide of scientific gibberish. Whatever it was, the duo was soon completely caught up in their discussion, leaving the rest of the car to do as they liked. Sandy had quickly drifted off to sleep and Nick was humming along to the pop rendition of jingle bells currently being sung over the car's speakers by someone Aster didn't recognize. This left the artist with no one to talk to and a very-long period of Nick's driving to suffer through.

As the familiar, queasy feeling that arose every time Nick zoomed around a corner began to twist at his stomach into knots, Aster decided to try and take a page from Sandy's book. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and let the sounds of a discussion on atomic models lull him to sleep.

"Aster, wake up!"

The Australian growled lightly and snuggled into his pillow. He was far too comfortable to wake up and he'd been having the best dream!

A light giggle sounded right by his ear and now someone was poking him. Honestly, couldn't he just sleep a little longer? He was comfy here, even if his pillow was a bit on the hard and lumpy side.

"Aster, I've got to get out of the car now, wake up!"

Car? What car? And why was someone playing Christmas music?

With a groan, Aster opened his eyes and groggily took in his surroundings. He was sitting in the back of Nick's car and Ana was looking at him with a positively wicked grin on her face while Jack looked down at him from a heart-stoppingly small, I-could-kiss-you-if-I-just-moved-my-head-an-inch-c loser, distance.

Aster was suddenly wide awake and blushing cherry-red as he realized that his bony pillow was
actually Jack's shoulder. With something oddly close to a squeak, the artist shot up and began to stutter out an apology, but Jack only grinned.

"It's fine, Aster. I would've let you sleep longer if I didn't need to get out of the car."

The artist nodded mutely, clamping his mouth shut before he could embarrass himself any further and simply watched as Jack said his good-byes before exiting the car and heading up the Bennett's driveway.

Once Jack had entered the house, a chuckling Nick pulled away and headed towards the rec center as he and Ana continued to give the blushing Australian amused glances from the front seat.

Aster exited the warmth of the rec center and headed out into the harsh winter air, the familiar weight of the shed key in his hand, and hurried towards the sleigh. As he approached, he could see Ana was out of her seat and busily rummaging through the trunk while Sandy blinked the sleep from his eyes by her side. Unsurprisingly, Nick had already started across the field with a duffle bag full of cleaning gear slung over his shoulder.

The artist reached the jeep just in time to watch as Ana handed Sandy a box of trash bags and a broom while saying "Here, take these and I'll get the other brooms. Aster can carry my duffle."

"I don't remember signing up to be your bag boy."

Startled, Ana whipped her head towards him and then grinned. "And Jack didn't sign up for pillow duty, but he did it all the same without a word of complaint. These are the things we do for our friends."

As Aster turned crimson, Sandy gave the pair a questioning look.

"Oh, right, you were asleep for the fun! Someone dozed off on the ride here and just so happened to end up curling up against a certain white-haired cutie in his sleep."

Now Sandy laughed, giving Aster an amused grin and wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh, don't you start, too! I've already got her playing matchmaker; I don't need two people trying to dictate my love life."

Sandy just laughed harder and started across the field towards the shed, privately thinking that he'd make quite a good matchmaker if he ever put his mind to it.

Back at the trunk, Ana began to say something more about the "pillow incident," but Aster shut her up with a pointed look as he grabbed the neon-purple duffle bag sitting inside and tried hoisted it onto his shoulder. Unfortunately, he'd grossly underestimated the bag's weight and almost fell over instead.

"What'd ya have in this thing, Ana, rocks?"

Ana grinned innocently as she closed the trunk and started off towards the shed after a quick statement of "Not much, just some stuff we might need for today."

He let out a low growl and picked the bag up once more, this time successfully managing to sling it across his shoulders without stumbling before shouting after her, "How did you even manage to get this thing into the car?"
"I had Nick carry it for me when we were getting the brooms. Now, stop grousing and come on!"

Aster sighed and started to follow after her, though he moved at a much slower pace due to the dead weight he was lugging. It was lucky for Ana that he was used to carrying heavy bags of supplies in the art room.

When he finally reached the shed, Aster carefully placed the bag on the ground outside and walked inside to join his friend. The three of them were looking at the fire's remains in silence with troubled looks on their faces.

"You know," Ana whispered as Aster came to a halt beside her, "knowing what actually happened that night makes it a lot harder to be here, doesn't it?"

Sandy nodded and shivered as the other boys grimaced.

They stood there a bit longer, all lost in their own thoughts, before Aster shook his head and moved forward, grabbing the edge of the closest piece of wood. "Okay, enough of that! Let's get to work."

Four hours of heavy lifting and a well-deserved lunch break later, all the burned boards had been carried across the field to the dumpsters by the rec center and the gang had started to go through what was left of the Easter supplies to see if anything was salvageable. So far, the answer was a resounding "no."

Aster sighed and threw yet another ruined basket onto the growing pile by the door. Great. Just great. He ran a sooty hand through his hair in annoyance, not even caring that he was getting the black substance all through it. This meant that he was going to have to start working on Easter stuff extra early this year if he wanted to pull off the hunt.

As he picked up the next basket and started to examine it he could hear the ending notes of some random Owlcity song blasting from just outside the shed. It turned out that Ana's duffel had contained snacks, several water bottles, even more trash bags, and a set of portable speakers. Her phone was currently plugged into these and playing through her favorite songs for a second time since Nick's offer to replace the pop medley with a Christmas selection after the first run through had been unanimously vetoed.

"Found anything useful yet?" Ana asked, coming to stand by his side while Nick and Sandy filled up garbage bags with the baskets Aster had already judged unusable.

"No. Not one, single, measly basket out of however many were stored on these shelves. Damn it, Pitch. What did we ever do to you?"

This basket was worthless too. With a growl of anger Aster chucked it over his shoulder, almost hitting Sandy in the head. The golden eyed teen gave his upset friend a saddened look before grabbing the projectile off the ground and throwing it into his trash bag.

Nick stuffed a basket into his own bag and joined the conversation. "It's not like we can't still pull off the hunt, Aster. If we were able to make the Christmas fair work, this will be a piece of pie."

Aster nodded and rejected yet another basket. "I know, but that doesn't mean I can't be mad about it. Easter's only three months away! Do you realize how much extra work I have to do now?"

"Well, maybe we can help."
The gang all turned towards the source of the new voice and smiled when they saw who’d come to join them. Jack was standing in the doorway, with Jamie on his right and Pippa on his left, grinning happily.

"What are you three doing here?" Ana cried, moving past Aster to greet the three Frosts and turn off her music.

Jack laid his hands on the twins' shoulders and explained. "When I told them that you guys were busy cleaning the shed today, they wanted to come by and see if you needed any help once we were done with today's plans."

As the others left the shed to welcome the new arrivals, Aster carefully scrutinized his crush for any signs of a breakdown. Jack seemed to be okay, though. The fire's remains were mostly gone at this point, anyway, so it was probably a lot easier for Jack to deal with being here now. The comforting presence of his newly gained siblings was probably helping, too.

"Aster, are you okay?" Jack called in to his friend, noticing that the Australian hadn't moved.

Aster nodded and quickly came to join the group. "Yeah, sorry, just lost in thought."

Jack grinned. "That's alright. How's the clean up going?"

"Well, the cleaning up part is going well. The finding anything worth keeping part? Not so much."

Pippa peered into the shed, brown eyes full of curiosity as she noticed the soot stained floor. "Wow, what happened in there?"

"Some jokers thought it would be fun to start a fire in that old fire place," Jack lied, giving his friends a pointed look. "It got out of hand, though, and all the stuff we were keeping in the shed caught on fire, too."

Pippa frowned and Jamie made a disgusted sound before pulling at Jack's hand and exclaiming, "That's awful! Why didn't you tell us this is why your friends had to clean out the shed, big bro?"

Jack took his little brother's hand in his, the endearment making him practically shine with joy, and smiled down at him. "Well, I didn't want you to get upset about it before I knew how bad things were. This is the first time any of us got to look and see how bad the damage actually was."

Jamie accepted the explanation as Nick grabbed a water bottle from Ana's duffle. While he cracked it open he asked, "So, what were you three up to while we were getting ourselves covered in soot?"

"Jack took us and all of our friends skating!" Jamie answered, grinning. "I was able to jump without falling, too. Jack says I'll be able to do fancy stuff in no time!"

"Then we took everyone else home and went to the flower shop. Jack let me pick out whatever flowers I wanted to put on mama and papa Frost's graves when we visited them," Pippa added, holding tightly to her older brother's hand and smiling up at him. "I got a whole bouquet of poppies for them because poppies are my favorite flower."

"That's just because you like that song and wanted to sing it for them," Jamie responded knowingly.

"What's wrong with that? It's a lovely song! I bet they liked it," she countered while glaring at him.

And now the gang knew why Jack had been so nervous that morning.
Jack knelt down, refusing to look at the other, and stopped the budding fight by hugging the twins to him tightly. He even managed to keep a grin on his face as he whispered, "It was a lovely song, Pippa."

Pippa beamed and leaned to the side to make sure her twin could see that she was sticking her tongue out at him.

"Song?" Ana asked, mostly because she didn't know what else to say.

Pippa, who had suddenly realized that Jack seemed upset about something, wrapped her little arms around his neck and explained, "There's a song called *In Flanders Fields* that we sing in choir every year for our veteran's day concert. It's a song for people who are missed."

Jack nodded and took a deep breath before he trusted himself to speak. "And you always do a great job, Pip. Now, enough about our day, let's see what's left from this annoying, little fire."

He looked over at Aster. "What do you need our help with?"

Since some of the baskets weren't too badly charred, Aster allowed the twins to help bag them up as long as they promised to be careful not to get themselves too dirty. He didn't want the Bennetts mad at Jack over soot covered clothing.

The twins readily agreed and began to pack up garbage bags with Ana and Sandy while Nick and Jack carried the full ones across the field. As Aster resumed examining the baskets that were still on the shelves, Pippa began to hum.

It was an unconscious habit for the little singer and her voice was clear as a bell, so Ana didn't bother to turn back on her music. By the time Jack and Nick had returned the child was singing. It was a song Aster had never heard before, but it was so hauntingly beautiful that he stopped working and just listened.

"*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow*

*Between the crosses row on row,*

*That mark our place; and in the sky*

*The larks, still bravely singing, fly*

Jack leaned against the door of the shed and listened for a bit before joining his sister in her song.

"*Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago*

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,*

*Loved and were loved, and now we lie*

*In Flanders fields."

Pippa gave Jamie a wide-eyed and pleading look as she sang. Her twin saw the look, sighed, rolled his eyes, and joined his siblings.

The entire gang had all stopped working by now, too caught up in the song to do anything but listen as the trio finished the song.
"Take up your quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields."

The song faded away and Jack walked over to his siblings before pulling them both into a tight hug, his blue eyes unusually bright. Aster was certain he wasn't the only one who noticed the slight, husky note in the albino's speech as he declared, "The Von Trapps have nothing on us Frosts!"

The twins laughed and hugged Jack back before going returning to their task of stuffing the ruined baskets into trash bags. Jack grinned at them and took a deep breath before grabbing another trash bag and heading across the field. As he left, Ana rushed to turn her music back on before Pippa could break into song again. If that kept happening, they'd never get the job done.
Chapter 12

Aster finished examining the final basket and threw it to Jack, who then tossed it into a trash bag, left the shed, and headed across the field to the dumpster. There had been over 200 baskets stored in the shed when they counted last spring. Only 40 had survived the fire. Aster sighed and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he glared moodily at the blackened wall before him. Over 150 baskets to order and paint before Easter. Lovely. A tiny hand took hold of his arm, drawing his attention from his staring contest with the wall and down to the face of the little girl standing by his side.

Pippa smiled at him sweetly and declared, "You need to stop being grumpy about things you can't change."

Ana, who'd been watching the scene unfold with mild interest, stifled a laugh. Aster heard the noise and glanced at her sharply before looking back at down the little girl and saying "I'm just upset."

Pippa shook her head. "Doesn't matter. You're still being a grump and that doesn't help anything. Come on now, if something's making you grumpy the best thing to do is to leave it be."

She dragged him away from his brooding and out of the shed, past a very amused looking Nick and Sandy, towards the opposite end of the field where Jack and Jamie were waiting for the gang to join them. When Jack realized what his little sister was doing, his face transformed into a mask of amused disbelief.

Jamie, on the other hand, just shook his head and laughed. When Aster and Pippa reached the Frost boys, the male twin asked, "Was he being grumpy?"

Pippa nodded and gave Aster another disapproving look.

As the rest of the gang crossed the field and joined them, Aster stammered out the words "No I wasn't!"

Pippa let go of his arm, placed her hands on her hips in a stance that was disturbingly reminiscent of Ana, and treated the Australian to a judging look. "You were glaring at the wall, mister. That's acting grumpy and is not allowed."

Aster started to protest, but the laughter of the others shut him up immediately. He had to admit, this probably looked ridiculous. So, instead of saying anything, he grinned and picked the little girl up in his arms. She let out a squeak of surprise as he swung her around, but by the time he put her down Pippa was laughing and all thoughts of chastisement were gone.

When Aster glanced at Jack to make sure his crush was okay with what had just happened, he found the other teen smiling at him softly. The artist grinned back as the albino looked at his laughing sibling and declared that it was time for him to take her and Jamie home.

Pippa stopped laughing, grabbed Aster's left hand with her right hand, and dragged him over to Jack. When she reached her big brother she took his right hand with her left and grinned up at the two teens. "Okay, but Aster has to come with us so I can make sure he doesn't go back to being grumpy!"

Jack laughed and said, "As long as he doesn't mind it's fine by me. In fact, why don't we have the whole gang walk with us?"
He turned to look at his friends before adding, "That is, if you guys want to."

"Why not?" Nick agreed. "Just let me go and dump Ana's bag back in the sleigh."

Sandy gave them a double thumbs up of approval and Ana's assent was clear from the smile on her face.

The matter settled, the group left the rec center and headed for town.

As they walked, the twins told the gang all about the buildings and places they were passing. Pippa did most of the talking with Jamie serving as her anchor. When she started to babble, her twin would give her a special look and she'd instantly reign in her speech. Every now and then, the male twin would actually add a comment of his own, but he seemed content in his silent role.

When they eventually reached the Bennett's house, Jack walked the twins to the door and exchanged an awkward hello with Mrs. Bennett before hugging his siblings goodbye and rejoining the gang. He was about to say something about heading back to the rec center when a loud growl emanated from his stomach, making the others laugh.

"I take it you'd be up for dinner in town?" Nick asked, giving Jack a knowing wink.

Jack nodded and grinned. "Definitely, I'm starving!"

The others readily agreed and the gang made their way back to downtown Burgess amidst heavy debate on what they should eat. As they drew close to the local pizza parlor, the debate was decided for them by the tempting smells of baking bread and garlic.

"Thank you, that was delicious," Ana called to their waiter as they left the restaurant and stepped out into the twilight evening. It was only 5 o'clock, but winter meant early sunsets and long nights in upper Maine.

"So, back to the rec center and then we head home!" Nick declared, starting to walk along the street towards the proposed destination.

The others began to follow, but then Jack asked, "Actually, do you mind if we make a slight detour? It'll only take an extra ten minutes or so."

Aster paused mid stride and turned to look at him. "Where'd you wanna go?"

Jack shrugged. "I just wanted to swing by the graveyard, that's all."

He was obviously trying to sound casual about the request, but Aster could hear the nervous tremor in his crush's voice.

"Sure, we have time," Ana said with a delighted smile. "It'd be lovely to see where your parents were buried."

Jack grinned at her and nodded his thanks. "Great! It's this way."

He took off down the street and the others followed after him. They were heading along the same path they would have taken to go to the rec center at first, but then Jack took an unfamiliar turn and they were in a part of Burgess the gang had never seen. Older houses lined these streets.

"This is the oldest part of town," Jack commented, motioning towards the buildings they were passing.
The gang nodded, studying the old buildings with slight interest. Their hometown of Narvon was very young and none of the buildings there were anything close to as old as these. Soon, they came to the end of the street where a tiny chapel sat on the edge of a sprawling sea of tombs.

With the ease of years spent visiting this land of the dead, Jack made his way through the graveyard, the gang trailing at his heels.

Eventually, he came to a halt before two, unassuming, black marble graves that lay beneath the bare branches of a tall oak tree. The one on the right had a carving of a flowering rosemary branch next to the words "Emma Frost: Beloved Mother and Friend" and the one on the left read "Nathaniel Frost: Treasured Companion and Father" with a stone lilac chiseled beside the words. On the ground before the graves lay a bouquet of vermilion poppies.

Jack knelt down and straightened the flowers a bit before laying a hand on his mother's grave. He traced a finger along her name as he said, "Hey mom, I just wanted to stop by and let you know I got the twins home safe and sound."

He repeated the motion with his father's name. "And don't worry, dad, we didn't get into any trouble."

Then he turned to look his waiting friends and grinned at them nervously. "Guys, these are my parents."

The boys didn't seem to know what to do, but Ana stepped forward and knelt by Jack's side. "Who picked out the gravestones? They're lovely."

Jack ran a hand over the smooth surface of his father's stone once more before replying, "Me. Everyone else wanted to put something to do with music on my mom's grave and they were gonna give my dad a pair of skates, but I wouldn't let them. I insisted we give them flowers.

"You see, my grandmother had died just about a year before my folks did and I remembered my mom telling me that a tombstone should always have at least one flower carved on it. That way, even when people stop visiting you, there will always be flowers on your grave."

"I couldn't give them any old flower, though. While I was growing up, my dad would never just buy my mom flowers. Every bouquet he brought her had a special meaning. Mother's day was pink carnations for a mother's love; Valentine's day was purple tulips and lovely, blue forget-me-nots for true love; he even got her an Iris for good news when we found out she was pregnant with the twins. With how much my parents loved their silly flower messages, I knew the flowers on their graves had to have special meanings, too.

"I spent hours looking through a book on flowers and their meanings in the library before I chose these ones. Rosemary for remembrance," he ran a finger over his mother's flower as he said this before moving his hand to his father's flower, "and lilac for love and memories."

Jack drew back his hand and chuckled lightly. "I still feel bad for the poor man who carved the tombs. I brought so many pictures of what I wanted on the graves with me when the Overland's took me to see him, but he didn't complain. He looked at every one of them and let me go on and on about what I wanted until the words ran out."

The others had drawn close during Jack's speech, forming a tiny circle around the kneeling duo. He looked up at them now and smiled shyly. "Sorry, I was babbling again."

Ana shook her head. "It was a lovely story, Jack. You weren't babbling at all."
Jack nodded, still looking a little shy as he asked, "So, would you guys think it was totally weird if I introduced you to them?"

Aster laughed softly and knelt down on his crush's right hand side. "Nah, mate, seems perfectly normal to me."

Jack beamed at him before beginning the introductions. He went around the circle, starting with Nick and ending with Sandy, introducing each of his friends to the marble symbols of his parent's lives. When the introductions had been completed, he rose to his feet and brushed of the bits of grass that were clinging to his pants as he said, "Thanks again for coming with me, guys."

Aster and Ana rose to their feet as well as Nick quietly replied, "Any time, Jack."

Jack nodded and took a steadying breath before speaking. "Well, it's really starting to get dark now. Come on, let's head back before we trip on someone's grave and get stuck with a vengeful ghost wandering around after us."

The others smiled and allowed him to lead them out of the cemetery. As their feet hit the pavement, Jack motioned across the street to the house directly opposite them. "Did you know that used to be the court house back when the town was founded, but then they moved to the new one downtown and the old one got turned into a house?"

"How do you know all this stuff?" Aster asked, giving the albino an amused glance as the gang began to walk down the street.

"My mom was a history teacher at the local high school," Jack explained, "so I got to learn all about the town's history whenever we went for walks. Here, watch!"

Jack turned around and began walking backwards as he played the tour guide for his four, amused friends. "The town was founded by Thaddeus Burgess in 1798 as a trading post for trappers and hunters. He and his decedents were the principle residents of the town until the mid-1800's when several new families decided to come and settle here. The street we're walking on now consists principally of houses built during this time and many of them are still occupied by the decedents of the original owners. The house directly to your left is actually owned by the decedents of Thaddeus Burgess himself, though the family no longer goes by the name Burgess due to the fact that Thomas Burgess, Thaddeus' great-great-grandson, failed to sire any male heirs."

"Now, if you look to your right you'll see we're entering the newer section of the town. As you can see, Burgess has come far from its humble roots and is now one of the largest towns in Penobscot county, Maine, even serving as the county seat. The large building with the domed roof that sits across from us is the courthouse and it is here that the accused arsonist, Pitchford Black, will be put on trial come the 20th of February," Jack casually proclaimed as they made their way along the empty street past the building.

The amused looks on the gang's faces disappeared. Ana, Nick, and Sandy looked worriedly at their pretend guide as Aster interrupted his crush mid-sentence to irritably ask, "Why didn't you tell us, Jack?"

Jack grinned, ignoring his friend's anger. "I think I just did, silly."

"When did you find out?" Ana questioned.

"You guys are a really noisy tour group, you know that?" When no one laughed, Jack's smile wavered slightly and he answered the question. "I found out when the police came to take my
Aster was a little concerned how unsurprised he was that Jack hadn't told them about these events until now. His crush called them his friends, maybe even considered them something close to family, but it seemed that he was still hesitant to say or do anything that wouldn't be considered fun when he was around them unless it was forced out of him.

They turned onto the street that led to the rec center as Nick started to inquire about the trial details. Jack answered all the questions without letting his smile falter, but Aster was silently wishing the albino would just let himself be sad so that they could actually comfort him. He wanted Jack to cry so that, when the tears were all spent, he could see that wonderfully real and incredible smile that so rarely graced his crush's face take up a permanent residency there.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This is probably my favorite chapter. Please let me know if you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next week it quickly became apparent that Jack's nonchalant attitude about the trial was a complete sham. Bags appeared under his icy-blue eyes and even the smallest, unexpected touch made the normally easy-going teen stiffen.

The day that he nodded off during lunch and woke up trembling was the day that the gang realized Jack was being plagued with nightmares. Not that the new knowledge did them much good. What could they do to protect Jack from dreams?

The only one who didn’t find the information depressing was Sandy. The quiet teen wasn’t an expert on nightmares or night terrors, but he’d heard about them before. It was one of the benefits of having a father who worked the night shift at the hospital.

So, while the others tried their best to make Jack’s days the best they could, Sandy started to research. He talked with his father, read through some of the psychological journals in his family’s library, and planned. He knew that there had to be a way to bring sweet dreams back to his frosty-eyed friend.

Aster, who knew nothing of Sandy’s plot, took it upon himself to try and make Jack laugh at least once a day. Surprisingly, when he was sick with worry about his crush, it was pretty easy to keep his emotions in check.

Aster stared up at the ceiling of his room, wondering if Jack was having a good day with the twins. He hoped that his crush had managed at least a little bit of sleep before going off to Burgess. He wouldn’t want Jamie and Pippa worrying about their big brother, too.

A knock on the door drew him out of his silent musings and he called out, “It's open.”

The door opened in response to his cry and Ana walked in, giving him a small smile as she did so.

Aster groaned. “No more, Ana. Please? I don’t wanna even think about trying to win Jack right now.”

Ana frowned and put her hands on her hips. “Well, duh! Do you really think I’d do that? There’s no way we should try and mess with Jack’s already fragile psyche until after the trial’s over.”
“Oh… then why are you here?”

Ana rolled her eyes and came over to sit by Aster’s side as she said, “To see you, of course. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that Jack’s not the only one whose been affected by this. Today’s all about you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, besides, why would I break our tradition just because things are a little crazy?”

Aster sat up and looked at her with a puzzled frown. “Tradition?”

“You really are bad with dates, you know that?” Ana replied with a smile that only made Aster’s frown deepen.

“What did I forget this time?”

“It’s Australia Day, ya gumby.”

Aster actually smiled at the comment. He had forgotten. He hadn’t forgotten the rule, though. “I thought I told you that you were barred from using slang after the “g’day mate” incident.”

Now it was Ana’s turn to frown, though it looked more like a pout. “How was I supposed to know that you don’t actually say that?”

“Common sense?”

Ana gave him a look of annoyance before sticking out her tongue and saying, “Fine, no slang. Now get out of bed and come help me make anzac cookies!”

“They’re called biscuits in civilized countries,” Aster countered, but he got out of bed anyway and followed Ana to the kitchen where his mother was already hard at work making food for the celebration of her country’s founding.

When she heard the duo enter, though, she turned around and smiled at them.

“I take it I can leave the dessert in your expert hands this year?”

“I should hope so!” Ana replied. “We have been making them for eleven years now.”

Mrs. Wilder just smiled wider and motioned to the kitchen table where the ingredients were already waiting. She’s gotten them out when Ana had arrived, knowing that the blonde would have her son out of his sulk and working on baking the treats in short order. It was a tradition that had been started the year after they’d moved to Narvon, when an unknowing young Ana had come over to play, only to discover that Aster was busy helping his mother prepare for a holiday she’d never heard of. Instead of leaving, the young girl had asked if she could stay and had quickly proved her worth by helping Aster make anzac biscuits.

By the next year, it was a tradition. One that Mrs. Wilder happily embraced as it meant that her son had a good and true friend.

She finished her musings on the past and was about to return to making the main meal when a little voice called out, “Sophie help!” and little hands began to pull on her skirt.

Mrs. Wilder looked down at her daughter and smiled, but said, “No, Sophie. You can’t help mama with this. She’s using sharp things and touching nasty meat that Sophie’s too young to deal with.”
The little girl stuck out her lower lip and looked like she was going to start crying, but the Aster called out, “Come over here, Soph. You can help us.”

The pout disappeared and Mrs. Wilder watched in delight as her baby girl ran across the room and was then lifted up in her big brother’s arms. Once she’d watched them for minute or so, she returned to her cooking, listening in silent bliss as the trio joked and laughed together. It was good to hear Aster laugh. He’d been so sad as of late and she didn’t know why.

A few minutes later, a loud cry made her jump and she almost drop dinner on the floor.

“Aster, no eating the cookie dough!”

“I’m not eating cookie dough, I’m eating biscuit dough.”

Mrs. Wilder just shook her head and laughed. As far as she was concerned, Ana was an angel.

“Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong

Under the shade of a coolibah tree,

And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:

"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me?"

Mr. Wilder sang along with the traditional song as he danced with his laughing wife. Across the room, Ana and Sophie were trying to get Aster to join in the fun.

“I’m not dancing.”

“Waltz Matilda!” Sophie cried, tugging at her brother’s leg as Ana tried to get him to uncross his arms while saying, “Oh come on, Aster. You used to love to dance to this song!”

“Yeah, when we were eight!”

Oh, now he was getting double puppy dog eyes. This was completely unfair and quite possibly counted as emotional blackmail.

“I said no.”

The puppy dog eyes were joined by trembling lips.

“…fine, but I’m not singing!”

Aster grumpily got off the couch and took Ana’s hand in his, twirling her around the room while Sophie cheered and waited her turn, only to shriek in surprised delight when her mother picked her up from behind and swung her through the air while singing,

“Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda

"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me",

And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker bag:

"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me."

By the time the song ended, all five of them were laughing and Ana didn’t even have to force Aster...
to keep dancing when the next one started. He willingly kept going until dinner was ready.

“Thanks, by the way.”

Ana turned to face Aster, a little surprised at the comment. Over the years they’d been friends she’d learned that his thank yous were mostly shown instead of spoken. Hearing him say actually those words meant something special and it brought a smile to her face.

“Hey, what are friends for, right?”

Aster nodded and then gave her a big hug, which Ana happily returned.

“No, really, thanks. I needed that.”

She just hugged him tighter. She knew how stressed he’d been and it had done her just as much good to see him smiling again as it had done him to smile. Then she pulled away and said, “Enjoy the rest. The new baskets should be in by Monday.”

Aster nodded, but his smile didn’t fade. “I think I’m gonna see if Jack wants to help me paint them.”

Ana’s smile turned into a look of surprise. “Really? I’m impressed, Aster. You never let people help you paint.”

“Yeah, well, you saw the booths. He’s good. Not an artist, but good. I can trust him with a couple of baskets.”

Ana laughed and smiled again. “Well, for the record, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Hey, all my ideas are good!”

“Most of your ideas are good.”

Aster just grinned and winked at her as she stuck her tongue out at him before heading out the front door and beginning the short walk home.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were curious about the song in this chapter, here you go: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEVKUE_ma00 this video has both the song and an explanation of all the slang! Anzac cookies are another Australian tradition and they’re delicious, btw. Though they’re not easy to make.
The baskets did indeed arrive on Monday and Jack willingly accepted the invite to help with them. Every day, the albino would follow Aster home after school to help him work on painting the wicker egg holders bright, spring colors for an hour or so and then he'd head back to the Overland's to lie on his bed and stare at the ceiling for hours. He barely touched his homework, but his teachers didn't punish him. Everyone knew about the trial thanks to the papers and the news and one look at Jack was enough to realize how badly it was affecting him.

The whole gang seemed to be affected by it. Nick’s laughter wasn’t quite as boisterous as it used to be and Ana seemed to be perpetually worrying about something. Sandy’s smiles and easygoing nature were replaced by constant troubled looks and a constant air of anxious. The only member of the gang who’d had something of a positive reaction was Aster, who’d replaced his nervousness with determination.

Aster would have given anything to return to his former state of being a blubbery idiot, though, if it meant that Jack would be his normal self again. As the days passed and Jack continued to look worse and worse, though, Aster started to wonder if he'd even see Jack's true smile again.

The bell rang, making Jack jump slightly before he sighed and tiredly grabbed his backpack from the floor, holding back a yawn. He was so tired and so sick of nightmares. What he wouldn't give for a decent, dreamless sleep.

With a heavy heart and clenched fists, he made his way out of the classroom to where a smiling Ana was waiting for him, leaning against the wall by the door as she did every day. He gave her a tired greeting and then they began to move through the hallways towards their final class of the day.

As they walked, Ana happily chattered about how her day had been going and Jack shuffled along beside her, content to just listen. He was so tired that he wanted to collapse and he could feel the beginnings of a headache pounding against his brow. Three weeks. Three weeks until he had to face Pitch for the first time since the fire. Three weeks until he had to tell a bunch of strangers how his first love had almost killed him twice. Three weeks to hell. The mere thought made him feel sick.

They turned a corner and Aster came into view, walking the opposite way with Nick and Sandy by his side.

The sight of his best friend made Jack smile despite how tired, scared, and worn out he felt. He couldn't wait for school to be over so he could go to Aster's house and paint. He was pretty certain that his daily visits to the Wilder house were the only thing keeping him from breaking down due to the growing terror in his heart and the never-ending attack of the nightmares.

He really couldn't express how grateful he was that Aster never talked about the trial around him or commented on how terrible he looked. All the Australian ever did was talk about painting, books, Sophie, or the twins. Things that made Jack smile, laugh, and forget about his fears for a while. It was like heaven.

As always, Ana and Jack waved at the trio of boys as they passed each other in the hallway. They made this exchange every day between seventh and eighth period, but today something was
different. As Aster casually raised his hand and waved back, Jack suddenly found his heart racing as blood rushed to his cheeks. Thoughts of bright-green eyes and deep, rich laughter pushed aside all others and the albino found himself stumbling down the hallway in a state of shock. Though the dazed teen continued to move along with the crowd, he had stopped watching where he was going, his mind floating in a happy ether a thousand miles away. He was so far gone that Ana had to grab onto his arm and pull him to a stop to keep him from running into a wall.

"Jack, what's wrong?" she asked, several weeks' worth of concern evident in her voice.

A breathy "Oh" was his only reply.

"Jack?" She asked again, even more worried now that she'd had time to notice his flushed cheeks and uneven breathing pattern.

He looked at her with widened eyes and made a few strangled sounds, but nothing coherent escaped his pale lips.

"Jack, do you need to go to the nurse?" Ana raised a hand and placed it against his forehead, checking his temperature. He did feel a little on the warm side, but he shook his head in denial when she suggested a possible fever. He didn't offer another explanation, though. He was too busy staring at her with his eyes full of swirling emotions to even think about speaking.

Ana was annoyed now and in full on mama mode. "Then tell me what's wrong or I am dragging you to the nurse's office, mister."

He nodded and pointed to the classroom behind them, which was thankfully unused this period.

Ana guided him inside the empty room and forced him to sit down on the floor in case he fainted. Once that task was complete, she crossed her arms, looked down at him, and demanded, "What is going on, Jack?"

The albino was grinning with wonder now and all the thoughts that had been rushing around his head started to pour from his mouth. "It's just that I realized I, I don't know why I didn't notice it sooner! How long have I felt like this? I guess things were just so crazy that I, I don't know! It's the most wonderful thing and, boy are his eyes the most amazing shade of green."

Ana was starting to get angry. "Jack! What. Is. Going. On?"

The albino's grin turned into the smile that had captured his secret admirer's heart all those months ago and he started to laugh as the words, "I think I'm in love with Aster!" burst forth from his pale lips.
Chapter 15

Ana stared down at her smiling friend for a full minute before finally managing to get out the words, "Come again?" in a voice full of shock and disbelief.

"I'm in love with Aster!" Jack reiterated, his smile growing even brighter.

"Since when?"

He shrugged, but the smile never faltered. "I don't know! I mean, I only just realized it, but I think it's been happening for a while."

Ana looked down at Jack and frowned. Despite the fact that he was positively glowing with happiness, he still looked sickly and exhausted. This sudden rush of adrenaline due to his new feelings would probably start to fade soon and then Jack would be left emotionally drained as well as physically. She needed to get him somewhere safe before that happened. Chem class would have to wait.

As Jack looked on in curiosity, she pulled her cellphone from her back pocket and quickly dialed her home phone. Her mother picked up on the third ring. "Ana, dear, what's wrong?"

"Mom, a small emergency has arisen and I need to get out of my final class. Can you call the school office and sign me out?"

Mrs. Romoli knew her daughter well. The determination in Ana's voice left no doubt in her mind that whatever was going on was of the utmost importance to her child. Without a second thought, she agreed to make the call.

"Thank you so much, mom," Ana whispered gratefully into the phone. "I'll be home soon and I'm bringing Jack with me."

Mrs. Romoli acknowledged the information and hung up the phone as Ana snapped hers shut and grabbed ahold of Jack's arm. "Come on, lover boy, we're leaving. You can sign yourself out now that you're eighteen, right?"

Jack looked confused and maybe even a little lost. "Yeah, but don't we have class?"

"You are in no state to go to class," Ana decreed, dragging him out into the deserted hallway.

Jack was about to argue that he was fine when a wave of exhaustion coursed through him, almost making him stumble. Okay, maybe he wasn't fine. Wordlessly, he allowed Ana to take him to the school's office.

Thankfully, the secretary had already gotten Ana's mother's call, so she was free to go, and Jack's status as an independent allowed him to sign himself out for the day. It didn’t take any effort to convince her that he needed to go either. Being an eighteen year old orphan that looked like walking death had its perks.

Once they'd retrieved their coats from their lockers, they left the school and headed for Ana's. As they walked, Jack allowed Ana to hold his hand and pull him along behind her. He was so tired that it was taking all of his willpower just to walk straight. Ana seemed to be able to sense this and kept him going with a happy stream of chatter about how he was going to have to give her all the juicy details about his crush once he'd taken a nice, long nap. Every time she mentioned Aster's
name Jack felt his heart skip a beat and a warm feeling coursed through him, but that was a good thing. It kept him awake and moving.

A worried Mrs. Romoli was waiting for them by the door and, the moment she got a good look at Jack, she told Ana to take him up to the guest room and bustled off to the kitchen to get him something to drink. Jack gave her a weary sounding thanks and allowed Ana to lead him to the guest room where he immediately collapsed on the bed. He didn't even mind when Ana took his shoes off for him or when she helped him out of his coat.

Once these were gone, Ana adjusted the pillows under his head to a more comfortable position as her mother came in with a tall glass of orange juice. Jack managed to stammer out some form of appreciation when he took the glass from her, but Mrs. Romoli just smiled and told him to get some rest before leaving the two teens alone.

The albino took a drink of the orange juice and smiled tiredly at Ana before letting out a huge yawn.

Ana laughed at the sight, relieved to finally see Jack admitting to how tired he was, and took the drink from him, setting it on the bedside table as she said, "I am not having you spill orange juice all over yourself."

He nodded. That would be bad. Then a thought occurred to him and he started to rise from the bed. "What about Aster? He's going to be waiting for us after school! We have to be there so he doesn't worry!"

Ana placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back onto the bed. It frightened her how easy it was to do that, but she didn't let it show on her face. "I'll send him a text, okay?"

"Oh, texting, right. Good plan. Can't have Aster worry." Jack mumbled out the words as his eyelids started to droop. "I should call. Let him know."

"Jack, you're starting to sound delirious. I'll take care of everything for you. Right now you need to sleep."

"But Aster…"

"Wants you to sleep, too!" Ana declared, gently running her fingers along the sleepy teens face in a motherly caress.

"He does?" Jack sounded more asleep than awake now and Ana used that to her advantage.

"Yes, Aster would be very happy if you'd sleep, Jack. You want him to be happy, right?"


The mumbling grew softer and soon petered out into soft breathing.

Once she was sure he was asleep, Ana sighed and pushed herself off of the bed. Time to go and text Aster. If she knew her friend as well as she thought she did, she would soon have to deal with a distraught Australian demanding to see Jack. This would be fun.

Aster threw open the door, rushed into the Romoli's house, and flew up the stairs, not even taking the time to remove his coat or shoes. Upon reaching the second floor, he burst into Ana's room only to find her calmly sitting on her bed, working on her homework.
"Where is he?"

Ana looked up at him and treated him to an annoyed stare as a cool breeze wafted through her room. "Did you even bother to close the front door when you charged in here?"

"Ana." The word came out as a growl.

The blonde rolled her eyes. "Aster, calm down. He's fine."

Aster looked like he was close to hysterics. "Calm down? You tell me that Jack is sick and then expect me to calm down without even seeing him?"

"I said he wasn't feeling well, not that he was sick," she calmly explained as she laid her homework to the side and rose to her feet. "Now, you are marching back downstairs, taking off your shoes, and closing the front door, then we'll talk."

"…you promise he's okay?"

Ana smiled comfortingy and said, "Yes. He's actually sound asleep."

Aster's shoulders slumped and he looked immensely relieved. "Bloody hell, Ana. When I got your text I swear my heart stopped. He's just looked so terrible lately that I, I…"

He leaned against the doorway and hid his face in his hands, taking a few deep breaths to calm his racing heart.

Ana walked over to his side, reached up, and laid a hand against his shoulder. "Come on, silly."

He allowed her to guide him back down the stairs to the foyer. Here, he removed his shoes and coat as she shut the door. Once that was done, the duo sat down on the stairs.

Aster had his hands clasped tightly in his lap and he was still breathing pretty hard from running all the way here, but Ana was willing to wait for him to calm down. She knew her mother wouldn't bother them and Baby was playing at her aunt's today, so they didn't have to worry about a horde of little girls attacking them, either.

When the Australian's breathing had finally calmed down he whispered, "Ana, I'm scared."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, a familiar gesture that she knew he'd come to find oddly comforting over the years, and asked, "Of what?"

"About what's going to happen to Jack. It's like he's wasting away before my eyes. Every day it gets a little harder to make him laugh and now this. I'm scared he's never going to go back to his old self."

_Oh Aster, if only you knew. What happened today was probably the best possible thing for Jack because, now, he's got you to make him forget all about Pitch._ Though the idea of telling her friend about Jack's confession was incredibly tempting, Ana didn't. Those feelings weren't hers to tell. Instead, she reached over and pulled his hands apart, taking his right hand in her left.

"He's going to come back. We just have to be here for him and believe in him."

She looked at her friend now and frowned. The dark shadows under his eyes were worse than they’d been on Saturday, just four short days ago. She'd been so worried about Jack that she hadn't been paying enough attention to Aster, apparently. A mistake she’d have to remedy. "Have you
been having trouble sleeping?"

He chuckled softly. "Maybe a little. It's hard to have a good night's sleep when you know the guy you love isn't."

She got to her feet and pulled him onto his. "Come on, you need something to calm your nerves."

They went into the kitchen where Mrs. Romoli was working on dinner and Ana prepared two cups of tea as Aster slumped at the kitchen table, resting his pounding head in his hands. When Ana glanced over at him, the sight made her heart clench. He looked almost as bad as Jack.

"Here," she handed him the warm beverage, making him look up and drawing his mind away from the world of gloomy thoughts, "one cup of Australian Afternoon Tea with cream and sugar, just how you like it."

Aster took the beige beverage from her, wrapping his hands around the steaming mug and letting them soak in the warmth while Ana took a seat across from him. His warm, green eyes studied his friend as she took a sip of her own tea and he couldn't help but smile. "Ana?"

"Yeah?"

"You're something else, you know that?"

She laughed. "You're being sweet two times in one week? Now I know you're sleep deprived!"

His smile widened and he took a sip of the tea, savoring the rich, earthy flavor before he swallowed.

They drank their tea in comfortable silence, the only sound being that of Mrs. Romoli chopping up carrots.

Once the tea was gone, Ana rinsed out the cups and placed them in the dishwasher before leading Aster upstairs to the guestroom. Together, they peeked in and watched Jack's peacefully sleeping form for a few minutes before closing the door and going to Ana's room. Here, Ana took a seat on her bed and Aster sat down backwards in her desk chair, resting his arms and head against its back. Now that he'd seen that Jack was indeed alright he wanted details.

"So, what happened?"

*Jack realized he's in love with you and then had something of a meltdown.* Life would be so much easier for her if she didn't have to let the two idiots realize their mutual feelings on their own. Time to tell a half-truth, something she didn't like doing.

"I think Jack finally realized just how tired he was. Right after we passed you guys in the hall he started to act all funny. I knew something was up, so I made him come home with me and lie down. As you can see, I was right."

Aster nodded, but he looked a little sad. "I just wish that I'd been able to help him realize that instead of just making him laugh and smile."

It took a lot of effort for Ana to keep from breaking into hysterical laughter at the irony of that statement. Instead, she just smiled and said, "Aster, I think you did more than you're giving yourself credit for."

"You think so?" he asked as he looked at her hopefully.
Ana nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"I hope so," he replied and then he turned his head so that he could stared out of Ana's window. It had started to snow and he found watching the snow fall oddly calming. It made him think of Jack: soft, pale, and beautiful. He'd started to appreciate winter a lot more since he'd fallen for the albino. "How long do you think he's gonna sleep for?"

Ana shrugged and leaned back against the covers of her bed, staring up at her ceiling. "Who knows? I'm guessing he's going to be out for a while with how tired he was. Even if he does wake up, I doubt I'm gonna let him go home by himself. I'll probably call the Overlands in a bit and let them know that Jack passed out here after school. I doubt they'll mind if he spends the night, but I don't want them worried."

Aster made a sound of approval and continued to watch the snow. When Jack woke up he was going to be so excited to see the fresh snow. He loved snow. The sound of the door opening pull the artist's gaze away from the outside world. Was Jack awake?

It wasn't Jack.

"Ana, I'm home!" Baby cried out as she came running into the room and Ana sat up. When the child reached her sister's bed, Ana picked her up and pulled her into a tight hug.

"I didn't think you'd be home until late, sweetie."

Baby hugged her sister back and giggled. "Auntie Laura sent me home early because Lea has lots of homework to do."

Aster watched the two sisters in silent amusement. Baby looked so much like Ana had when she was little that it was kind-of scary, but it did bring back fond memories of days long gone. Then he noticed a piece of paper the child had dropped on the ground when Ana had grabbed her.

"What's the paper, Baby?" he asked.

The little girl squirmed out of Ana's arms and grabbed the paper off the floor, handing it to her sibling. "I made you a valentine's day card!"

Ana laughed and took the paper, which had a crude drawing of two human-like figures and a heart on one side. "Isn't it a little early for giving out valentines?"

Baby shook her head. "Lea said you have to give them early if you want someone to be your valentine, that way someone else doesn't get to them first!"

"Oh, are you asking me to be your valentine?" Ana question.

"Yes!" was the eager reply.

Aster chuckled, knowing that the little girl didn’t understand what that meant. Then he stopped chuckling and a thoughtful look crossed his face before he asked, "Baby, what's a valentine?"

She looked at him in disbelief and cocked her head to the side. "Don't you know?"

Of course Aster knew, but he was curious what the child thought the term meant. "Nope, can you tell me?"

"If a person is your valentine, then they promise to love you forever!"
"I see," the Australian said, trying to keep from laughing at how adorable the child was and knowing that she wouldn't understand if he tried to explain that there were different kinds of love. "I think Ana would love you forever even if she wasn't your valentine."

"I know, but this way she has to!" Baby explained, her violet eyes wide.

Ana giggled and pulled her sister into another hug. "Of course I'll be your valentine, Baby."

The child beamed. "Good! Can we play dress up now?"

"Not right now, sweetie. I can't abandon Aster."

"He can play, too."

Ana gave Aster a questioning look and he shrugged. "Why not? It's not like I'm gonna be able to go home and paint until I know for sure that he's okay."

"Know who's okay?" Baby asked, looking from one teen to the other.

Ana placed the child on the ground and stood up. "Jack's sleeping in the guest room right now, Baby. He wasn't feeling well so I brought him here to sleep and Aster's worried about him."

"Can I see him?"

"I think it'd be better if we just let him sleep, okay?"

Baby pouted lightly, but agreed. Seeing the little girl's disappointment, Aster stood up and knelt down to her level. "Would a piggyback make it better?"

The pout was gone, replaced with an excited grin as she nodded eagerly and Aster turned around so she could climb on.

Once Baby was positioned securely on his back, he let Ana lead them down to the playroom.

The smell of something wonderful roused Jack from his slumber. He was still tired, but gnawing hunger beat sleep any day. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and followed the scent downstairs towards the kitchen, the sound of laughter caught his attention. A quick course change found him following the noise of mirth to the playroom where he Ana and Aster were playing with Baby. The sight of his newly realized crush made heat rush to Jack's cheeks and, in the few seconds it took the others to notice his presence, Jack went from pale to crimson.

Aster took one look at his crush's flushed cheeks and rushed to his side.

Jack took a step back as the tall Australian placed a tan hand against his forehead and looked down at him in concern. "Ana, I thought you said he was just tired! He's burning up!"

Jack tried to say something, but all that came out was gibberish due to Aster's proximity. This just made the taller teen look more worried.

"Okay, you need to get back to bed, mate."

Before Jack had time to register what was happening, Aster had picked him up in his arms bridal style and was carrying him back to the guest room. This only made his blush intensify.

Meanwhile, Ana was watching the scene unfold with intense amusement. She knew why Jack was
so hot. This was too ridiculous, but what could she do? She couldn't just tell Aster why Jack was suddenly running a temperature.

Baby, who had been too surprised by Jack's appearance and Aster's reaction to it to react at first, was now tugging on Ana's hand. "Come on, we gotta follow them!"

Ana shook her head, grinning. "No, sweetie, let's let them be for now. Why don't we go and see if mom will let us take Jack some food? I highly doubt Aster's going to let him come down to dinner until that temperature's gone and I have a feeling that won't be happening anytime soon."

Baby was confused by her sister's words, but agreed and allowed Ana to lead her into the kitchen.

Jack was still blushing when Aster laid him on the bed and sat down by his side. This was the first time he'd seen the other teen since he'd realized his feelings and all he wanted to do was grab the Australian and kiss him. Which was strange, because he'd never felt the urge to kiss Pitch. All he'd ever wanted was for Pitch to hold him or even just show him a tiny scrap of affection. Aster, on the other hand, made him want to do a lot more than that. Maybe that was because Aster already did everything Pitch never had?

Like right now, Pitch would never have thought to carry Jack to bed or to fuss over him like a mother hen. Watching Aster babble on about taking care of himself, Jack felt a stupid grin taking over his face, but he didn't try to fight it. He just lay there and listened to his love's deep, worry filled voice wash over him.

He could listen to Aster talk for hours, days even. How had he not realized that meant he was in love before now? His mind wondered away from the bedroom as he started to try and figure out when he first started to fall for Aster.

The Australian noticed none of this, too full of worry to notice the stupid grin and loving gaze of his crush. "Now, promise me you won't leave this bed again, okay?"

"I think it was at the lake," Jack stated, not realizing he'd spoken the words aloud.

"What lake?"

Jack started at Aster's question. With a nervous laugh, he grinned at his crush and said, "It's nothing, honestly. I'm just delirious."

Now Aster knew something was up. "Yeah, right, like I'm going to believe that. Wanna try again?"

"Just thinking out loud," was the nervous reply.

"About what?"

Jack looked at Aster, intending to try and explain his outburst, but then their eyes met. Blue stared into green and both boys found themselves unable to talk. Jack's blush started to intensify and Aster felt heat starting to rise to his own face.

Oh no, he's going to notice something's up!

Both boys were so worried about their own reactions being noticed that they failed to notice the identical ones taking place on the face of their crush. It was only when Ana and Baby came in with food for Jack that they stopped staring at each other.
One look at their guilty, red faces told Ana all she needed to know: nothing had happened while they were alone together.

It took a good deal of effort for the matchmaker to keep from banging her head against the wall.
Chapter 16

Aster's heart was pounding. How long had he been lost in Jack's eyes? Had Jack noticed what was up? Probably not. He looked far too delirious to notice much of anything. Aster had never thought he'd be thankful for Jack's ill health, but right now he certainly was.

Ana set down a tray of food on Jack's bedside table and Baby handed the albino a glass of water, looking at Jack's face curiously. "Jack, why are you all red? Are you sick?"

Jack shook his head and took a sip of water. "No, I'm alright, Baby. Just a little tired."

"Then you should sleep!" She announced, lightly patting his hand as she did so.

He laughed and smiled at her softly. "That sounds like a good idea, but I should probably eat first."

Baby accepted this proposal, but insisted that they all stay with him while he ate. Aster took a seat in the room's desk chair while Ana and Baby positioned themselves on the bed. At first, Jack seemed a little hesitant to eat with so many people watching, but Ana soon remedied that. She started to talk about her day and then made Baby tell them all about her Valentine’s Day card.

By the time Baby was explaining what a valentine was, the hungry teen had devoured everything on his plate and Ana had run downstairs to grab more. While they waited for her return, Baby scooted across the bed until she was sitting by Jack's side.

The five-year-old leaned against his shoulder and asked, "Jack, who's going to be your valentine?"

As the pale teen blushed and started to stammer out an answer, Aster found himself holding his breath. What would Jack say?

"I, I don't know, Baby. I didn't really plan to have one this year."

This was not an acceptable response. "But you have to have a valentine! Lea said so!"

Jack smiled and said, "Did she now? Okay, will you be my valentine then?"

Baby shook her head. "No! I'm Ana's valentine! You have to ask someone else."

"Can't you have two valentines?" Jack asked, pretending to not understand.

"No! You can only have one each year."

"Well, if I can't have you or Ana then I guess I'll have to go loveless this year," Jack replied sadly.

He'd meant it as a joke, but Baby looked heartbroken at the confession. Tiny tears welled up in her violet eyes and she whimpered out the words, "You can't go loveless, Jack. That's too sad! Everyone needs to be loved!"

Jack tried to calm her down, but the tears were already cascading down her cheeks at the thought of Jack being left all alone without love.

Aster got up from his seat and sat down on the bed beside Baby, sandwiching her between him and Jack. He ran a tan hand through her hair and said, "Baby, it's okay. Jack won't be left alone on Valentine’s Day. He'll have me, Sandy, and Nick to hang out with."
Baby sniffled lightly and looked up at Aster. "But he still won't have a valentine and Lea said that means you'll never fall in love."

Aster made a mental note to talk to Mrs. Romoli about the nonsense Lea was being allowed to preach, but aloud he said, "That's not true, Baby. I haven't had a valentine in years and I'm certain I'll still find love."

This admission didn't seem to help and Baby started to cry again, wailing about how Jack and Aster were doomed to loveless lives. The boys exchanged worried looks. They didn't know how to deal with this one.

Just then, Ana returned with a tray of food. She took one look at her baby sister and rushed to the bed, setting the food down on the bedside table, before crawling onto the sheets and sitting down before her baby sister with a cry of, "Baby, what's wrong?"

"Jack and Aster are gonna die alone!" was the hysterical reply.

Based on how her two friend's love lives were currently progressing, Ana could very well believe this statement, but she didn't know how Baby could have caught onto her friend's romance issues. Their feelings were pretty obvious, but not that obvious. She pulled the child into her arms and stroked her hair, whispering, "Baby, why do you think that?"

"Because they don't have valentines!"

Ana blinked in surprise before a wicked idea entered her mind. "Well, we'll just have to fix that!" Baby stopped crying and pulled out of Ana's hug, looking at her sister in confusion. "We will?"

Both boys were looking on in horror. They had a pretty good idea where this was going.

"Yes! If neither of them have a valentine, then they'll just have to be each other's. That way they won't have to die alone."

Baby clapped her hands, her eyes full of excitement. "Yes!"

She turned to the boys, looking as serious as a five-year-old can, and commanded, "You have to be each other's valentine and promise to love each other forever!"

Ana was grinning and holding back laughter at the looks on the boy's faces. They both seemed very enamored with the idea, but reluctant to admit that aloud. Then another idea occurred to her. "Baby, they can't just say it."

The little girl looked at her sister curiously. "They can't?"

"No. Remember, you gave me that lovely card when you asked me."

Baby's mouth widened into a tiny 'o' before she grinned and nodded. "Yes! They have to make cards!"

Ana hopped off the bed, her grin positively diabolical as she said, "I'll go get the card supplies from the playroom."

And then she was gone, leaving two shell-shocked teenage males and an excited child in her wake.

"I'm going to kill you." Aster declared as he sketched a snowflake on the pale, blue paper. He was
sitting in the hallway outside of the guestroom, making his valentine with Ana's help while Baby and Jack made their own inside. The little girl had insisted the cards be made where the intended receiver couldn't see for the 'valentine's day magic' to work and neither boy had complained. Having to do this was bad enough, making the cards with their crush present would have been torture.

"I'll deal," Ana replied as she watched him draw.

Aster's card was a snowy, winter scene with a shadowed couple kissing under a dim streetlamp. She noticed with interest that the couple appeared to be two males, but didn't comment on it. On the top of the card were written the words 'Be Mine?' in flowing, cursive script.

Aster's only reply was a glower before he continued to draw as he fought back yet another blush. He was really getting sick of having a permanent red tint to his face.

Inside the room, Baby was watching with glee as Jack drew tiny red hearts on a piece of pink paper. The words "I'm Yours" were scrawled in cursive in the center of the card in silver lettering. Jack had picked them out himself, but had made Baby promise to tell Aster it had been her idea. His card wasn't an artistic masterpiece like Asters. It was simple, plain, and straight from Jack's aching heart.

He'd only been aware of his crush for a matter of hours now and already it was driving him mad. He blamed it on the sleep deprivation.

A knock on the door drew the duo's attention from the card and Jack called, "come in."

A nervous looking Aster stepped in with Ana hovering behind him. Jack could feel his face flushing at the sight of the card in his crush's hand. This was going to be interesting.

For the longest time, neither teen said a word. They merely stared down at their cards, fighting blushes and hoping they'd be able to ask the dreaded question without stammering too badly. Finally, Baby got sick of waiting. She nudged Jack pointedly and the albino shivered slightly before holding out his card and whispering, "Aster, will you be my valentine?"

The Australian knew it was just to make Baby happy, but the words still made his heart soar. He grinned at his furiously blushing crush and took the card from his outstretched hand, replacing it with his own. "Only if you'll be mine."

Jack smiled at him and nodded happily. For a moment, Aster actually believed this was what Jack really wanted.

Then Baby started to clap and the moment was gone.

While the child clapped, Ana marched around Aster and tried to grab her little sister as she said, "Okay, time for Jack to sleep," but Baby avoided her.

"We have to tuck him in, first! That way there are no bad dreams!"

Ana couldn't help but agree to the demand and hope that the child was right. Besides, Baby just looked too cute to deny.

With a pleased smile, Baby leaned forward and kissed Jack on the forehead before whispering "Get well soon." Then she turned to Ana and gave her an expectant look.

Knowing full well what the look meant, Ana mirrored her sister's actions, kissing Jack softly on his
forehead and giving him a tiny wink as she pulled back. Once Ana had completed the ritual, Baby turned her gaze on Aster and the Australian's eyes widened as he realized what she wanted him to do. He knew there was no way out of it, too.

Blushing, he nervously stepped forward, leaned down, and brushed his lips against the pale skin of Jack's cheek. After a moment, he pulled back and smiled goofily at his crush, unsure what to do next. Jack seemed just as lost so Ana rolled her eyes and dragged Aster out of the room.
Ana stood before her mirror, yawning lightly as she brushed her hair. A few deft motions later she had most of it pulled back into a high ponytail, leaving the only the dyed portions free to frame her face. She'd need to re-dye them soon; maybe she'd do that after school on Friday?

Her hair taken care of, she grabbed today's poncho - a purple one with bits of silver glitter in it - and left the room. The smell of something delicious and cinnamony filled her nostrils as she entered the hallway, but she turned away from source of the tempting odor and headed to Jack's room instead.

Once she reached the door, she knocked, but he didn't respond. Figuring that the albino was still fast asleep, Ana entered the room, intent on waking him for breakfast.

Jack was already awake, though, curled up into a tight ball on the floor by his bed, his head hidden in his arms. The sight filled Ana with dread and she was soon kneeling by his side, a hand against his shoulder as she asked, "Jack, what's wrong?"

He groaned and looked up at her. Ana had to hold back a gasp. He looked even worse than he had yesterday! His eyes were bloodshot and the circles under them were darker than ever. Did he sleep at all?

"Jack, are you okay?"

He shook his head and smiled sadly. "I can't get him out of my head, Ana, no matter how hard I try."

Ana sighed and turned around so she was sitting against the bed as well. Then she leaned back against the mattress and asked, "Well, why not just ask him out?"

Jack blinked, unsure what Ana was talking about. Hadn't they established that Pitch was a past crush? Even if he wasn't, asking him out didn't strike Jack as a good idea. Then his tired brain finally connected the dots. Oh, she wasn't talking about Pitch. Good, better to not worry her and just play along, then. "Ask him out? Ana, Aster's the best friend I've ever had. I don't wanna lose him."

Oh honestly. "Lose him?"

Jack nodded and buried his head in his arms once again. He was so tired. So very, very tired. Damn his nightmares, but Ana couldn't know about those. That would be bad and talking about Aster helped. It grounded him. "If I ask him out, then things are gonna be weird between us after he rejects me. I, I can't take that right now. Not with the trial coming up. I need Aster to be there for me, not awkwardly avoiding me."

He let out a tiny, desperate laugh as he remembered how foolishly he'd acted the previous evening. At least he could tell her this truth. "Then again, maybe it wouldn't matter because I'll probably be avoiding him anyway."

Ana's annoyance with the albino faded away. With a kind smile, she looped an arm around his shoulders and asked, "What if he says yes?"

Jack stiffened. She could tell he hadn't even considered that as an option. "Says yes?"
"Yeah! What if Aster says yes?"

Jack was looking at her again, his face unreadable. "I… I don't know."

Ana wasn't sure how to interpret that response. "Don't you want him to say yes?"

Jack turned his gaze to the room's wall, lost in thought. He hadn't even thought about that yet. He was still getting used to the idea of being in love with the gorgeous Australian and the idea that the feelings were mutual had never once occurred. For the first time since he'd woken up in the middle of the night, Jack stopped thinking about his nightmare. He thought of how kind Aster had been as of late and he almost smiled, but then he thought of how he'd been acting. Who'd want to date someone who couldn't even sleep for more than three hours at a time and woke up gasping in terror?

Ana wiggled her toes, oblivious to her words true effect, and waited for Jack to talk.

"Yes. I want him to say yes more than anything."

Jack's voice was desperate as he spoke, still staring at the wall. "But what could Aster possibly see in me? I'm a mess, Ana."

"Jack, you're not a mess…"

"Yes, I am!" He was still refusing to look at her. "I have nothing to offer someone like Aster. Aster's kind, talented, and just so much… so much more than I could ever be. I'm… glad for these feelings, but Aster deserves a partner who can give him something other than a headache in return. At least with Pitch he was just as messed up as me…"

Ana wrapped her arms around Jack, cutting off his rant, and he hugged her back, burying his face against her shoulder as she gently ran a hand along his back in a comforting motion and whispered, "Love isn't about being worthy, Jack. It's not a contest. I bet that, if Aster loved you, he wouldn't care how messed up your past was. You already give him more than you realize."

He pulled back, startled. "I do? What do I give him?"

"He always smiles when you're around and I've never seen him let someone paint with him," Ana explained, keeping her voice calm and reassuring as she spoke.

Jack smiled shyly, his eyes alight with pleasure. "Really?"

"Really!" She got to her feet and held out a hand to the curled up teen. "Come on, let's go get some food. My mom makes a mean pancake."

The mention of food made Jack's stomach growl and his smile grew a little wider as he allowed Ana to pull him to his feet.

"That sounds delicious."

Despite their talk, Ana could see Jack's doubts coming out the moment they joined Aster for the walk to school.

Instead of smiling and joking with his friend, Jack made sure to keep Ana between them and he barely made eye contact with the other teen.

His actions didn't go unnoticed by Aster. At first, he'd tried to talk with Jack, but the albino's curt
answers soon made them fall into a tense silence. Ana tried to ease the tension, but nothing worked. In the end, he spent the whole walk with Jack staring at the ground and Aster glaring straight ahead of him while Ana watched the train wreck helplessly.

When they got to school, Jack made up some excuse about needing to see a teacher and rushed inside, leaving Ana and Aster to join their waiting companions without him.

Aster's whole body had slumped as he watched Jack leave and he barely spoke a word until it was time to go to class.

As he left, the other boys hung back, hoping Ana could shed some light on the situation.

“What's going on between him and Jack?” Nick asked, watching as a defeated looking Aster entered the building.

Ana sighed and clasped her hands together behind her back. “It's… complicated, Nick. Just, don't talk to him about it. I'm not sure what we should do, but for now let's try and keep their minds off each other, okay?”

Nick stared at her for a moment before asking, "What, did Aster finally ask Jack out and get rejected?"

Ana and Sandy gaped at him and Nick's worried frown turned into an indignant pout.

"You know, even I'm not that oblivious."

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Lunch time was even worse.

Instead of getting his food and joining Aster like usual, Jack waited in the cafeteria for the rest of the gang just so that he could avoid being alone with the Australian. When they sat down at their normal table, Jack took the seat farthest from Aster and immediately began reading a book. He didn't stop until it was time to go to class and, when that time came, he almost ran away from them.

Aster watched him flee in silence, but he looked heartbroken.

After the final bell of the day rang, Ana moved across the classroom to Jack's side. "So, how are you feeling?"

Jack laughed nervously. "I'm actually feeling a little sick, so I'm gonna head straight back to the Overlands, okay? Let Aster know for me."

He jumped up from his desk to leave, but Ana stopped him. "Jack, this has to stop. You can't just avoid Aster forever! He already knows something's up."

Jack suddenly found the floor oddly fascinating. "I know…"

"Jack…” Ana tried to keep her voice from sounding upset, but failed and he visibly flinched at her tone.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to take things back to normal tomorrow. Just… just let me avoid him a little longer. Please?"

As soon as Ana sighed and said ‘okay,’ he flew around her and out the door, leaving Ana staring after him with saddened eyes.
Aster took one look at the basket he was working on and held back a growl. It looked almost as terrible as he felt. What had happened with Jack? Just yesterday things had been fine between them and now he was treating Aster like a plague barer. It hurt. It hurt a lot.

Maybe he should have taken Ana up on that offer for tea instead of brushing her off and heading home.

With a sigh, he set the basket to the side and got up off the floor. He couldn't paint anything pretty when he felt like this. He needed to clear his head.

Knowing just what to do, Aster entered the hallway and called, "Hey, Sophie, wanna go to the park?"

His baby sister came running from the playroom, her eyes bright with excitement as she said, "Yes!"

Her excitement instantly lifted Aster's spirits. He didn't even have to force the smile that came to his face. "Alright, let's go get on your snow clothes!"

The two Wilder children suited up in snow pants, scarves, gloves, and coats, then Aster got a pink sled out of the garage. Sophie started jumping up and down with excitement the seconds she saw it, making Aster laugh. As much as Aster hated the cold of winter, Sophie love it.

"Okay, you know the rules," he said, holding out his hand to her.

She nodded and held onto him tightly as they left the house and walked to the neighborhood park where they spent the remaining hours before sunset sledding and building a very impressive snowman. During the whole adventure, a happy grin never left Aster's face.

His worries were still there, of course, but Sophie's smiles and laughter pushed them away for a while.

While Aster played, Jack was curled up into a tight, miserable ball on his bed.

The Valentine's Day card that Aster had made him was now fastened to the wall next to the artistic teen's sketch, but Jack wasn't looking at them. Instead, he was staring blankly out across his room. He could barely think with how hard his head was pounding, let alone focus his exhausted eyes.

He didn't even notice when Mrs. Overland quietly pushed the door open and peaked in, her blue eyes full of worry.

As she took in his pained form, her grip on the door handle tightened. Ever since the fire, things had been tense in the Overland household and it felt like Jack was even less of a son than he'd ever been.

When they'd signed up to be foster parents, the agency had warned them that foster children often came with issues, but she hadn't understood what that meant until they'd got Jack: a little boy lost in a dark world, unwilling to open up to anyone.
It wasn't fair. All she'd wanted was a child to love, but she'd never had that. Jack was always more of a boarder than a child. Now he wasn't even that. Her foster son was barely more than a phantom of a person.

Ana stormed into study hall the next day and slumped down in her seat by Sandy. She'd about had it! She could barely concentrate on any of her classes she was so worried about the two idiots. "Sandy, they're going to drive me to an early grave! It was bad enough when I just had to deal with Aster. I know Aster. I can deal with Aster! Comforting him and making him feel better are tricks I mastered years ago. But Jack? I just don't have a clue when it comes to Jack. He won't even talk to me about it!"

The smaller teen frowned and nodded in agreement. This was starting to look grim. Yesterday, Jack hadn't even joined them in the sleigh and then he'd read a book all lunch to keep from talking to anyone. He hadn't even gone home with Aster to help paint, saying he felt too tired and needed to sleep. Today, Jack had joined them in the morning, but he'd been awkward and fidgety the entire time.

The growing tension between him and Aster had left them all feeling sick.

If Sandy had to guess, the weight of the trial combined with Jack's new crush was leaving the albino a nervous wreck. He looked it, too. His eyes were blood shot, it didn't look like he'd even tried to comb his hair, and Sandy was pretty sure he was wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing the day before. If someone didn't do something, Jack was going to land in the hospital sooner than the witness stand.

Sandy had a pretty good idea how to deal with the nightmare issue by now, but he didn’t think it would do much good until Jack had dealt with his crush stress.

A determined look came over Sandy's face and he patted Ana’s arm. Time to try his own hand at a little matchmaking and, unlike his violet eyed friend, he wasn’t going to be so subtle.

Nick wanted to yell at Jack when he saw the albino waiting for them once again at lunch. This was just so wrong! Instead, he grinned at Jack and asked, "Forget your way to our table?"

Jack tried to smile, but it looked more like a terrified grimace. "Nope, just waiting for you guys!"

As he fell into step with them, Nick exchanged a look with Sandy. The smaller teen winked at him and Nick felt relief surge through him. If anyone could come up with a plan to stop all this, it was Sandy.

The plan obviously wasn't for lunch, though, because that was just another feast of awkwardness for the gang. Jack and Aster talked when asked a question, but every word they said sounded forced.

The end of the lunch period, which was normally met with good-natured groans, was treated like a blessing.

"Are you going home with Aster today?" Ana asked.

Jack shook his head sheepishly. "I, I, um, I, that is…"

Ana groaned and stalked away from him, calling the words, "I'll let Aster know you're sick again,"
over her shoulder as she exited the room.

Jack thought about calling a "thanks" after her, but didn't. Instead, he slowly gathered his things and began the long and lonely walk back to the Overland's. Once there, he lay on his bed and stared at Aster's drawings through bleary eyes until he fell into a restless sleep that left him wide awake, paralyzed with fear, and gasping in terror long before sunrise.
Sandy adjusted his shirt lightly and gazed into his bedroom mirror as he thought about his plan.

Would this work?

Probably. At least it should get them talking again.

Then he sighed and grabbed his book bag from the foot of his bed. Time to test a theory and hope Aster didn’t murder him for it.

Jack opened the sleigh door and climbed in, awkwardly sitting down next to Aster and doing his best not to touch him. How he’d been able to sit here, day after day, pressed so close to Aster prior to this he couldn’t say, but he missed it. He missed being able to talk to Aster, but every time he tried those terrible dreams came rushing back. He wished desperately that he’d never realized his stupid crush.

As soon as he’d closed the jeep's door, Sandy opened the one on his side and got out of the car, making the others look at him in surprise, but he didn’t just get out of the car, he starting walking around it. First he opened Nick's door and pulled the bigger teen out of the car, then he leaned in and grabbed the keys.

Once that was done, he pulled Nick along behind him to Ana's side and grabbed her too. Then, he dragged the startled couple away from the car and into the building as Jack and Aster stared after them, both suddenly realizing what was going on.

Which was actually what Sandy had been hoping for, really.

Speaking of hoping for things… Sandy glanced back at his companions and smirked. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, right?

As soon as the school's door closed him and his dragged along companions, he stopped pulling them and, instead, carefully placed their hands together with a pointed look. The action made both of them start.

Then they stared down at their suddenly intertwined hands while Sandy gave a nod of approval and headed off down the empty hallway, whistling a happy tune. He'd done all he could for his friends, now the rest was up to them.

As the golden haired boy started to wonder off, Nick's blue eye's met Ana's violet ones and he smiled. "Well, we've got quite a bit of time to kill. Wanna grab a hot chocolate in the cafeteria?"

Ana laughed and nodded, giving his hand a tiny squeeze. "That would be lovely."

Then they headed down the hallway after Sandy, their hands still intertwined.

Oh he was going to murder Sandy. What was the golden-haired drongo trying to do? Ruin their friendship forever, that’s what! This was bad.

Aster glanced over at Jack and frowned. Look, Frostbite wasn’t even willing to meet his gaze, not that that was anything new… Was Jack actually trembling? God, what had he done to make the
albino so scared of him? Aster was the one who should be freaking out here, not Jack!

After all, only one of them was stuck in a ruddy Christmas jeep with their secret crush.

Aster glanced at Jack again and his brain finally registered the faint blush tinting the albino’s cheeks. Why was Jack blushing? What reason did he have to be embarrassed? It had to be something to do with Aster or their current situation, but it was probably something to do with both… Or maybe he was just sick.

Aster reached out and placed a hand against Jack’s forehead to check, making the albino finally turn a confused gaze towards him. No, not sick. And if he wasn’t sick, then that meant… what did that mean?

“Why are you blushing?”

Jack’s confused look became one of panic and his light trembling grew stronger as the faint blush grew a bit darker, but he didn’t speak.

Now what did that mean? If only Ana was here… no, he could figure this out on his own! He might not be good at reading emotions, but he could do it if he tried. He was sure of it.

Okay, blushing… Why did people blush? Embarrassment. Why would Jack be embarrassed? The valentine? No, that wouldn’t get a reaction this strong, even with the sleep deprivation.

He looked at Jack again and noticed that the albino was refusing to meet his gaze.

So, embarrassed about something to do with Aster for sure… the only thing he could think of was… no. No way.

“Do you like me?”

Jack’s reaction was immediate and powerful. The albino’s whole face turned crimson and he began to choke out words, not that Aster was listening to them. He was too busy smirking in triumph. HA! Take that Ana. He could read people too.

Then he realized what Jack’s reaction meant. Jack liked him. As in, was attracted to him, and based on that blush, probably even wanted to kiss him. That was good. No, that was great!

“…so, so sorry! I didn’t want you to know and I promise…”

Wait, why was Jack apologizing? Didn’t he realize Aster liked him too? No, no he doesn’t, because you’ve been too busy playing detective to tell him, ya gumby.

Aster opened his mouth to explain, but all that came out was a very squeaky sounding, “Jack.”

He tried again, but only managed to get out, “You see I…” before he clammed up again. Oh, how was he supposed to do this? He’d never told anyone he liked them before!

Aster stared at Jack and gulped, thinking back to all the silly romantic comedies he’d watched with Ana over the years. Well, if it worked in the movies…

Without further thought, Aster leaned forward and gently pressed his lips to Jack, silencing the albino’s rambling apologies with a kiss.
Chapter 20

Jack stared down at his hands, which were clutched tightly in his lap, as blood rushed to his cheeks. He knew he could get out of the car and leave. In fact, that was probably the best thing for him to do, but he couldn't seem to move. He was terrified. Aster was going to know something was going on no matter what he did. Heck, Aster already knew something was up. That's why he'd been avoiding being alone with him. Why, Sandy, why?

The he felt a warm hand being pressed to his forehead and a deep voice asked, "Why are you blushing?"

Oh no. Jack's gaze turned slowly from his hands to the face of his crush in horror. No, this couldn't be happening.

After a few moments, realization stole over the Australian's face. Jack knew what was coming. Oh God. Why Sandy? Why?

"Wait, do you like me?"

Frick. Jack's blush only grew stronger and he began to babble. "Oh, God, Aster I, I'm so sorry! I'm trying not to, really I am. I’m so, so sorry! I didn’t want you to know and I promise I’ll get over it! Please don't hate me I, I couldn't…"

The tan teen was looking at Jack with a cocky smirk on his face, which Jack didn’t understand. Why did Aster seem so pleased with himself? Maybe he was flattered? That could be good.

Then Aster opened his mouth to speak and Jack braced himself for the coming rejection, but kept his gaze trained on his crush. He'd take it like a man.

"Jack."

Well that was a weird noise and now Aster’s smirk had been replaced with a nervous smile. That couldn’t be good…

Then Aster kissed him.

Jack's body acted of its own will and his hands suddenly found themselves clutching at Aster's shirt, pulling the Australian closer. Aster didn't seem to mind, though, since he reached up and placed a hand against the back of Jack's head, wrapping tan fingers in snow-white hair, then pushed their lips together even tighter.

Aster's lips were the smoothest things Jack had ever felt. He smells like strawberries.

The thought made him giggle, breaking the kiss, and bringing them back to reality.

For the longest time they just looked at each other shyly and then Jack whispered, "I guess this means you don't hate me?"

Aster smiled softly and began to absentmindedly play with Jack’s hair as he blushed and said, "I'm pretty sure it means the exactly opposite."

And then, just because it had worked so well the first time, he kissed Jack again.
Kissing Jack was nothing like Aster had imagined; it was a thousand times better. Jack was so much smaller than him and he felt so fragile, like glass, but so incredibly soft. Like freshly fallen snow.

As they kissed, Aster felt that familiar urge to hold Jack close and keep him safe. An urge he finally let himself give into, wrapping his arms around his crush and pulling him close.

When they broke apart again, Jack leaned against Aster's chest and sighed happily, closing his eyes and enjoying the feeling of two, strong arms wrapped around him as all the worries and terror melted away. He could get used to this.

Aster, for his part, was happy just to bury his face in Jack's hair as he made a mental note to get Sandy a trip to Hawaii or something equally amazing.

Neither of them spoke, but they didn't need to. The answers to the questions that flitted through their minds were pretty obvious, but finally, Aster asked one anyway. "So, do I get to call you my boyfriend now or do I have to take you out on a date first?"

Jack snuggled closer to him and sleepily said, "Can't we do both? After all, you do owe me a valentines date."

Aster laughed and Jack loved being able to feel his boyfriend's chest shake as the wonderful, rich sound escaped him. "I think I can handle that."

They fell back into happy silence once more, content to simply hold and be held until they heard the faint sound of the tardy bell ringing.

"I guess that means we should go, huh?"

Jack nodded in agreement, but didn’t seem at all inclined at actually untangle himself from Aster’s arms, a sentiment which the Australian fully understood.

By the time they finally moved and got out of the sleigh, they were both very late for class. Neither of them cared in the slightest.

"Well, Mr. Wilder, so nice to see that you've decided to join us."

Aster grinned at his teacher and murmured an apology before sitting down next to an amused looking Nick.

As he took his seat, the teacher began to teach once more, but Aster was too happy to hear a word she was saying. Jack liked him! Like, like liked him! Like like like liked him? Did it matter? Jack was his boyfriend! Okay, he should probably stop the happy sighs before he drew more weird looks. Oh, Nick was looking at him like he was an idiot. Well why should he care about that? Let Nick think whatever he liked!

"So, how'd it go?" the burly teen asked in a whisper, unaware of his friend’s internal musings.

Aster grinned back goofily, his whole face glowing. "I am so sorry for every bad thing I have ever said about that ruddy car of yours, mate. I will never complain about the ruddy thing again."

Nick chucked and then said, "I told you, *everyone* loves the sleigh."
Aster bit his lip as he concentrated on the paper before him. He’s gotten all jittery waiting for Jack to arrive, so he’d decided to calm his nerves by sketching. He’d quickly lost himself in the task and now he was working on a drawing of Sophie playing in the snow, a Valentine’s Day gift for her to hang up in her room.

A sudden weight on his shoulder drew him out of his drawing zone. Apparently Jack had arrived, since the albino was leaning against him, happily reading a book and munching on a cookie. When had he gotten here?

"Sorry, was I ignoring you?" Aster asked, looping an arm around his boyfriend's waist.

Jack looked up from his book and smiled. "Kinda, but that's okay. You can go back to drawing."

Aster set down his sketchpad as a goofy grin fought for control of his face. Boyfriend. He was really coming to like that word. "Nah, I can work on it later."

Then he noticed how tired Jack appeared and his smile changed into a look of concern. He’d been so busy trying to keep himself from looking like a love struck idiot throughout the day that he’d forgotten just how bad his boyfriend had looked that morning.

He did look a bit better now, no more trembling, but that wasn’t good enough.

"Jack, are you alright?"

The smaller teen yawned and snuggling closer to Aster, but before he could reply a tray was slammed down on the table and they suddenly found themselves staring into the fiercely gleaming, violet eyes of Ana Romoli.

"Details. Now."

Both boys turned crimson.

Ana laughed and sat down as Nick and Sandy took their places at the table. None of them touched their food, though. They simply sat, grinning, and waited.

"In case you can't tell, we're dating now, and that's really all you need to know." Aster announced, holding onto Jack protectively and glaring at the rest of the gang.

Sandy clapped in delight, but the others weren't letting them get away that easy.

"No way!" Ana exclaimed, folding her arms across her chest as she did so. "I've had to worry about you two for way too long to let you off that easy."

The blushes only grew.

Jack started to stammer out something, but then another yawn took hold of him and Aster got an idea. He rose to his feet, pulled Jack to his, and grinned at the gang. "Sorry, guys, Jack isn't feeling that well, so I'm gonna take him to the nurse's office and let him sleep. It might take me a while, so I'll just take my stuff with me and see you guys later."
Jack didn't protest, but Ana jumped to her feet and grabbed Aster’s bandana from his head.

"Hey!" He tried to grab it back, but she was too fast for him to catch.

"You can have it back when I get the full story from one of you."

The Australian was going to argue with her, but another yawn from Jack made him stop. He hadn’t been kidding about taking Jack to the infirmary.

With an annoyed glare at Ana, Aster took hold of his boyfriend's hand was about to lead him away from the gang when Sandy stopped him. In the small teen’s hand was… an mp3 player?

Aster took the offered gadget and gave Sandy a questioning look, but the other teen merely smiled and pointed to Jack.

The artist got it then. “For when he’s sleeping?”

Sandy nodded and Aster grinned.

“Okay, we’ll give it a go. That’s mate.”

Then the couple headed off.

Unsurprisingly, Jack was more than happy to just let Aster lead him along. The white-haired teen had been on an emotional high most of the morning, but the adrenaline rush was fading fast and he really was very tired. Aster had said something about sleep, right? Sleep was good. Cuddles were good, too… wait, where was he going to be sleeping?

Jack shook his head slightly, exhaustion clouding his thoughts as he asked, “Where are we going?”

"Like I said, the infirmary. The nurse will let you take a nap there during lunch as long as there's a free bed."

Jack smiled drowsily. “Sleep is good.”

“Mmhm, and you’re gonna listen to whatever this is, too,” Aster added, handing Jack Sandy’s gift as the duo entered the infirmary.

A brief conversation with the nurse later, Jack was lying down in a dark room, listening to the sound of waves crashing against a shore and the cries of dolphins. It didn’t take long for the soothing sounds to lull him to sleep and his dreams were nothing but sweet for the first time in weeks.

Jack held back a yawn as he pushed open the unfamiliar door. He really wanted to know what Aster had said to the nurse to get her to let him sleep through the rest of the day, not that he was complaining. He’d needed the rest. In fact, he wouldn’t mind a little more, but first he had to find his boyfriend. He just hoped he had the right room.

One look told him that he probably did.

The room was long, narrow, and practically covered with paintings and shelves of pottery. Unfamiliar music blasted from a radio by the door into which a pink ipod had been plugged. A group of interestingly dressed teens were sitting around a table in the far corner, talking, and a single girl in a long, white smock was standing near the entryway, glaring at a painting with a paintbrush clasped tightly in her hand.
Jack didn’t want to both the talking kids, so he cautiously approached the glaring artist and tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned to face him and, for a moment, all the frustration of her glower was focused on him. Jack was about to apologize and run away when her face brightened into a pleasant smile and she said, "Oh, hello! Can I help you?"

Oh good. He wasn’t going to be yelled at. That was nice. "Yeah, um, do you know where Aster is?"

She nodded and gestured towards a door at the back of the room. "I think he's in there, throwing. At least, that’s where he normally is."

Jack thanked her and she gave him another kind smile before returning to glaring at her canvas.

After a final, nervous glance at the girl, he walked across the paint splattered floor to the doorway she'd indicated. Inside the new room, Aster was sitting at a spinning pottery wheel, his brow furrowed in concentration as he carefully ran his fingers along a slab of spinning, grey clay.

Jack smiled in relief at the sight of his boyfriend and stepped into the room, letting the door close behind him. He winced slightly at the creaking sound it made, but Aster didn’t seem to even hear the noise, let alone realize he had an audience. The music was too loud and he was too intent on his pot to see anything else.

As Jack watched, the Australian leaned close to his project to fix some minor detail and, suddenly, his hair was caught in the clay.

"Not again," he groan as he stopped the wheel and pulled the hair out, frowning at the indentation it had left in his pot.

Jack couldn't help but laugh, drawing Aster's attention to him.

The moment he saw who was here, the tan teen’s frown turned into a smile, making Jack blush as Aster brushed his hair out of his eyes with his arm and said, "You know, you're allowed to interrupt me."

Jack grinned and walked over to his side. "I like watching you work. I got your bandana back from Ana, by the way."

Aster grabbed a rag from the bench he was sitting on and cleaned the clay off his hands before gratefully taking the blue cloth from his boyfriend.

Then he expertly folded the bandana into a headband shape and tied it around his head while saying, "I always get my hair caught in the clay when I'm not wearing one of these."

Jack nodded, timidly shuffling his feet. This was the first time he and Aster had really been alone since that morning and it was making his heart race. "I think you look better when you're wearing one."

Aster started at the admission and then grinned. "I do, too."

His grin turned to a slight frown when he looked down at his pot, but then he shrugged and said, "Well, I really don't care enough to fix this."

With that, he squashed the clay down into a ball.
Jack made an odd sound and Aster shot him a worried look before asking, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just, I thought it looked nice. It must have taken you a while to get it looking like that and then you squashed it!"

"A while? Jack, it probably took me all of five minutes. Throwing's really not that hard once you get the hang of it." Aster got up from the stool and motioned for Jack to sit down. "Here, I'll show you."

Jack shook his head furiously. "No, I don't think I'd be very good."

"Jack, if I can let you see me make a fool of myself on ice skates, then you can let me teach you how to throw. Now, sit down."

Reluctantly, Jack took a seat before the potter's wheel and Aster grinned. Finally, a chance for him to show off.

"Okay, the first thing you need to do is wet your hands."

Jack sighed and dipped his fingers into the bucket of clay colored water sitting on the edge of the wheel's stand. Aster rolled his eyes. "Jack, I said wet your hands."

He demonstrated, leaning over and plunging his hands into the water so that they were fully soaked. Jack followed suit unenthusiastically.

"Now, start the wheel turning by pushing on that peddle by your foot."

Jack did so, watching as the wheel and clay began to turn.

"Okay, this is the hard part. You have to press your hands to the clay and center it on the wheel."

The albino did his best to follow the instructions, pressing his hands to the wet clay and trying to force it into a circular shape, but all he seemed to be doing was splashing wet clay onto his jeans. Aster laughed and wrapped his arms around Jack, placing tan hands on top of pale white ones, his chin resting on Jack's shoulder.

"Here, like this."

Jack was finding it a little hard to concentrate on the lesson with Aster so close, but he did his best, allowing his boyfriend to guide his hands through the process. Together, they got the clay centered on the wheel and Aster began to guide him through the steps of shaping it into a bowl.

At first, Jack mostly just watched at adept, tan fingers pressed into the center of the clay, pulling it into the needed shape, but then Aster took Jack's hands in his and wordlessly showed him what to do. It was surprisingly easy and, soon, a crude bowl was spinning beneath their fingers.

Jack turned his head to look into Aster's green eyes, grinning at his success, and Aster smiled back. Then he realized just how close their faces were and, blushing, Jack closed the small distance between them, shyly pressing pale lips to rosy pink ones. Aster happily kissed him back.

The pottery lesson was forgotten as the two young lovers lost themselves in the kiss until the sound of an amused cough broke them apart. An unfamiliar woman in a loose, black jacket and paint splattered jeans was leaning in the doorway, smirking at them.

"Aster, who's the cutie?"
As Jack blushed crimson, Aster grinned at the woman. "Marie, this is my boyfriend, Jack. Jack, this is the head of the art department, Marie Crane."

She winked at Jack and said, "Nice to meet you," before pushing off the door and entering the room.

As she walked over to them, Aster took his hands from Jack's and stopped the throwing wheel from spinning. Then he looked at the pot and smirked.

"Well, that turned out interesting."

They all looked down at the pot. Sometime during the kiss the clay had been *slightly* manhandled, making it lopsided. Aster didn't seem to mind, though, as he grabbed a long piece of wire and quickly drew it along the wheel, freeing the misshapen pot from the surface.

"What are you gonna do with it?" Jack asked curiously, his face still slightly red.

"I'm gonna fire it, of course," Aster explained as he grabbed a wooden tray and carefully placed their pot onto it.

"But it looks terrible!"

"On the contrary, I think it's the best piece I've made all day." Aster said with a grin as Marie laughed at Jack's quickly returning blush.

"Oh Aster, he's adorable! Why haven't you brought him around before?"

Aster placed the wooden tray onto a rack in the corner of the room and shrugged. "We kind-of just started dating today…"

As Marie made an understanding sound, Aster grabbed a damp towel and gently took Jack's hands in his, drawing his boyfriend's shy gaze from the floor.

"Here, go ahead and clean off the clay with this. I'll take you to the washing room after I've finished tidying up and you can get off the rest."

"Actually," Marie interjected, drawing the duo’s attention, "before you do that, I have a favor to ask."

Aster drew his hands from Jack’s and the albino began to clean off the grey goop as the artist said, "Sure, what’s up?"

"Well, Aster, would you be a dear and help me mix up a new batch of clay?"

The Australian seemed puzzled by the request. "But I just checked the supply, like, an hour ago. It looked like we had enough to last us until Monday."

"Well, we *did*, but then one of the idiots in my beginning art class decided it would be fun to play with the clay while I was getting paint from the supply closet. We only just finished the cleanup and now I don't have any clay for class on Monday."

Aster grimace in annoyance and glanced at Jack. "You okay with waiting a bit longer to leave?"

Jack nodded and Marie beamed. "Thanks, Aster. I don't know what I'll do when you graduate."

"A lot more heavy lifting, that's for sure." Was the amused reply as Aster took Jack's hand in his
and lead him from the room.

Marie lead the way through the main art room to another side room full of heavy looking bags and several, large metal contraptions.

The Australian didn't bother to ask for instructions. He simply let go of Jack's hand, grabbed a bag off the floor, and threw it over his shoulder. Marie didn't offer any assistance. She simply stood by Jack and watched as Aster set the bag down by one of the machines and began to measure out powder.

Unsure what to do, Jack nervously asked the woman, "Shouldn't we help?"

She looked at him and grinned mischievously. "Sure, go ahead and grab that bag."

He tried to lift the beige bag with blue lettering she'd motioned to, but he couldn't budge it. "Wow, these things weigh a ton!"

Then Aster was by his side, easily lifting the heavy bag for him with an amused grin. "Don't worry; I'll take care of it, Frostbite."

"Okay" was the albino's embarrassed reply as he resumed standing by Marie, suddenly very aware of how his boyfriend had gotten his muscles.

The teacher placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I have trouble lifting those things, that's why I let Aster make the clay for me."

"That and she hates having to scoop the wet clay out of the mixer," Aster added as he poured grey powder into the machine.

"Guilty as charged."

"And you like it?" Jack asked, looking between the pair.

Aster nodded. "Yeah, it's why I got into throwing. Back in sixth grade, my art teacher broke his leg and wasn't able to mix clay, so he asked me to help. I really liked doing it, so he let me help any time he needed to make clay from then on. When I got to the high school and Marie realized I knew how to do this, she was more than willing to let me do it for her."

Marie nodded appreciatively. "I can do it when need be, but Aster's got a natural talent for mixing that sludge that I am sadly lacking. Those muscles of his definitely help, too."

Aster finished adding the powder and rose to his feet. "Now we just have to wait for the machine to mix it."

"How long does that take?"

"About twenty minutes, give or take," Marie replied with a shrug. "If you two need to go I can take it from here."

Aster glanced at the clock on the wall and pursed his lips. "We probably should. I have no doubt that Ana's waiting for us."

Jack nodded in agreement and the trio made their way back to the main room. Here, Aster and Jack rinsed the remaining clay from their hands and said goodbye to the teacher as they grabbed their backpacks.
Marie acknowledge the farewell and called after them, "Bring him around again, Aster. I’ve never seen you smile so much!"

Laughing at Jack's sudden blush, the Australian promised to do so as the couple entered the hallway and headed for the end of the building where an annoyed Ana was undoubtedly waiting.

When Ana saw Jack's jeans she let out a cry of dismay. "Jack! What happened?"

He looked down and realized that the once blue material was now covered in splotches of dried clay. "Oh, Aster showed me how to throw."

Ana glared at the grinning Australian. "Just because you're dating him doesn't mean you have to look like him, Jack! The paint and clay covered look is not a good one."

Aster winked at Jack as he replied, "Awe, Ana, I thought you'd find it cute. The whole matching couple thing"

She made a face and headed out the door into the chill, winter air with a dismissive cry of "It’s not!"

Aster laughed and took Jack's hand in his as the trio left the building and headed towards Ana and Aster's neighborhood.

As the two boys exchanged happy smiles Aster said, "Mk, whatever you say, Ana. Whatever you say."

Chapter End Notes

I actually went and learned basic throwing from a friend to write this chapter. The character of Marie is based off of her.
Chapter 22

What had supposed to be an evening of basket painting had quickly turned into nap-time when Jack had fallen asleep on Aster's shoulder in the middle of painting a basket pastel-blue. The Australian didn't mind, though. The basket could wait. He was quite content to work solo and let Jack sleep. His boyfriend definitely needed the rest. With a content sigh, Aster finished up the basket he'd been working on and laid it down beside him before wrapping an arm around Jack and resting his head on top of the smaller teen's snow-white hair. Soon, he too, was fast asleep.

It was too bad that they’d both forgotten all about Sandy’s gift.

The surreal nature of a dream is often lost on dreamers, leading them to believe the strange land of nod is, in fact, reality for the duration of their stay. So it was for Jack, who didn't find it at all odd that he'd stepped straight from his bedroom to a courtroom or that he was cuffed to the witness stand. All he knew was that he was scared and no one seemed to be listening to him.

"You honestly expect us to believe that he broke his own leg?" the suited man asked with a mocking laugh.

Jack tried to explain, but another voice chimed in, cutting him off.

"What possible reason could he have for setting those booths on fire?"

"Because he..."

Before Jack could finish, Ms. Black appeared, shouting, "I swear he was at home the whole time! That good for nothing is lying!"

He gave up trying to answer when the familiar specter of the counselor he'd been forced to go to after his parent's deaths stepped out of the crowd and looked at him sadly. "Jack's always been a troubled boy."

Through it all there was Pitch, the king of Jack's nightmares, grinning through the bars of a cage as Jack begged to be believed. It was only when the verdict of innocent was announced and a laughing Pitch was freed that Jack woke up in a cold sweat.

As he breathed heavily and tried to calm his racing heart, he noticed an odd weight on his head. A quick glance towards the source of the strange pressure soon informed him that it was nothing more than his boyfriend resting by his side. Simply knowing Aster was there made Jack feel better.

The motion woke the Australian and Aster slowly sat up with a yawn. Forcing a grin onto his face, Jack looked at his stirring boyfriend and whispered, "Morning."

Aster glanced up at his bedside clock and replied, "I think you'll find the proper greeting is 'good evening.'"

Jack checked the time and his forced grin changing into a real one. They'd been out for a good three-hours and, surprisingly, he actually felt pretty well rested despite the nightmare. Then he noticed the half-painted basket lying on the ground beside him and he said, "Sorry, looks like I didn't even finish my job before passing out."

Aster stretched and shrugged. "No worries, we still have well over a month to get ready and we're
almost done with these bloody things. If we ever lose all the baskets in a fire again, convince me to just use shopping bags instead, okay?"

Jack laughed and gave his boyfriend an amused looked. "You know you care way too much about Easter to ever do that."

Aster grinned. "True. Hey, you know what? I'm starving! How about you?"

The thought of food made Jack's stomach growl and Aster rose to his feet, chuckling.

"I guess that answers that question. Come on, let's go see what's in the kitchen."

It turned out the rest of the Wilder family had already eaten, leaving the teens to fend for themselves. To Jack's amusement, Aster rejected his mother's offer of leftovers, declaring that he'd cook instead. The albino broke into merry laughter when he discovered "cook" meant spaghetti with premade sauce, but he appreciated the effort none the less.

Once dinner was done, Aster borrowed the car and drove Jack home, arriving at the Overland's house just a little after nine.

After Aster parked the car, Jack leaned over and kissed him on the cheek before asking, "Do I get to see you tomorrow?"

Aster pretended to think about it before grinning and asking if Jack wanted to have their first official date the following evening. Another kiss and an enthusiastic agreement later, Jack was exiting the car and waving goodbye as his boyfriend drove off into the night.

Only after the car was gone did Jack allow his smile to vanish as he got out his key. Unbeknownst to the rest of the gang, the Overland's had left to visit Mr. Overland's mother earlier that day and wouldn't be back until Sunday, leaving Jack to take care of the house by himself.

What would normally be a dream come true to a teenage boy was now wholly unappealing. The Overland's absence meant Jack would be alone with nothing but his slowly worsening nightmares to keep him company.

A heavy sigh later, he pushed open the door and entered the dark house with a nervous shiver. He just hoped that Sandy’s gift would be enough to get him through the night.

Surprisingly, it was.

Jack woke up the next day feeling more well rested than he had in ages! He even managed to get through some of his mountainous pile of homework before anticipation about that evening’s date drove him to his closet. He wanted to look his best, after all.

Aster stared into his closet hopelessly. T-minus seven hours to the date and he was already feeling nervous. Plus, as usual, he had no clue what to wear. With a weary sigh, he took out the first shirt that caught his eye and held it up to his bare chest for a moment before casting it onto the floor.

This was going to take a while.

Jack took one look in his closet and immediately rejected everything he owned. He wanted something special for this and he knew just what to do.
Without further thought, he grabbed his phone and quickly punched in a few buttons before raising it to his ear. When a cheery voice picked up he asked, "Hey, Ana. I need help getting ready for a hot date; know anyone who’d want to take me shopping?"

Her gasp of delight was all the answer he needed.

Aster stood before his mirror in dark-grey pants and a light-blue shirt for five seconds before smiling. Yes, this would do.

Then he turned to the side and the smile disappeared. No, what was he thinking? This looked horrible!

"Here, try on this!" Ana thrust an outfit into the arms of a laughing Jack with an excited smile.

The snowy-haired boy nodded and made his way into the dressing room, soon returning to model the outfit: a black leather jacket over top of an ocean-blue polo shirt and black jeans. Apparently, Ana had decided Aster's idea of the "matching" look might actually have some merit, thus the jacket.

She gave him an appraising look before stepping forward and unbuttoning the top few buttons of the shirt, transforming it into a V-neck. "There we go, perfect!"

Jack moved to stand in front of a mirror and spun around before grinning. "It's great, Ana!"

But Ana was shaking her head now and the smirk on her face was oddly foreboding. "No, no, I was wrong. We need to make one tiny change."

"What?" Jack asked in confusion as he glanced back at the mirror. He didn't see what was wrong.

"Those jeans are way too baggy. They need to be a lot tighter."

For the first time since they'd started out on this little expedition, Jack blushed, but he let Ana lead him back to the jean rack without complaining.

Aster groaned and threw another shirt to the side. He was an artist for crying out loud! How was it so easy to make a breathtaking painting, but so impossible to pick out a single outfit?

He glanced at the phone lying on his dressing table, briefly considering the idea of asking Ana for advice, before shaking his head in annoyance. He did not need help for this….

Oh, who was he kidding?

With a groan, he grabbed the phone and punched in speed dial number one. Ana was never going to let him live this down.

Jack paid for his new outfit and the duo wondered back into the mall. As they passed the candy store, music suddenly blared from Ana's pocket.

"Do you come from a land down under?"

Jack immediately knew who was on the other end of the phone and couldn’t help but grin and ask, "Does he know that’s his ring tone?"
“Yep!” Ana replied, pulling her phone from her pocket.

“And he’s okay with that?”

Ana grinned wickedly at the question and said, “Why do you think I keep it locked?”

Then she answered the call with a happy, "Hello!"

Whatever Aster said made her laugh and grin mischievously as she replied, "Of course I will!"

Jack watched with growing curiosity as she agreed to meet the Australian "as soon as possible" with a sly glance in his direction.

When she hung up the phone he gave her a mocking pout and asked, "You're abandoning me?"

"Sorry, sweetie, I've gotta go and save the day for another desperate soul. I'll drop you off at home first, though."

Jack laughed and shook his head. "Nah, that's okay. It's not that far and I've got five hours to kill before Aster picks me up. A walk is just what I need to keep me busy."

Ana nodded and gave him a hug before rushing off towards the mall's parking lot.

Jack watched her go with a smile on his face, only turning back to window shopping when she'd disappeared from view. He stopped short when his eyes caught sight of something wonderful and he quickly darted into a shop, emerging a minute later with a tightly wrapped bundle. Aster would love it! Well, maybe not love it, but he’d at least be amused.
"Well, this looks like a disaster zone, doesn't it?"

Aster gave Ana a disparaging look, the effect of which was a bit lost by the fact that he was sprawled out on his floor amidst a sea of clothing with Sophie happily sitting on his belly.

"How long have you been at this, anyway?"

He groaned and closed his eyes, running a hand over his face as he replied, "Three hours, give or take?"

Ana laughed and walked across the discarded clothing to Aster's side as Sophie smiled up at her and greeted the blonde with a cheery "hi!"

"Hello, Sophie," Ana replied, kneeling down by the child. "Are you helping Aster?"

The little girl nodded and bounced lightly on Aster's stomach, making her brother let out a yelp of surprise at the sudden pressure changes on his abdomen.

"Yep!"

Aster rolled his eyes. "If by helping you mean trying to get me to wear a costume then, yes, she's been very helpful."

When Sophie had wondered in to see what he was doing, Aster had hopefully asked her thoughts on the outfit issue. His desire for a repeat performance of the New Year's rescue had been dashed to pieces when she'd pulled out the clothing that had made up his Halloween costume. She'd refused to choose anything else and had nearly cried when he'd told her he wasn't wearing it. This had led to him abandoning the clothing issue for the upset two year old one. She'd only calmed down when he'd given up and laid down on the floor in despair, thereby allowing her to take up her current perch.

Ana looked at the discarded pieces of Aster's Zorro outfit lying on the floor beside the sprawled out teen and grinned. "Actually, that's not a terrible idea. You did look quite good in that get up."

The look he gave her at this suggestion said everything Aster couldn't say out loud with his baby sister present and Ana got the message loud and clear.

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding! Now, get up and let me look at you."

Aster sighed and lightly jostled Sophie. "Alright, you need to get up, Soph."

Sophie shook her head. "No!"

"Please, Sophie, I can't get up until you do."

Sophie just giggled and lay down on his chest, staring at him with pale-green eyes that were so similar to his own. Despite her insolence, Aster couldn't help but smile at her and say, "Okay, no more Mr. Nice Guy."

Then he grabbed Sophie in his arms and jumped up, clutching her to his chest to keep her from falling. Sophie let out a cry of protest at her prisoner's escape, but it changed to a cry of laughter as Aster tickled her mercilessly.
"Stop! Stop!"

He did so and kissed her forehead before setting her down on the ground. "That'll teach ya to try and trap me!"

Sophie stuck her tongue out at her sibling and ran from the room before he could tickle her again, leaving Aster and Ana to the task at hand. After a good deal of bickering and several threats, they mutually agreed upon an outfit of dark-blue jeans, a white v-neck, a blue bandana, and his leather jacket.

As Aster modeled the chosen attire in the mirror, Ana lounged on his bed and asked, "So, where are you taking him?"

"I was gonna take him to dinner at a little diner we went to a few weeks ago and then go see a movie."

Ana gave him a look that was laden with disappointment. "Dinner and a movie? Don't you pay any attention to those romance movies I make you watch? Dinner and a movie is like the vanilla ice-cream of dating, Aster. It’s nice, but stereotypically lame."

The Australian glowered at her. "And what would you suggest instead Ms. I've-never-been-on-a-date-before?"

Ana leaned back, propping her arms behind her head as she pondered the question, ignoring the jibe. "Well, the dinner idea is fine, but skip the movie."

"We can't just do dinner," Aster complained, sitting down on the end of the bed and looking at her expectantly.

"I know, just let me think for a minute!"

Ana closed her eyes and thought back to every chick-flic she'd even seen and every romance novel she'd ever read, but nothing from them hit her as right. Then she thought about Jack and what made him happy. Well, Aster, obviously, and the twins, but that wouldn't work. Snow? Jack liked snow…

"What about a walk in the woods?"

Aster looked thoughtful. "It is supposed to be a nice night."

"Yeah, wait, but what about the moon?" Ana asked, suddenly looking worried.

"The moon?"

"What phase is it in? You need to know if you're gonna have enough moonlight or not."

Aster shrugged and Ana rolled her eyes.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question, you know. Go look!"

Aster got up and turned on his computer after a muttered comment about bossy female. An internet search later, he sullenly informed Ana, "It's almost the new moon, so that's a no to the moonlight."

Ana pursed her lips and thought for a minute, then asked, "Well, is it gonna be cloudy tonight?"

He turned around and glared at her. "I'm not your secretary, you know."
"Yes, but this is your date, so start typing."

He did so without further complaint, actually looking a little embarrassed now. A few seconds later he said, "It looks like it's gonna be clear tonight."

"Great! You can go stargazing."

Aster paled at the thought. "Ana, it's also gonna be, like, 20 degrees outside tonight and you want me to go lie around in the snow?"

"Just take along an extra thick coat or something. Unlike you, Jack likes the cold."

She was right. Stargazing on a winter night sounded like an ideal Jack activity. Aster sighed and rose to his feet before heading out of his room into the hallway.

Ana leaned up off of the bed and called after him, "Where are you going?"

His reply of "To find the warmest coat we own!" made her smile.

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Jack was sitting by the living room window, playing with his new jacket as he waited. Aster would be here any minute now.

As the clock on the mantle chimed six, a familiar, silver car pulled into the driveway and Jack's boyfriend got out. It was funny, but just the sight of Aster made his heart race and made him feel calm, too? It was a weird mixture of feelings, but that was a good thing. At least, he was pretty sure it was.

After brushing aside his odd musings, Jack smiled and watched as the tan teen took a deep breath and then start towards the front door. The Australian was simply too cute for words when he got nervous like that.

With a pleasant sigh, Jack stood up and headed to the door, reaching it just as Aster rang the bell. He waited a moment before pulling it open and greeting his boyfriend with an excited grin.

Aster smiled back. Then he noticed Jack's new outfit and the happy smile changed into a puzzled one. "You look great, but when did you get a leather jacket?"

Jack laughed and said, "I let a certain fashion guru friend of ours take me shopping this afternoon."

Aster suddenly felt a whole lot better about letting Ana dress him, but he decided he was better off not mentioning their mutual source of fashion advice. Opting to lean down and kiss Jack's forehead instead.

"Well, she did a great job, as usual. Are you ready to go?"

Jack nodded and exited him home, allowing Aster to hold his hand after he'd locked up the house. When they reached the car, the artist even held the door open, leading to an amused joke about chivalry and a peck on the cheek before Jack got into the car.

Once Aster had got into his own seat, Jack asked, "So, where are we off to?"

"I was thinking dinner and then a special surprise."

Jack's blue eyes sparkled with excitement as Aster started up the car and pulled out of the driveway. "A surprise?"
"Yeah, but you'll have to wait until after dinner to see what it is."

"That's no fun!" Jack complained as Aster switched gears and turned onto the main road.

"Maybe not for you," Aster relied with a wink, "but I'm gonna enjoy it."

Jack pouted, but Aster could see that he was fighting a grin.

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After dinner at Laura's Diner, the couple got back into their car and Aster took off into the night. Jack had spent a good portion of the meal trying to figure out where they were going afterwards, but Aster had refused to tell. He hadn't minded the constant guesses, though.

Jack had made a game of it and, more often than not, his guesses had been jokes meant to make Aster laugh. As they made their way out of town, though, the guesses became serious.

"You're going to murder me and hide my body in the woods?"

Well, mostly serious.

"I told you, you just have to wait and see."

Jack grew quiet as he watched the scenery pass by with growing anticipation. As Aster glanced over at his boyfriend, he silently hoped that Jack liked this idea. If not, he could always blame Ana.

They reached an intersection and Aster pulled onto a snow covered dirt road, not noticing as Jack tensed slightly. The albino was remembering the last time a crush had taken him down a road like this. He looked over at Aster and took a deep breath to calm his sudden nervousness.

Aster wasn't Pitch. He could trust Aster. He did trust Aster. Jack involuntarily reached out and placed a hand on top of his boyfriend's tan one, taking comfort in Aster's warmth.

The sudden feeling of Jack's touch started the Australian a bit, but when he realized what the feeling on his hand was he smiled. "We're almost there!"

Jack nodded, still working on calming his nerves as Aster pulled into what appeared to be a snow covered parking lot.

The albino looked out of the car and into the night before asking Aster, "Where are we?"

"We're at a biking trail my family goes for walks on every summer." Aster reached into the back seat of the car and pulled out two warm, winter coats. "Where better to take Jack Frost then on a walk through the winter woods? That is, if you want to. I mean, we don't have to if you don't…"

Jack smiled before leaning over and kissing Aster on the cheek, interrupting the nervous rambling. Then he said, "I think it sounds like a great idea."

Aster grinned and handed Jack the smaller of the two coats, a light silver one that looked almost feminine. "I didn't want to give anything away by telling you to bring a coat, so I brought along a smaller one that should fit you."

He conveniently left out the fact that his mother was the previous owner of the coat as his boyfriend accepted the offered piece of clothing.

Jack took off his leather jacket and shrugged on the coat. It was a near perfect fit. Once he'd zipped it up he looked over at Aster, who was just finishing putting on his own coat, and excitedly asked,
"So, ready to go?"

Aster nodded and they exited the car.

With hands intertwined, they made their way from the parking lot to the path's entrance. At first, they walked in total silence, enjoying the quiet magic of nature and the thrill of being so completely alone together. Then the trail passed by a little clearing and Jack pulled Aster from the path.

The Australian smiled and allowed himself to be dragged into the clearing. Once they were well away from the snow covered bike trail, Jack let go of Aster's hand and walked a little ways further into the clearing, staring up into the evening sky.

Aster was content to just watch as his boyfriend stood in the middle of the snow covered glade with his face turned towards the clear sky, surrounded by trees and glistening in the faint light of the stars. As he stood there, with starlight shining off of his white hair, Jack looked every bit the winter prince his fan club thought of him as.

Aster had thought of Jack as amazing, sexy, annoying, handsome, and a thousand other things, but never before had the words magical, enchanting, and ethereal crossed his mind. Now, though, they seemed to only words appropriate to describe the albino and Aster's inner artist was going nuts with the desire to capture the scene on a canvas, but he pushed aside those thoughts for now. There would be time for that later. Right now, there was an incredibly tempting winter sprite who was in desperate need of a kiss.

Jack jumped when Aster's arms wrapped around him, but as soon as he realized who it was he laughed and leaned into the warm embrace. Then he looked up into his boyfriend's bright green eyes and smiled as the distance between them rapidly closed and their lips met in a kiss.

It was a sweet kiss, like every other one they'd shared, but Jack needed more than sweet. He was sick of fear, of terror, of sleepless nights and Aster took those things away. Being with Aster made him feel like himself again.

Kissing Aster filled him with a dizzying rush of good emotions and he desperately needed that now more than ever so he wrapped his arms around Aster's neck and pulled him as close as possible, crushing their bodies together. Then he opened his mouth just a fraction and nervously allowed his tongue to snake along his boyfriend's lips in a silent and desperate plea.

Aster loved the feeling of Jack in his arms and had been more than willing to allow his love to pull them closer, but the odd, silky sensation of Jack's tongue startled him. His shock translated into a loosening of his jaw which Jack took for an acceptance and he deepened the kiss.

Their first few kisses had been like a breath of fresh, spring air to Aster. Something wonderful that made excitement well up inside of him. This kiss was nothing like that. This kiss was the raw and all-consuming fire of a midsummer's heat wave. A blinding fury that drove away thoughts of anything else and left Aster's body trembling and his mind spinning. All he could think of was Jack and the extraordinary taste of laughter mixed with chocolate that was far better than any Easter candy.

Jack didn't know what he'd expected from his bold action, but it hadn't been this. Not this strange, heady rush that left him desperate for more as he tangled his pale fingers in Aster's caramel color hair and drew him closer, deepening the kiss even further. Aster tasted oddly spicy, like a strange, exotic dish and Jack was desperate to memorize the flavor.
They broke apart gasping, both of their eyes slightly glazed over and neither knowing what to say. Jack decided the best response to the silence was to leaned in and kiss Aster once more, but Aster pulled back before their lips could meet, his breath more than a little shaky. "Jack, if you kiss me like that another time, I, I'm not gonna be able to stay standing."

Jack grinned, a wicked looking thing that made Aster's heart race even faster, and pushed the Australian backwards across the clearing until he was pressed against a tree. Then, Jack wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's neck and whispered softly, "There, problem solved."

He pressed pale lips to rosy pink ones once more, immediately picking up right where they left off, loosing himself in the rush that was kissing Aster.

They kissed for a long time, only stopping when Aster started to shiver from the growing cold at which point Jack grinned at his shivering boyfriend and placed a final, soft kiss on his rosy lips before taking Aster's hand in his and slowly guiding him back to their car. Neither spoke as they walked, but they continually exchanged soft, happy smiles the entire way.

Once they'd arrived back at the now cold car and had taken their seats inside, Jack leaned over and buried his face against Aster's neck, smiling into the chilled skin.

Aster turned the car on to get the heat working and then slowly began to stroke the back of Jack's neck, gently playing with the albino's snowy locks. The feeling of Aster's hand in his hair made Jack sigh contentedly. Right now all he wanted to do was curl up and fall asleep. Who knew kissing took so much work?

"You ready for me to take you home?" Aster finally asked, gently leaning down and kissing Jack's hair as he did so.

The smaller teen nodded. "If you have to."

Aster chuckled and disentangled his hand from Jack's hair, letting his boyfriend's arms remain firmly wrapped around his neck as he drove them back to Narvon.

Jack only let go when they reached the Overland's house.
“What do you think of this one, Jack? …Jack? JACK?”

Jack started, coming out of his daydream about Aster to find his baby sister giving him an amused look.

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

“…maybe?” Jack replied with a guilty smile.

Jamie, who’d been startled from reading his book by his sister’s shout, glanced curiously at his brother and said, “Where were you, anyway?”

“Where was I?” Jack asked, unfamiliar with that particular phrase.

“It’s something mom says when I zone out and she wants to know what I was thinking about,” the male twin explained and then grew silent, waiting for his brother to answer his question.

Jack could feel a flush creeping across his face. Yeah, Mrs. Bennett would probably freak if he told the twins he’d been daydreaming about making out with his boyfriend. No, scratch that, there was no probably about it, she’d definitely freak.

When she saw the flush on her brother’s face, Pippa’s eyes began to gleam. Ooooh, something juicy was afoot. “Jaaaaaack, you’re blushing. What is it?”

Jack’s blush just grew deeper. Oh boy.

“Is it a girl?” Pippa asked as Jamie rolled his eyes and went back to his book. This was definitely not his area of interest.

When Jack stammered out a nervous “no” Pippa’s grin faded a bit. Then a thoughtful look crossed her face. “Is it a guy?”

Pippa knew she’d struck gold when Jack turned crimson.

“Ah! It is! Is he cute?”

Jack was… surprised, actually. He’d expected a bit of a freak out from the twins.

“You’re okay that I’m dating a guy?”

Pippa’s squeal of “You’re dating?” may have turned heads.

Jamie looked back up from his book as his twin stared at Jack with gleeful eyes and asked, “Why wouldn’t we be?” just as Pippa said, “I bet he’s just as sweet as Magnus!”

Jack was totally lost now. Magnus?

“Oh, would you shut up about that stupid Warlock, Pip. I can’t believe mom let you read that junk.”

“It is not junk and you haven’t read it, so you can’t judge it.”
Jamie opened his mouth to continue the argument, but Jack cut in before he could speak.

“Who’s Magnus?”

Jamie closed his mouth and gave his big brother an amused smile. Now he’d done it. Poor Jack.

“Magnus is the coolest character ever! He’s from this book series all about angels and vampires and werewolves and he has a super cute boyfriend who’s really shy and geeky, but an awesome fighter…”

Jack tried to follow along as his little sister went on and on about her favorite character, but he got lost after about a minute and he spent the remainder of her rant wishing he’d never asked. By the time she started describing the character, he'd totally zoned her out. It was only when Jack realized that Pippa hadn’t spoken in a few seconds that he zoned back in and said, “Wow, that sounds really interesting, Pip.”

He really shouldn’t have said that, because the next thing he knew Pippa was dragging him to the bookstore and Jamie to the bookstore with a cry of, “Then you should read them! Come on! Let’s go get you copies!”

As he followed after her, Jack couldn’t help but wonder how their shopping trip to get a Valentine’s Day gift for Mrs. Bennett had turned into this.

Then he looked at his little sister and smiled. Well, he could think of worse things to do with his Sunday. Who knew, maybe this book series wouldn’t be that bad.

After Jack had been forced to purchase the entirety of *The Mortal Instruments* series by Cassandra Clair, Pippa said, “We’ll have to meet him, of course.”

Jack blinked, trying to follow along with his sister’s subject jump, but he couldn’t so he asked, “Meet who?”

“Your boyfriend, of course! We have to make sure that he’s a suitable partner for our big brother.”

Jack had expected Jamie to tell his twin to knock it off, but he didn’t. He was nodding in agreement instead, a wicked gleam in his brown eyes as he said, “But you have to give us time to think up some good threats first.”

“Threats?” Jack asked nervously as he glanced between the evilly grinning duo.

“Yeah!” Jamie exclaimed. “Like, ‘break his heart and we’ll break your neck!’”

“Oooh or, ‘I will register you as a sex offender in all 50 states and Canada,’” Pippa added with a grin.

Jamie gave his twin an amused look and said, “I’m pretty sure we should only make threats about things that we can actually make happen, Pip.”

“Oh like you could break someone’s neck?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried, but it’s still a lot more believable than yours.”

Jack bit back a laugh and said, “Guys, please don’t threaten Aster when you meet him.”

Both twins stopped now and they stared at him in disbelief. They’d heard about Aster enough to
know who he was and they had briefly met him once before. The only problem was…

“You’re dating the Easter Bunny?”

Now Jack did laugh. He really hoped that his boyfriend never found out that Pippa had refused to stop using that nickname when she talked about the Australian. Not that he’d done much to curb the habit, a fact that he was suddenly regretting just a little bit. Oh well, no time like the present!

“Yes, I’m dating the Easter Bunny, but don’t call him that to his face.”

Pippa was about to say something else, but Jack quickly cut her off with a reminded of, “Now, weren’t we shopping for your mother before this little detour?”

That seemed to do the trick and the three of them quickly took off for yet another store that Pippa had wanted to look in, though she continued to pester Jack for all of the juicy details until he dropped the twins off at home that evening.

“Okay, its noon, you’ve slept in long enough, Aster! Details time!”

The Australian groan and refused to open his eyes. Ana seriously needed a love life of her own.

“Ana, sleeping! Go away!”

“Emerson Aster Wilder, I spend two hours helping you get ready for that date, the least you could do is give me the basics!”

“It was good. I had a nice time. There, you got the basics, sleeping now.”

Ana rolled her eyes and positioned herself so that she could see Aster’s face, then she said, “Is Jack a good kisser?”

The crimson flush was all the answer she needed.

“Yes! You kissed!”

“Ana, we kissed when we got together!” he said, finally opening his eyes so that he could glare at the intruder.

Ana looked genuinely shocked at the admission. “…wait, really? I’m impressed! Who kissed who?”

“I kissed him. Twice,” Aster replied with a smirk.

Ana smirked right back. “And you’re proud of it! Way to go!”

“Why wouldn’t I be proud of it?”

“Shh, let me bask in the glow that is confident Aster. I’ve missed him these past few weeks.”

Now Aster smiled. He couldn’t help it, the way Ana said those words let him know that she really meant it. Well, he’d missed confident Aster, too. Blushing nervous Aster wasn’t much fun.

“Okay, I’ll give you the details, but only the basics.”

Ana grinned. “I’d expect nothing more than that.”
So he filled her in on the details of how they’d gotten together and how the date had gone, enjoying the dreamy look in her eyes. When he finished the tale, he added, “Sheesh, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you had a crush of your own from the way you’re going all gooey eyed.”

Wait, was she blushing?

“Ana, what’s up?”

With a tiny smile, Ana replied, “Nick likes me and I think I like him back.”

Aster was silent for a moment and then he said, “I hate you.”

Ana stared at him in shock before saying, “What? What did I do?”

“No drama, no ‘does he like me?’ no nothing! Just ‘he likes me and I like him, yay!’!”

Ana’s smile was back and it looked like she was holding back a laugh. “Yes, well, some of us don’t need to be locked in a car together to express our feelings.”

“The sleigh wasn’t locked.”

“Aster, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I still hate you.”

“I hate you, too,” Ana said with a wink. “Now get out of bed! We’ve got things to do today!”

“Things? What things?” Aster asked as he threw back the covers and stretched.

“Little sister things! I thought we’d take the girls sledding.”

Aster smiled and got out of bed. “Alright, Sophie’s been bugging me to take her since yesterday anyway. Now get out of the room so I can get dressed!”

Ana stuck her tongue out at him, but did as she was told, though she couldn’t resist a parting jibe of, “Do you need me to pick out your clothes for you?”

The comment earned her a pillow to the face.
Sandy sighed and glanced at the clock on the wall. When Nick had asked for his help in picking out a flower to give to Ana, he’d expected it to take all of five minutes. They were approaching twenty and Nick still hadn’t made up his mind.

Honestly, there weren’t even that many flowers in the shop!

It was Sandy fault, though. If he hadn’t pushed his friends together, Nick and Ana probably would never have realized their budding feelings and then he wouldn’t have been dragged flower shopping.

Only Sandy had noticed the way Nick smiled whenever he saw Ana and only Sandy had noticed that the blonde always started playing with her hair whenever she talked to their Christmas loving friend. That’s what happened when you were too busy worrying about other people’s hearts to pay attention to your own, you missed things.

He was just happy that the love bug had yet to bite him. The last thing their group needed was for all five of them to be love struck at the same time.

“What do you think of this one?”

Nick’s question broke Sandy from his silent musings, drawing his attention to the flower in his friend’s hands. As tempting as it was to nod and be done with it, Sandy was a good friend and, apparently, the only one who paid attention to Ana’s preferences. She HATED orange. A tiger lily would be an awful choice. So he sighed and shook his head, then reached over to grab a lovely looking rose, only to have Nick say, “No, I need to pick it out myself!” for the hundredth time.

Sandy scowled and crossed his arms, giving his friend a look that said, “well then, pick one!”

Nick just grinned nervously and went back to searching.

Finally, after another ten minutes, the nervous teen chose the pretty, purple rose Sandy had been trying to suggest since they’d arrived. It was a sign of Sandy’s near infinite well of patience that his only reaction to the choice was a sigh. At least they could leave now.

As they exited the flower shop and began to head back towards the parking lot, Nick kept glancing around the mall as if he was terrified that Ana was going to jump out and surprise them.

Sure, Ana spent more time at the mall then all four of the male members of their friend group combined, but that wasn’t saying much seeing as this was the first time Sandy had set foot in the building this year and he was sure the same could be said for Nick. Shopping just wasn’t their thing.

Suddenly, Nick let out a squeal of terror and rushed into the nearest shop.

Sandy tried to figure out what had caused his friend’s flight and then he saw her. Really?

He took another look and smirked. Well, it wasn’t Ana, but he could see how Nick would make that mistake. Sure, she wasn’t the right age, height, or body type, but she was a blonde with dyed streaks in her hair, albeit streaks that were pink and orange, not green and blue, but still. The mistake could have been made by anyone. Anyone but a person with functional eyes.
Ah well, he’d best go and get Nick if he wanted to get out of here.

With that, Sandy turned and entered the shop Nick had rushed into, only to stop short when he realized what it was. The arcade… gosh, he hadn’t been here since they were kids.

Nick seemed to have been hit by the same nostalgia only, instead of just standing there and taking in the memories, he was at the change machine getting quarters.

Sandy should have been annoyed, he had things to do, but the idea of a walk down memory lane was just too tempting. Besides, he wanted to see if he could still beat Nick at the racing games.

“I haven’t seen you two do something like this since we were in, what, fifth grade? Just how many quarters are in that stack?”

Both boys jumped in their seats at the loud greeting, sending their cars flying off the side of the road and dropping them from 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} place to the lowest ranks in the game. Not that they were paying attention to the game anymore. They’d both turned around at the sound of the voice to find Aster and Ana standing behind them, sporting matching grins.

“Here we are, thinking we’ve had this super original idea to come and play at the arcade, only to find that you two beat us to it,” Ana added. “I call winner, by the way.”

Both racers looked shell shocked. It had been ages since any of them had come here and now all four of them had chanced upon the same idea within the space of a few hours? That didn’t seem likely.

Sandy’s skepticism must have been written all over his face, because Ana laughed and said, “Okay, okay, so we didn’t have any desire to come to the arcade. Nick’s mom called us since you weren’t picking up your phones and asked if we’d come by the mall and find you two. So, here we are!”

Both boys looked embarrassed now. Just how long had they been playing for? A quick glance at the clock on the wall informed them that the answer was way too long.

“Hey, what’s with the flower?”

Ana’s question drew their gazes from the clock to the purple rose that had been sitting by Nick as they played.

Nick’s eyes grew wide and Sandy had to fight to keep from laughing. After all Nick’s paranoia he was still going to be found out.

Then Nick tried to redirect their attentions to something else, hoping that the flower would be forgotten. He really didn’t want to ask Ana out at an arcade. “That? Oh, it’s nothing… Where’s Jack?”

“What, Jack? Oh, he’s in Burgess today, visiting the twins. Though he’s probably home by now,” Aster replied, giving his Christmas-loving friend an odd look.

As soon as he’d said those words, Ana’s phone began to ring and they all recognized the ringtone. Jack.
“So, Jack, how was your weekend?”

Jack gave his foster mother a tentative smile and said, “Good. How was your visit?”

“It was nice. Did you do anything interesting while we were gone?”

Jack looked at the Overlands and sighed. Sure, he could try and hide it, but he didn’t want to. He just had no clue how they’d react to finding out that he was dating a guy. Issues about homosexuality weren’t something he’d talked about with them before. Well, there was only one way to find out for sure.

“Yeah, I went on a date.”

Both of his foster parents looked at him in surprise and then Mr. Overland asked, “A date? With who?”

Okay, here goes…

“Aster Wilder.”

The looks on their faces as they realized that meant Jack had gone out with a male weren’t promising.

Mrs. Overland’s tone when she said, “Aster? Isn’t he a…” only confirmed Jack’s suspicions, but he completed the statement that she hadn’t been able to finish anyway.

“A guy, yeah.”

“Oh.”

All three of them were silent and then Mr. Overland said, “Jack, I know we’ve been distant since the… incident, but joking about dating another male for our attention…”

Jack cut him off before he could finish. “Your attention? What does that even… I’m not doing this to be noticed! I’m doing it because I like Aster.”

Mrs. Overland spoke before her husband could retaliate. “Oh, Jack, he didn’t mean it like that!”

“Yes he did!”

“Well, you have done things in the past just to cause trouble so you can understand why that would be our first though,” Mr. Overland said with a pointed look that made Jack’s blood boil. “But if you seriously like this boy then we won’t stop you. Of course, the daily visits to his house will have to stop.”

“What?” Jack stared between them, but Mrs. Overland was nodding in agreement with her husband.

“Yes, it was fine when he was just your friend, Jackson, but if you’re dating him then we can’t just let you two go off whenever you…”

“Let me? You’re not my parents! You’re not even my guardian’s anymore!”

Silence ruled in the aftermath of Jack’s shout and then Mr. Overland spoke. “You are living in our house, Jackson. That means we make the rules.”

“Well then maybe it’s time I moved out!”
The silence was back and even tenser than it had been before.
Jack was walking along the side of the road with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder when they found him and Aster practically jumped out of the car to rush to his side with a cry of, “Jack!”

Hearing his boyfriend’s voice, Jack turned around and smiled as warm arms wrapped around him. He hugged back, just burying his face in Aster’s chest and breathing out a sigh of relief.

By the time he pulled back so that he could see his boyfriend’s face, Nick had parked the sleigh and the rest of the gang had come to join the duo on the side of the road.

Jack smiled at them, but looked a little embarrassed, too. “Hey guys, I didn’t think all four of you would be together when I called Ana.”

“Why did you call Ana first, anyway Frostbite?” Aster asked as it suddenly hit him that he hadn’t been Jack’s go to.

Now the albino looked even more embarrassed. “Mostly because I didn’t want you to know yet?”

It was Aster’s turn to pull away, letting go of Jack and looking at him with a searching and slightly hurt gaze. “What?”

“I just didn’t want to worry you or, well, I didn’t want you to feel guilty.”

“Guilty?” Aster asked, looking at his boyfriend with pure confusion. “Jack, what happened? All you said on the phone was that something bad had happened and that you needed a lift somewhere.”

It was true. Jack had been very sparing on the details once he realized Aster was there, but there was no way he could hide the truth now.

“Well, I only called because I thought I’d have more stuff than this. It turns out that everything I own fits in a duffle bag. Neat, huh?”

Aster just looked more puzzled, but Ana got it. She got it right away. “Everything you… Jack, did the Overlands kick you out?”

“What? Oh, no, they didn’t kick me out, I left! Honestly, it was a little more dramatic than I’d hoped, but I’ve been thinking about doing that since I turned 18. The Overlands are nice, but, well, it was never home and, yeah, the whole gay thing didn’t help much…”

Aster looked shell-shocked and it was Jack’s turn to wrap his boyfriend in a warm hug as he said, “Hey, it’s okay. I’m fine. I shouldn’t have even called you guys.”

That broke Aster out of his shocked state. “Shouldn’t have… Jack, where are you planning to go?”

“A hotel for now,” he replied with a shrug.

They all looked at him like he’d lost his mind and Nick said, “You can’t be serious.”

“Well, where else would I go?” Jack asked with a laugh, as if there were no other possibilities.

“Well, I can think of four other options off the top of my head,” Aster replied, gently running his hand along Jack’s back as he spoke.
The homeless teen looked around the group and his mouth formed into a tiny ‘o.’ It was painfully obvious that he hadn’t even thought about asking the gang if he could stay with one of them.

“I wouldn’t want to impose and your folks…”

“Would be more than fine with it,” Ana said. “Now get in the car and come on, we’re taking you to my place.”

Jack look nervous again and he pulled out of Aster’s embrace as he started to stammer, “No, I can’t just show up and ask to move in.”

“You’re not asking, she’s offering, Frostbite. Now give me that duffel and get in the car.”

Aster grabbed the loosely hanging duffel from Jack as he spoke, ready to take the full weight of it, and the stared at it once it was in his hands. The duffle couldn’t have weighed more than twenty or twenty-five pounds. This was everything Jack owned?

“Did you leave some stuff at the Overlands?”

Jack shook his head, looking confused again. “No, why?”

Aster didn’t know what to say, he just stared at Jack and tried to process the thought of having so little. Then another thought occurred to him. “What about your laptop?”

“The laptop? Oh, that’s the Overlands, they just let me use it for homework and stuff. I loaded everything from it onto a flash drive and then deleted my account.”

Aster just nodded as the others looked between the duo, trying to figure out what they should say. Even though they couldn’t feel how light the bag was, the fact that it contained everything Jack owned was enough information to make them feel awful.

Sandy finally broke the growing awkwardness by clapping his hands and pointing towards the sleigh with a pointed look. That seemed to lighten the mood enough for everyone to get into jeep with Nick and Ana in the front and the other three taking their now customary spots in the back.

As soon as they were buckled in, Aster wrapped an arm around Jack and held him close, a gesture that the smaller teen welcomed whole heartedly. They spent the entire ride to the Romoli’s cuddling as Ana tried to keep the mood light with constant chatter.

The second Jack saw Ana’s house the nervous feeling returned and he buried his face in Aster’s shoulder before whispering, “I really think you should just take me to a hotel.”

“Not on your nelly, mate. Mrs. Romoli would kill us if we did that. Heck, my mom would kill us if we did that!”

Jack just smiled nervously as Nick pulled the car to a stop in the driveway and Aster practically had to drag him out of the vehicle and up the walkway to Ana’s home. Once the gang was inside, Ana called out “Mom! Dad!”

The answering cry of “We’re in the kitchen, sweetie” had Jack clinging to Aster’s hand for dear life.

Luckily, Ana decided that the best method of approach would be for her to talk to her parents first,
without the others there, so the four boys stood in the entryway and waited.

They didn’t have to wait long and, within minutes, Mrs. Romoli was rushing for the kitchen to pull Jack into a warm hug with a cry of, “Oh, Jack, of course you can stay here!”

Mr. Romoli followed shortly behind his wife and added, “It’s not like we don’t have the room. This old place has more space than we know what to do with!”

Jack was shocked. He’d honestly expect Ana’s parents to politely decline their daughter’s request, but he still managed to stammer, “Thank you. I don’t wanna be a burden, though. I mean, I can pay rent and…”

“Jack, we would never ask that of you!” Mrs. Romoli exclaimed in what was clearly meant to be a scolding voice. “I don’t want you to worry about that.”

“No really,” Jack said, stepping out of Mrs. Romoli’s arms and looking between the two adults. “I can’t just live here and mooch off you. I can at least give you something for food and…”

It was Mr. Romoli’s turn to sound exasperated. “Jack, we’re not going to have you go out and get a job just so that you can pay us for food.”

“A job?” Jack asked with an amused smile. “Why would I need a job?”

Ana raised an eyebrow and answered the question with a bemused statement of “Because money doesn’t grow on trees?”

Jack rolled his eyes and was smiling now, his nervousness replaced amusement. “Guys, I’m an orphan, not a street urchin! My parents left me money and there was insurance on our house. I’m not rich, but I have more than enough to pay for my own food.”

Everyone looked surprised at the announcement. None of them had considered that Jack actually had money of his own.

“Well, in that case, we’ll talk about it later. For right now, let’s just get you moved in, okay?”

Mr. Romoli’s suggestion was met with approval by all but Jack, whose opinion on the matter was immediately dismissed as Ana sent Nick out to get Jack’s duffel and then pulled her new housemate upstairs with a cry of, “Let’s go pick out your room!”

A whirlwind tour and several arguments between Ana and Aster later, Jack found himself standing in the middle of a white walled room with a comfortable looking twin bed, a large closet, a spacious desk, and a pinewood chest of drawers.

“This used to be my Aunt Mary’s room before she got married and moved out, what do you think?”

Jack looked around the room and smiled. “It’s great, Ana, thanks. You really didn’t need to do all this, I could have slept on the couch or something.”

Sandy rolled his eyes as Ana and Aster gave Jack matching ‘are you serious?’ looks just as Nick came walking through the door with Jack’s duffel.

“This thing weighs less than my school bag.”

Jack just shrugged and wordlessly took the bag from the Christmas lover. It was true, he didn’t have much, but he’d never really cared about it. A few shirts, some jeans, a jacket, a couple of
books, what more did he need?

Then the duffel was snatched out of his hands and Ana was holding it at arm’s length, looking at the blue bag as if it was some kind-of anomaly. “Yikes, it really is light!”

“Hey, give that back!”

“No, I wanna see what you have in here.”

“Ana.” Jack said in a warning tone that made the blonde grin.

“Okay, fine, we’ll leave and you can get anything you don’t want me to see out, but then I wanna see what’s all in here so we know what we need to go and buy.”

“…buy?”

“Yeah. Oh, I can pay for it if you don’t want to.”

“No,” Jack said, once again looking stunned. “I don’t mind paying, but what could I possibly need? I’ve got a week’s worth of t-shirts and a couple pairs of jeans, that should… be… fine, okay why are you all looking at me like that?”

“A week’s worth?” Aster asked as Ana groaned and said “You know, I thought you just had a bunch of the same color t-shirts, I didn’t realize that you were wearing the same ones!”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No, but it’s not a good thing either,” Ana replied, looking at her frosty-eyed friend with a worry-filled gaze. “What happened when your shirts ripped?”

Jack shrugged and threw the duffle on the bed. “I’d go to the thrift shop and buy a new one, of course. Before I turned 18, the Overlands got a pretty merger allowance from the government to take care of me with, so I always tried to keep my spending cheap.”

The gang just stared at him. So that was why Jack’s clothing always looked so worn.

“Hey, didn’t you say that you were gonna give me some privacy so that I could unpack?” The snowy-haired teen asked with a grin, oblivious to his friend’s new-found feelings of, well, not pity, but sorrow. Sorrow that Jack had gone without so much that they took for granted, but they didn’t say anything about it. Instead, they just smiled and exited the room.

When they’d closed the door behind them, Aster whispered, “You know, his room at the Overlands looked more like a hotel room than a bedroom.”

Ana grimaced at the mental picture and said, “Probably because he didn’t feel like he could buy anything for himself.”

“Well then, we’re just going to have to make sure he doesn’t feel that way here!” Nick exclaimed, only to have the others quickly make shushing noises.

Once Nick had whispered an apology, Ana said, “Well, let’s go make sure my parents are okay with us redecorating the room and then I have an idea. How fast do you think you three can redo this room?”

The boys grinned and Aster said, “I think I know where this is going.”
Ana just grinned right back.
“Hey Ana, is it okay if I hang some stuff on the walls?”

Ana looked up from her laptop and smiled at Jack, who was currently standing in the doorway to her room. “Yeah, sure, do you need sticky tack?”

“That would be great, actually. I was trying to figure out… Hey, wait, where are the guys?” He asked, abruptly switching topics as he looked around the room in confusion.

“Oh, Nick and Sandy took Aster to the mall. When you called we all came to find you in the sleigh and left the Wilder’s car there so Aster needed to go and get it,” she replied as she got up and went over to her desk.

Jack frowned at her explanation, a fact which Ana noticed immediately when she turned around with the sticky tack in her hands.

“Oh, are we doing that whole ‘I’m such a burden’ thing again? Stop it! You’re not. Now let’s go see what you’ve done with your room!”

With that, Jack found himself following after Ana as she ran to look at his room, not that there was much to look at, really. As far as Ana could tell, the only difference was that Jack’s duffel was empty now.

“What did you need the sticky tack for? I don’t see any posters or anything?”

“I needed it for these,” Jack explained with a slight blush as he picked up two pieces of paper from the top of his dresser. The first one Ana immediately recognized as the card she’d forced Aster to make, but the second one…

“What’s that?”

“Hmm? Oh, the sketch? Aster drew it a while back and he was gonna throw it away, but I stopped him. I thought it looked neat, so I kept it.”

“He was gonna throw it away?” Ana asked as she walked over to get a better look at the picture. Aster never threw away his art. She was pretty sure he still had the finger paintings they’d made in second grade stored away somewhere.

“Yeah, he said it was stupid,” Jack explained, handing the picture over to the curious blonde as he spoke.

Ana looked at the image, hardly believing Aster had drawn it. His pictures usually looked like someone had taken a photograph of something, not like… whatever this was. Squiggles?

“Are you sure Aster drew this?” she asked, looking back towards Jack who had hopped onto his bed and was carefully fastening the Valentine’s Day card to the wall.

“Of course I’m sure, I watched him do it!”

Ana frowned and looked back down at the picture. It really didn’t look like something Aster would draw. She squinted her eyes to try and figure out what it was and that’s when she saw it. There was a face in the picture. Not an obvious one, but a face none the less.
“Do you know whose face it is?” she asked, making Jack turn to stare at her.

“Face? What’d you mean?”

Ana turned the picture around and showed it him. “The face. Don’t you see it?”

Jack jumped off of the bed and carefully took the picture from Ana. After a few moments, a look of surprise crossed his face and he said, “Hey, you’re right. I never noticed that before. Who do you think it is?”

Ana shrugged and came to stand by Jack’s side so that she could see the picture again.

“It’s gotta be someone he knows pretty well if he was doing it from memory. Someone whose face he has memorized by heart.”

Jack nodded in agreement just as Aster reentered the room. Nick and Sandy weren’t with him, though, since both boys had gone home after they’d driven the Australian to the mall. Aster had only returned to quickly check and make sure Jack was alright before he went home for dinner.

“What are you two lookin’ at?”

The duo turned their gazes from the sketch to its artist and Jack smiled before saying, “Your sketch. Who’s it of?”

“My what now?”

Jack turned the paper so Aster could see it and watched in amusement as the look on the artist’s face went from puzzled confusion to mild embarrassment.

“Oh. That.”

Now Jack was super curious. “Yeah, who is it?”

Aster took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair before nervously saying, “You.”

Jack’s cheeks instantly went crimson and he squeaked out a surprised, “Really?”

The artist just nodded and gave his boyfriend a goofy grin as Ana rolled her eyes and said, “I think that’s my cue to leave. Dinner’s gonna be ready soon, though, so try not to get up to anything too time consuming, okay?”

Jack’s cheeks went even redder and Aster let out a started cry of “Ana!” as the blonde left the room with a wink, closing the door behind her.

Once the couple was alone Jack smiled shyly at his boyfriend. “You really drew a picture of me?”

Aster smiled back and walked across the room so that the two of them were only inches apart before he said, “Several, actually.”

Jack smiled the smile that Aster had come to realize only he got to see. “Isn’t that just amazing? He had his own smile!”

“Can I see them?”

The question was spoken in a low whisper, as if Jack was afraid to ask. As if he thought Aster could refuse him anything. But maybe that was a good thing. Once Jack realized how tightly
wrapped around his graceful, pale fingers Aster was, the Australian would really be done for. Oddly enough, though, that thought was more appealing than worrying and so Aster smiled and said, “Sure, Frostbite,” before leaning down and pressing his lips to Jack’s.

“Ana, I get it, I need a wardrobe that doesn’t look like I looted it from a garbage bag, but we’ve been at this for hours! Can’t we come back later?” Jack wined as Ana dragged him into yet another store. He’d been looking forward to going to Aster’s after school, only to find out that his new housemate had decreed that it was ‘shopping day.’

“No! Now come on!”

Jack sighed and followed after her, silently wishing that he could have gone home with Aster to spend his time working on painting baskets and stealing kisses instead of walking around this God forsaken mall. Why this couldn’t have waited until the weekend he really didn’t know. He just hoped that Aster was having more fun than he was.

“No, Baby, don’t touch the paint!”

“But I wanna help decorate! They get to help! Why can’t I?”

Aster sighed as Nick and Sandy exchanged amused looks and went back to rolling paint on the wall. They knew that, if it hadn’t been for the time crunch, Aster would have barred them from doing even this simple task.

“Baby, please, we need to get this done before Jack and Ana get home and I can’t work if you’re standing in my way.”

“You’re not sharing, Aster!”

Of course he wasn’t sharing! Jack’s room was not going to be painted by a five-year-old!

“Baby, do I need to call your mom?”

The little girl’s lower lip began to tremble and Aster’s eyes widened. Oh no. Not now!

Then Sandy was by his side, offering the child his hand. After giving the golden-eyed boy a puzzled look, she took it and let him guide her from the room, leaving behind a very relieved Australian who immediately got back to work.

Jack groaned as his tormenter pulled him into yet another shop. “Ana, I really don’t think that we need to go shopping for an alarm clock. I have my phone, remember?”

Ana gave him a withering glare. “You can’t just rely on your phone for the time. A clock lets you glance at the time whenever you want!”

“Oh, okay, sure, but do we have to get it today? It’s not like I’ll turn into a pumpkin if I don’t get an alarm clock by midnight or something.”

“…did you really just equate an alarm clock to Cinderella’s slippers?”

“Yes! I’m so desperate that I’m making bad analogies! Doesn’t that show you how tired I am?”
Ana looked at him with an amused smile on her lips and said, “Will you fall over within the next ten minutes?”

Jack blinked in surprise at the question. “No?”

“Then you’re fine! Now come on!”

Aster gently finished painting the last snowflake and stepped back to examine his work. Normally he’d wait for the top coat to dry before doing the decals, but he’d decided to do a little experiment and it had turned out wonderfully! The light blue paint had mixed with the white to make the winter scene he’d created look, well, magical. Like light was playing across ice.

Behind him, Nick let out a low whistle of approval and said, “Aster, you’ve outdone yourself! This looks great!”

The Australian smiled. “Thanks, mate. I just hope Jack likes it.”

“How could he not?” the Christmas lover asked. “It’s a wonderful painting painted by the person he loves! What’s not to like?”

Now Aster was blushing. Loves? He didn’t know if he’d go that far just yet, but hopefully one day soon…

A buzzing in his pocket drew him from his little daydream and Aster carefully wiped his hands on a wet rag before pulling out his phone and checking the text.

“Looks like Ana ran out of ways to keep Jack busy.”

Nick grinned. “I guess that means it’s showtime!”

“Ugh, you could at least help me carry some of this stuff, Ana!” Jack called from behind the pile of boxes as the blonde guided him up the stairs. They’d gotten so many things that Jack couldn’t even see over the top.

“I’m letting you stay in my home and I’ve just spend five hours helping you shop for a whole new wardrobe, the least you can do is carry some boxes!”

Jack just rolled his eyes and let her lead him down the hallway. Honestly, what was up with her today? What had happened to his helpful friend?

As they neared his room, or at least he thought they were near his room, he couldn’t see to tell for sure, he spoke up once more. “Can you at least help me unload them on my bed?”

“Sure thing, Frostbite,” Aster replied, taking some of the boxes from Jack’s arms with a grin.

“Aster! What are you doing here?” Jack asked, his annoyed frown instantly turning into a smile when he saw his boyfriend.

“Just some housework,” Nick said as he took the rest of the boxes from Jack.
Now the albino was confused. Still happy, but confused, too. Especially when he saw that Sandy was there, too, with a happily grinning Baby riding on his back.

“What’s going on?”

The gang just smiled.

Then Jack saw his room. He could only see the very edge of it from the hallway, but it was enough to have him rush inside to see what they’d done.

The formerly white room was now a winter wonderland with icy blue walls that had snowflakes drifting down across them and into piles of painted snow. His bedding, which had originally been an old set from Ana’s aunt, was snow theme now, too, and his desk…

“Did you guys buy me a computer?” Jack stammered, unsure what else to say.

Nick laughed and said, “No, Sandy just brought over an old one from his house. It’s not in the best condition, but it should be enough for homework.”

Jack didn’t reply. He just stared around his room, taking it all in in silence.

Suddenly nervous that they’d done too much, Aster set down the packages he was holding and ran a hand through his hair. “The paint’s still wet, so you’d better not…”

The sentence was cut off when Jack turned around and practically flung himself into his boyfriend arms with a cry of “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He didn’t stop saying thank you until everyone else was laughing and, even then, it still took a while.
Chapter 28

It was silly to be jealous of his friends. It really was. Especially when he’d seen everything that Jack had gone through as of late. The guy deserved a bit of happiness, especially if that happiness brought joy to a certain Australian as well.

None of this stopped Nick from wishing that he could look as happy as those two did last night. Aster may have been unwilling to call it love just yet, but Nick called it as he saw it and, well, if that wasn’t love, then what was?

The worst part? He knew he could have that, too, if he could just get over these stupid nerves. Ana liked him back, he’d bet real money on that, but apparently that knowledge didn’t make asking her out any easier. He sighed and looked at the flower on his desk. It was still in full bloom, but it wouldn’t be that way for long…

Okay. He was going to do it. He was going to ask Ana out today!

With a determined smiled, Nick grabbed the flower and rushed downstairs to get into the sleigh, but only after sending off three very important texts.

Sandy yawned lightly as he pulled on his coat and was just about to head out into the frigid morning when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. Who would be texting him this early?

When he pulled out his phone and checked the text, though, the frown turned to a grin.

*I’m going to ask Ana out today, don’t come to the sleigh*

Sandy laughed, put the phone back into his pocket, and headed out the door with a single thought on his mind: *It was about time!*

Aster woke up to his phone chiming and smiled sleepily at the message. Way to go Nick.

Then he yawned and hid his face under the covers. He had a few more minutes before the alarm went off and he wasn’t sacrificing them for anyone!

When Aster woke up the next time, it was due to the shrill sound of his alarm. He groaned and slammed the cursed machine off. Why did school have to start so early?

After a quick stretch, he forced himself from the warm confines of his bed and out into the world to get dressed and eat breakfast. Once these daily rituals were complete, he bundled up as best he could and set off towards the Romoli’s house.

As he approached the house, Ana and Jack exited the building while chatting animatedly about some TV show, making Aster smile and called out, “Ana, are you corrupting my boyfriend even further?”

The duo turned to face him and Ana stuck her tongue out while Jack’s whole face lit up with his Aster smile.
Okay, so getting up early sucked. Getting to see his boyfriend practically first thing every day? Yeah, he could get used to that.

“Watching TV with him is not corrupting him, Aster.”

The Australian rolled his eyes and took his boyfriend’s hand in his as he replied, “Wasting his time, then. I know the crap you watch.”

“Castle is not crap!”

At first, Aster looked startled at the exclamation, then he narrowed his eyes and said, “Wait, you two watched Castle? As in a decent TV show that most people would find entertaining and not some sappy rom-com?”

Jack nodded, looking a little puzzled as he asked, “Is there something wrong with that? I actually really liked the show.”

Aster ignored the question, focusing on the grinning blonde instead. “Why is it that anytime we watch something it’s a rom-com and Jack gets to watch something decent?”

Ana just shrugged and started walking towards the school.

The Australian looked after her with a glare, only to have his attention refocused by cool lips pressing against his own.

Oh. Boyfriend. Right.

After the brief kiss ended, Aster smiled down at his white-haired love and asked, “Did you get the text from Nick?”

“Yes! I didn’t even realize that he liked Ana, but I know she likes him.”

“And how’d you pick up on that?” Aster asked as the duo started walking towards school.

“Oh, she told me last night while we were talking.”

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good.

“Talking?”

Jack nodded and smiled brightly. “Yeah, we stayed up talking for what felt like hours about you and Nick. She told me all about your little crush, by the way.”

Great. Ana and Jack were bonding over girl talk. Wonderful.

Aster was about to complain, but then he saw the way Jack was smiling and the words died before he even opened his lips. Alright, so he wasn’t wild about the idea, but if it made Jack happy then he wasn’t going to complain.

At least, he wasn’t going to complain to Jack. Ana, on the other hand, would be getting a firm talking to about sharing classified information.

Ana knew something was up as soon as they got to school.

Instead of going to the sleigh as usual, Aster said that he had to go do something urgent in the art
room and Jack tagged along after him, leaving Ana staring after the duo with an amused smile. Aster was a terrible liar. Something was going on and, based on the looks those two were sharing, she had a good idea what was. It was about time, too!

She’d play along for Nick’s sake, though.

With fake confusion plastered on her face, Ana walked across the blacktop to the sleigh where her (hopefully) soon-to-be boyfriend was waiting.

It took a lot of effort to keep from grinning when she saw how nervous he looked. Honestly, it was positively adorable!

Still, she maintained her façade as she took her seat and said, "What's up, Nick?"

With an almost forced grin, he took a hand from behind his back and held out a single, purple rose that matched her eyes perfectly.

As she stared at the rose, he coughed lightly before taking a deep breath and saying, "I know you've already got a Valentine and I have no intention of trying to take Baby's place, so would you consider being my date for dinner this weekend instead?"

Ana cautiously took the offered flower and gently sniffed the sweet fragrance. Okay, she had not been expecting a flower! This was so sweet!

“Of course I’ll go out with you, Nick!”

Relief flooded over his face and he broke into a wide grin.

“Great!”

“But you really didn’t have to banish the guys from the sleigh to ask me out, you know.”

Nick’s relief switched to embarrassment and Ana couldn’t help but giggle. He really was too cute.

Aster and Jack found Sandy sitting in the school’s cafeteria, sipping on a hot chocolate and daydreaming. He broke out of his fantasy as soon as he saw the couple approaching, though, and motioned for them to join him.

The invite was instantly accepted and soon the trio was sitting together, each immersed in their own private world. Aster was sketching, Jack was reading, and Sandy was daydreaming. They probably would have continued like that until class time if Jack hadn’t remembered something and spoken up.

“Oh, right! Aster, I can’t come over after school today.”

The Australian looked up from his sketch pad with a frown. “Huh? Why not?”

“I have to go to Burgess after school. The lawyer whose representing the prosecution wants me to do some prep work for the trial. You know, get me mentally ready for it and all that.”

Sand and Aster exchanged worried looks at that. Between all the craziness of the past few days they’d all but forgotten the trial.

“Do you need me to give you a ride, Frostbite?”
“No, I’ll just take the bus. I don’t know how long this’ll take and I don’t want you waiting around for hours.”

Aster didn’t like the idea of Jack facing this alone one bit. Even if it wasn’t the real trial he felt like he should be there. He was going to say as much, but the bell rang, interrupting their conversation with a summons to class that would be unwise to ignore.

Oh well, he’d talk to Jack at lunch.
Aster didn’t get to talk to Jack at lunch. Instead of joining the gang as usual, the albino only stopped by to inform them that he had a meeting with Mr. Moon and then spent the entire period in said teacher’s office.

The artist spent the entire period gloomily staring at Jack’s empty spot. The fact that Nick and Ana kept exchanging smiles and giggles certainly didn’t help his mood, either. He should be the one making a fool of himself with his boyfriend!

His dower mood persisted throughout the day and, by eighth period, it was so bad that even his teacher took noticed of it. Not that it was much of a feat by that point.

Aster slammed down the clay onto the wheel and began to work, angrily running well practiced fingers over the slippery surface, forming it into a pot. It was a beautiful piece, one of the best he'd done, but it brought Aster no joy.

"So, what exactly did that poor piece of clay do to you?"

Aster started slightly and looked up into the concerned, brown eyes of Marie Crane. With a sigh, he stopped the wheel spinning and turned to face his teacher. Sensing this was going to take a while, Marie sat down on the wheel stool next to Aster's as he started to talk.

"Have you ever been in a situation where you had no bloody idea how to deal with what some bloody whacker was going through and it drove you up the bloody wall? I mean, bloody hell, what am I supposed to do!"

Marie frowned, talking in Aster's angry glower and worry filled eyes. "I'm guessing this has something to do with a friend or yours?"

Aster nodded as his shoulders slumped. "I just don't know what to do."

Marie nodded and rested her hands on her knees. "You know, when I was twelve my best friend's mom got cancer."

"I had no clue how to deal with her. Every time I was alone with her she cried or vented to me and I'd just sit and listen or make her something to eat. It was all I knew how to do. I felt totally useless! A few years back I met up with her for lunch and, while we were talking, she told me how I was the only thing that got her through that time."

"I don't know anything about your situation, but if it's anything like mine here's my advice: you're never going to understand what your friend is going through, but you don't have to. What matters is that you're there and that your friend knows you care."

She grinned at Aster as he thought about it.

"But I still want to understand."

Marie sighed and leaned forward, placing a hand on Aster's shoulder. "That's the hard part, Aster, you can't. There will always be things that you just can't understand. I couldn't understand a parent"
Aster nodded as she got to her feet and headed out of the room.

"Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go and make sure that the idiots in the acting class actually brought back the supplies they borrowed. Why we have to share with them is beyond me."

Aster chuckled as she left the room, only to fall silent when the door closed behind her. Could he deal with having to just be there? Could he deal with not understanding? Could he really support Jack through this?

He looked down at his bowl and smiled. If that’s what it took to be with Jack then of course he could. If Jack was his joy then he’d just have to be Jack’s hope.

Jack stared into the night gloomily as the bus pulled into Narvon. The meeting had gone well and he certainly felt a bit more prepared, but that didn’t mean he was in a good mood. No, he was anything but. Nothing like four hours of intensive preparation to make the trial a stark reality. Two weeks. A shiver ran down his spine at that thought. How was it already two weeks away?

The bus pulled to a stop and he stepped off with a sigh, then turned to wave goodbye as the driver pulled away, only to let out a surprised yelp seconds later when warm arms wrapped around him.

A yelp that turned to joyous laughter when he realized who was there. “Aster!”

“Hey Frostbite,” his boyfriend said with a grin as Jack turned and threw his arms around a surprisingly cold neck.

Once he’d felt the chill skin, the albino pulled back and stared at his boyfriend with a worried frown. “You’re freezing! How long have you been out here?”

“Not long. I parked the car over there and then came to wait for you. Is the bus normally this late?”

“But you hate the cold!”

“Yeah, but I like you more than I hate the cold.”

The smile this statement inspired could have lit up a city block.

“You’re amazing you known that?”

“Well, I certainly like to think so.”

Jack just laughed and pressed his still-warm lips to Aster’s cold ones.

The kiss only lasted a second before Jack was pulling back and demanding Aster get back into the car and warm up. A command that the frigid Australian was more than happy to follow.

Once they’d taken their seats in the Wilder’s car and Aster had turned on the heater, the artist turned to his boyfriend and asked, “So, how’d it go?”

Jack’s smile faded a bit, but not entirely which Aster took as a good sign.

“It went better than I’d expected, actually. I’m still not looking forward to this, but I feel like I’m ready for it. The legal aid went through the expect defense and explained what I’ll have to do.”
Aster nodded. He wanted to ask “is there any chance Pitch could walk?” but he didn’t. Instead he said, “Well, that’s good!” and pulled out of the parking lot.

The drive back to the Romoli’s was mostly silent, but Aster had expected that. Jack had just spent hours talking about the trial, it made sense that he didn’t want to spend more time dwelling on it.

The silence was broken as soon as they pulled onto Aster’s street and Jack caught sight of the Romoli’s house.

“It’s weird.”

Aster blinked in surprise at the sound and glanced over at his boyfriend with a questioning “Hmm?”

Jack was smiling as he gazed at the purple and pink house. “I lived with the Overlands for seven years and I’ve only been with the Romolis for, what, three days?”

Aster nodded and waited for Jack to continue.

“Well, this place already feels more like home than the Overland’s ever did.”

Aster smiled at that and parked the car in the Romoli’s driveway.

“Then allow me to see you home, Mr. Frost.”

Jack grinned back and exited the car, taking Aster’s hand in his as they walked up the walkway to the front door in a comfortable silence.

A silence that was broken the second they opened the door.

Mrs. Romoli called out “Welcome home, Jack! You’re just in time for dinner!” as Baby came running out of the playroom with a cry of “Jacks home!” and Ana came rushing downstairs while calling “Baby, let him get in the door before you attack him!”

As the little girl pouted and began to argue with her sister, Jack looked over at Aster with a smile and said, “Yep, this is definitely home.”
“Pitch, you have to give me something to work with here!”

The ebony haired teen rolled his eyes and turned to stare at the incompetent fool that dared to call himself a lawyer. Honestly, this was the best he could get? If only his moronic father hadn’t chosen to believe the police then Pitch would’ve been enjoying the competence of the top litigators in the nation, but no. He was stuck with this cheap moron instead.

“How many times do I have to say this, their evidence is purely circumstantial. All you have to do is point that out and I’ll walk.”

The man groaned and glared at his client. “Mr. Black, they have matches for your tire tracks. If you’d just stop with the innocent claim, then I could possibly get you into a psych ward instead of jail.”

Pitch scoffed at the statement. “Matches for my car’s tires and hundreds of other cars, Mr. Brown, still purely circumstantial. I’m not going to jail or a psych ward for a crime I didn’t commit.”

The lawyer looked like he wanted to punch his client, but Pitch had grown used to that. The man didn’t believe for a minute that the teen he was representing was innocent, but that really didn’t matter. All that mattered was that the fool pointed out the gaping holes in the case and then let Pitch do the rest. A couple of tears, a heart-wrenching sob story, and he’d be free to go.

“As soon as that Frost kid takes the stand you’re done for. His testimony gives credence to all the circumstantial evidence.”

Ah, Jack, the one glitch in this little plan. A glitch Pitch wasn’t even remotely worried about.

“Only if the jury believes him. By the way, don’t forget that, if I’m innocent, Jack’s the one who did it. My plea will remain unaltered.”

The lawyer sighed and threw his case files into his bag. Every meeting seemed to go this way. He’d try to get the kid to see reason, only to be told that the plea was going to remain as it was and that Jack was the real criminal. No one was going to buy that.

“Innocent until proven guilty, right?”

The ebony haired teen simply smiled as Mr. Brown sighed and left the room. Hopeless. This kid was hopeless.

Pitch watched from his window as the lawyer left the house, got into his car, and slammed the door. As the disgruntled man pulled out of the driveway Pitch whispered, “I’m doomed as soon as Jack Frost gives his testimony, huh?”

Everyone seemed to forget that Pitch knew Jack. In fact, there were some things Pitch knew about Jack that the albino didn’t even seem to realize about himself. Weaknesses hidden deep within the frosty-haired teen’s psyche. It was one of these weaknesses that Pitch was counting on from years of experience. A weakness that he’d seen take hold of Jack time and time again.

Theoretically Jack’s testimony would doom him, but if Jack was too terrified and sleep deprived to seem sane, well, how much would that testimony really hold up to the jury?
Pitch laughed lightly and stared out into the night as he began to hum a little song. When he got to the chorus, he whispered the lyrics, “Dream a little dream of me…”

Jack was standing in a woodland glade. A familiar woodland glade, though the snow that had blanketed the ground on his last visit was gone. It was warm this time, probably summer, and the moon was shimmering above him, bright and full. None of that matter, though, because he was kissing Aster and it was incredible.

No cumbersome winter coats were getting in the way of the kiss this time. Aster was wearing a simple white shirt that clung to his muscled form and Jack was shirtless, allowing his boyfriend to touch his bare skin as they kissed passionately in the moonlight.

Their positions were reversed from last time, too. Jack was the one pressed against the tree by Aster’s strong hands. He didn’t mind, though. He liked this helpless feeling, being totally under Aster's control. It was intoxicating and made him weak in the knees.

Then, Aster stopped kissing him and his hands left Jack's body.

The albino opened his eyes in confusion, wondering why his boyfriend had stopped. The answer was immediately obvious: Aster was gone.

Jack looked around, suddenly feeling scared, but he saw no sign of his boyfriend. As he stepped away from the tree to continue the search, strong arms encircled his waist and Jack gave a cry of surprise, but he was smiling again.

He turned to face his boyfriend, to kiss him once more, but he stopped when he saw Aster’s face. Something was wrong. Aster looked like he was in agony and Jack didn’t know why. He tried to speak, but no words came as swirling shadows surrounded them, blocking out the moon and enveloping the couple, hiding Aster from Jack's sight.

Despite the loss of his vision, Jack could still feel those strong arms around him and that scared him, because their grip was slowly growing weaker. Jack tried to reached out and touch Aster's face, but he felt nothing but icy cold darkness.

The loosened grip suddenly strengthened and shadows vanished, but what was revealed made Jack want to scream. Gone were Aster and the woods. The walls of a cage and a smirking Pitch had taken their place.

With a cold chuckle, the ebony-haired teen pinned Jack's arms to his sides and kissed him.

Jack sobbed at the other's touch and tried to break away, to run, but he was powerless. All he could do was struggle and taste Pitch's harsh kiss. It tasted of ashes and blood.

When Pitch pulled back he was laughing and his dark eyes were gleaming with delight. Mockingly, he leaned down and licked away Jack's tears, making the albino shudder in revulsion.

Where was Aster? Jack was mentally pleading for his boyfriend to come back, to save him, but it was in vain. For, when Pitch suddenly spun him around, Jack found why his boyfriend hadn't come.

Now, he did scream as he stared at the sight Pitch had revealed. On the floor of the cage before him lay Aster's blood soaked form, a pitch black sword plunged through his heart.
Jack sunk to his knees, sobbing as darkness and Pitch's laughter surrounded him, dragging him into oblivion.

Jack shot up in his bed, gasping for air with tears trailing down his cheeks. He could hear the sound of the sea in his ears, but it did nothing to calm him as he bit back sobs.

A nightmare. In spite of Sandy’s gift, he’d had another nightmare. A nightmare worse than any he’d had before. He pulled the headphones from his ears, plunging himself into a world of silence. Aster… God, Pitch really would do that, too, wouldn’t he? Jack had no doubt in his mind that Pitch would love nothing more than to kill the artist, he’d always hated Aster.

What if Pitch didn’t lose? What if Pitch walked free? Would he go after Aster?

The thought sent a shiver down Jack’s spine and loosened fresh tears from his eyes.

“Jack? Are you okay?”

The voice made the crying teen jump and he turned to look toward the door. Ana was standing in his doorway, clad in a shimmering blue pair of pajamas and watching him with worry filled eyes.

He opened him mouth to reassure her, but no words came out, just a choking sob.

Ana instantly rushed to his side and took a seat on the bed beside him before wrapping her arms around his neck and whispering, “Jack, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

He hugged her back, burying his face in her shoulder as he trembled and tried to regain control of himself. He felt like an idiot. A stupid, weak idiot. It was just a dream! Why was he letting it scare him so bad?

When he finally stopped shaking, he pulled out of Ana’s arms and wiped away the lingering tears on the sleeve of his snowflake pajamas as he mumbled the words, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t wake me up! I was already awake, working on a paper that I’ve been putting off.”

“Oh, well, then sorry for being so loud.”

“Wrong again! I only heard you because I was on my way back from the bathroom.”

Jack smiled lightly. “You know, you’re really making it hard to apologize.”

“Good! Because there’s nothing to apologize for.”

Jack refused to meet Ana’s eyes now, focusing on the frosty patterns that covered his bedding instead.

“Jack?” Ana asked, bending her head down so that he was forced to look at her.

After a few uncomfortable moments, the red-eyed teen sighed and said, “I had another nightmare.”

Ana let out a tiny gasp. “Oh, Jack. Did you forget Sandy’s music?”

The albino shook his head. “No, I remembered it. I guess the meeting today or was it yesterday? I
don’t actually know what time it is.”

“It’s about twelve thirty so, technically, yesterday. You went to bed pretty early for once.”

Jack nodded and continued on. “Well, anyway, I guess the meeting yesterday just stirred up some of the fears I’ve been avoiding.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Do you think you should talk about it anyway?”

Jack let out a short, mirthless breath of laugh. “Probably. That’s what my therapist would say, anyway.”

“Therapist?” Ana asked in confusion. Jack had never mentioned a therapist before.

“Yeah, they’re making me see one before and after the trial. It wasn’t the original plan, but after the lawyer heard the details of what happened to me he got pretty insistent that I see one. I saw him the first time in years after yesterday’s meeting.”

“First time in years?”

“Mhmm, I’ve met with him before. It’s the same guy they made me see after my folks died.”

“Well, don’t talk to me just because you think some shrink would be happy about it, talk to me because you want to. And, if you don’t wanna talk, then we could always go downstairs and pop in a movie.”

The offer made Jack smile. “Don’t you have a paper to finish?”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen every movie we own at least twice, so I can write and watch at the same time.”

Jack considered the offer for a brief moment and then asked, “Do you have anything with a dashing male leading?”

Ana giggled and nodded before hopping off the bed and motioning for Jack to follow after her. The duo quietly snuck down to Ana’s room, where she grabbed her laptop, and then they made their way downstairs. Once they were sure that they hadn’t woken anyone up, the blonde popped in *Tangled* while Jack made them both warm cups of tea.

When he returned with their drinks, Ana turned on the movie and got started on her paper while Jack curled up next to her and lost himself to the magical world of Disney.
“So, are we pretending last night never happened?”

Jack looked up from his breakfast with raised eyebrows and said, “You know, I actually know what you’re talking about and that still sounds wrong, Ana.”

The blonde grinned at him as she made her way across the kitchen to the fridge. “Just trying to make you smile, Jackie.”

Jack let out a snort of laughter at the nickname and went back to eating his meal. It was only when Ana sat down across from him with her toast and cereal that he looked up again and asked, “What did you mean by that, anyway?”

“Hmm?”

“The whole pretending last night never happened thing. What was that about?”

Ana pursed her lips and sighed as her smile faded. “I mean am I allowed to talk about it around the others or are we pretending that you didn’t wake up sobbing from a nightmare?”

“I…” Jack started to reply, but then fell silent as he considered the question. Ana let him think, knowing that this wasn’t an easy choice, and started on her meal.

As she finished off her last piece of toast, Jack finally made his decision. “I don’t want Nick and Sandy to know, not yet, not unless it happens again, but I’ll tell Aster.”

Ana nodded and swallowed her current bite of food before asking, “Okay. Do you want me to be there?”

“No. I think I’ll deal with this better if I can kiss him.”

Ana made an annoyed sound and cried, “What? You can kiss around me!”

Now Jack was smiling again. “Can, yes. Will we? Unlikely.”

“But I…”

“Ana,” Jack said, cutting her off with a pointed look that left the blonde pouting.

“Fine. Go be adorable where I can’t see it.”

A light blush stole across his features at the comment. “I doubt we’re adorable.”

“Oh, Jack, have you seen the way Aster looks at you? I have no doubt that you two are anything less than absolutely adorable when alone.”

Jack’s blush only darkened and the meal was finished in silence; the only semblance of conversation was a series of amused smirks from Ana that kept Jack’s flush a permanent feature.

Aster looked down at the white-haired teen in his arms and bit back a sigh. This was stupid.
stupid. He should feel happy that Jack was willing to tell him this. Happy that his boyfriend had been with someone who could comfort him, especially since that person was someone Aster trusted. He should not be jealous that Ana got to be there instead of him. None of that changed that fact that he was, though.

As much as Aster was trying to hide his truly ridiculous feelings, some of them must have shown because Jack pulled away from him and said, “You’re upset! I’m sorry, I didn’t…”

Aster cut his boyfriend off midsentence. “No, Frostbite, don’t apologize. I’m not mad at you, I’m mad at me.”

“Mad at… Why? What did you do?” Jack looked confused now, but that was better than the guilty look that he’d been sporting moments ago. Actually, it was kind-of cute the way those pale eyes furrowed together as his head tilted to the side… No, scratch that, there no ‘kind-of; about it and a guy that cute was just begging to be kissed.

So Aster whispered, “Nothing, just being stupid,” and did just that.

As he wrapped his hands around Jack’s thin waist he could feel the smaller teen smiling into the kiss and something about that fact made his heart race, made him want more. He was pulling Jack closer and tilting his head to deepen the kiss when someone coughed, making the couple spring apart and look to see who had made the noise.

He really should have known who it would be.

“Ana!” Aster growled, glaring at his friend while Jack lowered his gaze to the ground to hide the embarrassment sneaking across his face.

The blonde smirked and crossed her arms. “What? You two were taking too long, so I came back to make sure everything was okay. Now come on, we’ve gotta get to school.”

She turned and started to walk away, but then stopped and glanced back at the embarrassed couple with a wicked grin on her face. “By the way, if you two want privacy, making out on a street corner isn’t exactly the way to get it. Just sayin’.”

Then she sauntered off towards the school.

After taking a moment to let his embarrassment fade, Aster took Jack’s hand in his and followed after her.

To the trio’s immense relief, the following night’s brought nothing but peaceful slumber for Jack and, by the time Friday rolled around, Wednesday night’s nightmare was all but forgotten in the haze of excitement surrounding Ana and Nick’s first date.

Well, Ana and Jack were excited. Nick and Aster, on the other hand…

“So why exactly am I here?” Aster asked as entered the room to find Nick rummaged through his closet.

The other teen paused in his searching and shot his friend a panicked look. “Moral support, okay? Sandy had some family thing he had to do and you don’t expect me to get ready alone, right?”
“You didn’t help me get ready for my date with Jack.”

“You didn’t ask! And would you really have wanted me to?”

Aster didn’t even need to think about that one to know the answer.

“Right, I see your point… what do you need me to do?”

Nick stepped away from his closet while holding two shirts and giving Aster a desperate look.

“You want fashion advice, mate?”

“I guess? I don’t know. I mean, I was gonna wear the green one… does Ana like green?”

“She doesn’t dislike it?”

“Oh, come on! How did you pick out your outfit for your first date?”

“I called Ana!”

Nick groaned and leaned his forehead against the wall as Aster let out a nervous chuckle and ran a hand through his hair.

“Maybe you should ask your mom’s opinion?”

Nick opened his eyes again and stared at his friend. “You want me to ask my mom what to wear on a date? Really, dude?”

After a moment of mutual staring, the duo sighed and exchanged nervous looks. This wasn’t exactly going well, was it?

“What do you think of this one?” Ana asked as she twirled, showing off her dress for the audience.

Baby and the minis began to clap in approval as Jack nodded and declared, “It’s gorgeous, Ana! Nick won’t know what hit him!”

“Thanks! I bought it on sale a few months ago, but I just never had the chance to wear it.”

“Strapless? Isn’t it a little cold out for that?”

The model and her audience all turned to look at Mrs. Romoli who’d come upstairs to see how the fashion show was going and was now gazing nervously at her daughter’s dress.

“I’m gonna wear a shrug with it, mom.”


“Ohhh, true, good call! Black or purple?”

“Black. It’ll match the sash.”

Ana nodded in approval and ran to find the suggested addition as Mrs. Romoli’s frown changed to a smile. Jack had only been here a week and her daughter was already turning him into a fashion
“Nicholas, why are you in suit? I thought you were going to dinner, not dance?”

Aster hid his grin behind his hand as Nick blushed and started to stammer out an explanation in Russian. Whatever he said clearly wasn’t good enough for his mother since she pointed at the stairs and sent the duo to pick out a different outfit.

As they reached the seconds floor, the Australian couldn’t resist whispering, “I told you the suit was going too far.”

“Shut up, Aster.”

When Ana was finally ready, Jack called everyone together at the foot of the stairs so she could walk down in style.

She looked breathtaking. Her flowing purple dress matched her eyes perfectly, as did her 3” slingback heels, and she’d artfully draped a black, lace pashmina around her shoulders. The jewelry she’d chosen to complete the look was simple, but elegant, silver hoops and a silver necklace with a single charm.

“Oh, you look beautiful, sweetie!”

“Ana’s a princess!”

“Pretty!”

“Where did the necklace come from?”

The last question made everyone pause and look at Ana’s neck, but she just smiled and motioned towards Jack who shrugged and gave the audience an embarrassed grin.

“Well, she helped me get ready for my first date, it seemed right that I’d do something for hers.”

Ana beamed at him and gently brushed her fingers along the necklace as she said, “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

As Mrs. Romoli and the minis moved closer to look at Ana’s present Mr. Romoli asked, “But why a hummingbird?”

The duo smiled at each other and chorused, “It’s not a hummingbird, it’s a tooth fairy.”

“Flowers?”

“Check.”

“Car clean and well fuelled?”
“Check.”

“Outfit approved?”

“Check.”

“Alright, good luck out there, mate.”

“Thanks.”

The boys nodded at each other and then Nick got into the sleigh and headed off to Ana’s house. It was Showtime.

Once the cherry-red jeep had disappeared from sight, Aster got into his car and headed for the same destination. After dealing with Nick for two hours he really needed some stress relief. Hopefully Jack wouldn’t mind a last-minute date of their own.
Jack took one look at the exhausted Australian standing on the Romoli’s door step and burst into amused laughter, much to Aster annoyance. Once the giggles faded away, the grinning albino asked, “So, how was helping Nick?”

Aster groaned and slumped forward, hiding his face in Jack’s shoulder. “I am never helping him get ready for anything ever again!”

Jack smiled fondly at his weary boyfriend and said, “Anything I can do to make it better?”

The artist nodded, nuzzling Jack’s neck lightly as he whispered, “Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to get dinner.”

Jack felt his heart skip a beat when Aster’s lips brushed against his neck and he had to take a steadying breath to make sure his voice wasn’t shaking when he replied, “Sure, just let me thrown on my shoes.”

“The usual, boys?” Amanda asked as the couple scooted into the booth and Jack couldn’t help smiling at the question. They had a usual. He exchanged a looked with his boyfriend and both teens nodded.

Then Jack said, “Sure, thanks Amanda!”

“No problem, I’ll be back with waters in a jiffy.”

As she scurried away from the table, Aster turned to his boyfriend and said, “So, I never asked, how was getting Ana ready?”

“Fun! We had a blast, though I think I’m turning into whatever the male version of a fashionista is.”

Aster let out a soft chuckle and gave Jack a bemused smile. “And why do you say that?”

“Because I know the difference between a pashmina and a shrug.”

“The difference between what?”

“Exactly.”

After a moment of silence, both boys started to laugh. By the times they’d stopped, Amanda had come and gone with their waters.

“So, what do you wanna do tonight, anyway?”

“What’d ya mean?”

Jack shrugged and sipped at his drink before explaining. “Well, I figured we’d do something besides just dinner. We haven’t really gotten to do anything alone this week unless you count basked painting, but Sophie was in and out for the so…”
Aster smiled. Alone time with Jack, yeah, he could definitely go for some of that. “Did you have something in mind?”

A mischievous grin and a “you’ll see” were the only answers that the albino would give him no matter how much Aster prodded. Even once dinner was over, all Jack would say is “just drive to the school!”

As Aster sighed and obeyed his boyfriend’s demands, he realized how weird this really was. Five months ago he wouldn’t have given Jack the time of day and now here he was, letting the frosty-eyed teen take him who knew where without a second thought.

The thought made him smile. He’d never been more glad to be wrong about someone than he was to have been wrong about Jack.

When they got to the school, Jack hopped out of the car and told Aster to follow him. The Australian did just that and was surprised to find that Jack was leading him into the woods behind the building. It looked like late night walks were going to become another tradition of theirs. Well, he could get used to that, especially once summer arrived. For now, though, he’d brave the cold. The things he did for love.

As Aster followed Jack through the woods, he found himself struggling to keep up with his nibble footed boyfriend and actually had to call out, “Slow down, Frostbite! I don’t know these woods like you do.”

Jack grinned sheepishly at the cry and waited for Aster to catch up. Once he had, the albino took his boyfriend’s hand in his and they walked together in silence the rest of the way to the spot where Jack was leading them.

As soon as they arrived Aster knew where they were.

“Your rock, huh?”

Jack nodded, but he wasn’t smiling. If anything, he looked nervous and that worried Aster.

“Jack, what’s wrong?”

The snowy-haired teen shrugged and leaped his head on his boyfriend’s shoulder. “Just thinking, really.”

“About what?”

Jack sighed and snuggled closer as he whispered, “Pitch.”

Aster let go of his boyfriend’s hand and wrapped a protective arm around Jack’s shoulder before asking, “Why?”

“Because the last time I came here, he followed me.”

The Australian didn’t speak. He simply waited to see if Jack wanted to talk about it.

Apparently he did, because he soon spoke once more. “It was the day before you guys asked me to join the gang. I came here after school to relax and nap all the time. I’d never had someone follow me, but Pitch did that day. He wanted me to help him with some plot to ruin your winter benefit.”

“I take it you said no?”
Jack laughed lightly and nodded. “Well, duh. I told him that there was no way I was gonna help him after what he did last year. He got mad and left, but I didn’t come back after that. I was too worried that he’d try again and, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to keep saying no.”

Aster blinked in surprise and stared down at his boyfriend. “What? Why?”

“I missed him. Remember, he was all I had. The only person who really talked to me.” Then Jack smiled and glanced up at Aster. “Well, that’s not totally true; you were always quite willing to give me a piece of your mind.”

The Australian grimaced slightly at the words, but he couldn’t deny them. It was true. After the Christmas fiasco of the previous year, he’d taken any chance he got to yell at Jack.

Seeing his boyfriend’s reaction, Jack quickly darted up and pressed his lips to Aster’s cheek before saying, “Hey, I’m not mad about it. I deserved it for letting him burn your props.”

There was something about the way Jack said those words that caught Aster’s attention. “Jack?”

“How?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Huh?”

“The whole ‘let him’ thing.”

“Oh, that,” Jack said, looking embarrassed. “I just mean I should’ve stopped him sooner.”

Now Aster pulled away so that he could look his boyfriend in the eyes. “Stopped him?”

“Yes. I should’ve tackled him before he lit the props on fire, not afterwards,” Jack replied as he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I honestly didn’t think he’d really do it, though.”

Aster was staring at Jack now and it was clear that he was making him boyfriend uncomfortable, but he couldn’t stop. “Tackled him? Jack, what actually happened that night?”

Jack’s pale lips formed into a perfect ‘o’ and his gaze fell to the ground as he whispered, “Right. I forgot, you guys didn’t…”

Then he sighed and started again. “I didn’t know what Pitch was going to do to your props. He told me that we were just going to steal them and hide them for a few days. Cause a little mischief. I wasn’t wild about the idea, but, well, Pitch could be persuasive. Really persuasive.”

Aster nodded lightly, but didn’t say a word, so Jack pressed on, still keeping his gaze trained to the ground.

“We got to the spot where Pitch wanted to hide the props and, when they were all unloaded, he pulled out a lighter. At the time I thought it was my fault, cause I told him that no one would believe that we’d just found the props, and he said the best way to stay out of trouble was to destroy the evidence.

“I didn’t think he’d do it. I really didn’t! But then he did and I… I tackled him. It must have stopped the fire, but it may have just gotten knocked out while we were fighting.” Jack finished the story with another shrug and then stared off into the woods with a small frown on his face.

“It’s a good thing those hikers came along, too. Pitch is a lot stronger than I am and he’d have
started the fire again after he took me out.”

Aster stared at Jack as his mind whirled with this new information. Finally, after a long silence, he whispered, “You stopped Pitch from burning those booths?”

Jack turned his gaze back on his boyfriend and allowed his lips to form into a small smile as he said, “Yeah. That’s why Pitch and I stopped hanging out after the whole fiasco. He was livid and I guess I was too.”

That was true. Aster remembered Ana commenting on the fact that Pitch and Jack weren’t hanging out anymore last January, but he hadn’t given the comment much thought until now.

“You didn’t start the fire?”

Jack shook his head and shrugged, as if this revelation didn’t mean a thing. Well, maybe it didn’t to him, but to Aster it meant that months of hatred had been unwarranted, that angry words had been uncalled for, and that everything about how quickly Jack had fit into their group suddenly made sense.

Some of the conflicting emotions racing around Aster’s mind must have shown on his face because Jack’s tiny smile faded to a nervous one and he said, “Aster, is everything okay?”

The only reply the Australian could think to give was to gather Jack in his arms and whisper, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again until Jack pulled back and pressed cool fingers to his boyfriend’s lips, silencing him.

The albino was smiling now and his eyes were shining as he said, “Aster, stop it. I deserved everything I got after that fiasco. Pitch couldn’t have done it without me.”

The artist shook his head, his mind still racing. “Jack, we thought the worst of you! Why didn’t you tell us what really happened?”

His boyfriend’s next words almost broke Aster’s heart, both for the joking way in which Jack said them and the truth they carried.

“Who would’ve believed me?”

Chapter End Notes

yeah, like you guys having been waiting for this since the last story. Well, now you’ve got it!
Aster stared up at the ceiling of his room, unable to sleep. *Who would’ve believed me?*

He couldn’t stop thinking about those words or the obvious answer: no one. Heck, Aster would’ve laughed in Jack’s face had the albino tried to tell them the truth. Not that he’d mentioned that to his boyfriend. Instead, he’d just hugged the smaller teen close and whispered apologies for things he really didn’t think he could ever make up for until Jack had started to laugh and silenced the stream of words with a kiss.

After that, the two teens had ended up just wondering around in the woods for a while, but Aster would be the first to admit that his mind had been miles away during the rest of the evening and he was sure Jack had noticed.

In fact, knowing his boyfriend, that probably meant Jack thought Aster was mad about something.

Aster groaned at the thought and ran a hand down his face. Great. He hadn’t even thought about that and he had no way to check on Jack!

The artist rolled onto his side and stared at his nightstand in annoyance until his gaze focused on the tiny green light that meant his cell phone was charging. Well, he couldn’t check on Jack, but he knew someone who could. With a resigned sigh and a quick ado to his last scraps of his dignity, Aster grabbed the phone and sent a certain blonde a quick message that simply read *Hey, Ana, would you make sure Jack’s okay?*

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Ana woke up as soon as her cellphone chimed. After a light yawn, she grabbed her phone and opened the message, curious who was texting her so late. As soon as she read it, though, she got worried.

*Did something happen?*

*Kind-of, I’m just worried that Jack will think I’m mad at him.*

*Aster, what did you do?*

*Nothing! Just check on him, okay?*

*Fine, but I expect details tomorrow.*

As soon as the ‘sent’ image appeared on the display, Ana set her phone down and quietly left her room.

She knew Jack was still awake as the minute she peered down the hall.

A dull glow was sneaking out from under the door of said winter-lover’s room and, when she pushed it open, she found the albino sitting on his bed with a book in his hands.

He looked up from the book the moment that Ana entered and gave his unexpected guest a sheepish grin.
“Hey, Ana.”

“Hey, what are you doing up at this hour?”

Jack shrugged and motioned to the book that lay open on his lap. “I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to start reading a series Pippa had me buy.”

“Is it any good?” Ana asked as she entered the room and came to sit on the edge of Jack’s bed.

Jack’s reply of “That depends on what you consider good” was accompanied by an annoyed glare at the tome that made Ana giggle.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“The plot’s obvious, the male lead is a jerk, and it’s one of those stupid ‘love at first sight’ romances. It’s about as far from my usual choice of fantasy literature as you can get!”

“So why are you still reading it?”

“…I really wanna see what happens to the warlock.”

“The warlock?” Ana asked with a grin as Jack nodded hopelessly.

“Yes. I’ve also decided that I’m getting Pippa some good books for her birthday because I’m not letting my baby sister read more of this garbage!” This determined statement was followed by a wide yawn that made Ana smile.

“Hmm, that sounds like a good plan, as does sleeping.”

The suggestion made Jack frown. “I’m really not tired.”

“Sure you’re not. Wanna try a more believable excuse?”

Jack sighed and closed his book. “It’s nothing, I’m just… scared to sleep.”


“No! Aster didn’t do anything!” Jack declared firmly, cutting Ana’s accusation off mid-sentence in the process.

“Then what?”

Jack pursed his lips, turned his gaze from Ana, and began to fiddle with the book in his lap. “After that meeting with the lawyer last week I had a nightmare and I’m worried my conversation with Aster will do the same.”

“Your… what in the world did you two talk about?”

“The fire.”

Ana stared at her nervous friend in disbelief. “Aster asked you about the fire? Oh, Jack, I’m sorry, I don’t know…”

“No, not that fire!” Jack said, interrupting Ana for the second time as he realized the source of her confusion.
“Huh? What other fire was there?”

After a few more moments of idle fiddling, Jack sighed and looked up, finally allowing their eyes to meet as he replied, “The fire last Christmas. I told Aster what really happened that night.”

Ana nodded politely and patiently waited for Jack to continue while doing her best to hide her growing curiosity.

“Well, to make a long story short, I stopped Pitch from burning the props after I helped him steal them.”

Ana’s eyes grew wide at the confession. “You didn’t start that fire?”

“No! I may as well have, though, since without my help…”

He didn’t get to finish the though, because it was his turn to be cut off with a warm hug and a whispered, “Oh, Jack.”

Jack smiled softly and held her back. “Hey, it’s alright.”

He expected the hug to go on for a while, but it didn’t, because Ana suddenly pulled back with wide eyes and exclaimed, “So that’s why you and Pitch stopped hanging out!”

“You noticed that?”

“Yeah! I always saw you two talking in the hallway between classes and, after the Christmas fiasco, that stopped. I couldn’t figure out what happened, but Aster insisted that I was just being silly. I wasn’t, was I?”

Jack was grinning now, too amused with his friends excitement to stay sad. “Yeah, you were. We ended our friendship over that. I was mad that he tried to burn your stuff and he was mad that I stopped him. He was probably mad that I got him in trouble, too. Usually I just took the blame and let him get away with things.”

“T ook the blame?”

Jack nodded, looking unfazed as he replied, “For his plans, like the time he hide all those knocked-out fruit flies in the principal’s office.”

Ana remembered that one. “Why would you take the blame for him? You must have gotten in a ton of trouble!”

“Nah, I just got a stern talking to and some detention. They were always lenient on me since I was an orphan. Besides, if they’d found out Pitch had done it, then he’d disappoint his folks and I didn’t have anyone to disappoint, so it made sense for me to take the blame.”

“No, it didn’t,” Ana relied, her voice full of sadness and anger. “Jack, did you even pull any of the pranks that you got in trouble for?”

“Yeah, a couple of them. Like the time I used a universal remote to mess with the TV in Mrs. Kingston’s class when she wanted to make us watch that boring documentary on the civil war.”

Though still upset, Ana couldn’t help but giggle. That had been so funny and even Mrs. Kingston has laughed when she discovered what was going on. Jack had gotten off with nothing more than a warning and a confiscation of said remote.
Seeing his friends amused reaction, Jack grinned and explained the prank. “That one was 100% Jack Frost, too. I found the remote at the thrift shop when looking for a new shirt and just couldn’t resist the temptation. It was totally worth the dollar it cost me, too.”

As Ana’s laughter faded, a puzzled look crossed her face. “Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“All the pranks you pulled, they were the funny ones, weren’t they? The ones that made everyone laugh.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, the stupid childish ones were all mine.”

Ana didn’t comment on that, but she had a sneaking suspicion that she knew where Jack’s opinion of his harmless jokes had come from. Instead, she said, “Well, I liked them.”

The pleased smile this inspired felt like an accomplishment and, for the first time, Ana started to really understand the nature of Jack and Pitch’s ‘friendship.’ No wonder Jack seemed to think so little of himself! Her silent musings were interrupted when Jack yawned again and Ana couldn’t stop the soft smile the action inspired.

“I think that’s my cue to let you sleep, Jackie.”

The albino nodded sleepily, though he still looked nervous about the prospect of nightmares.

“And, if you should have a bad dream, you had better come and get me, okay? It’s my job as your cff to be there when you’re upset and Aster isn’t around.”

“cff?” Jack asked as he fought against another yawn and failed.

“Closest-female-friend, silly. Now lie down and go to sleep!”

Jack obeyed, but not before saying, “I guess you’re my bff, too.”

The comment made Ana pause halfway to the door. “I would’ve thought that was Aster?”

“Nah, he’s my best friend, but you’ll always be my bossiest-female-friend.”

Now both teens were smiling and Ana stuck her tongue out at him before shutting off the light and exiting the room as Jack put in his headphones and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay, Christmas is busy time for me!
Ana was already up and drinking tea when Jack wondered downstairs the next morning looking wonderfully well rested. Though she already knew the answer, she smiled at him and asked, “No nightmares?”

“Nope! None that I remember, anyway.”

“That’s good,” Ana said. Then, as an afterthought, she added, “Oh, there’s hot water in the kettle if you want tea, by the way.”

“Yes, please!” Jack replied happily and then he began to make himself a cup. As he poured the hot water into a blue mug, he asked, “Where is everyone else? I figured that they’d all be up by now.”

“They are up, up and gone for the day. With that snow storm coming in tomorrow, my parents wanted to go shopping and Baby needs new snow boots, so they took her along.”

“And you didn’t go?”

Ana shook her head. “Nah, there was nothing I needed, so I’m just hanging out here. What are your plans for today?”

“Aster and I are gonna visit the twins,” Jack replied while carefully adding sugar to his cup.

The blonde’s eyes began to glimmer with excitement at the statement. “Really?”

“Yeah. Pippa’s wanted me to bring him around for a while and I’ve been promising Sophie that we’d go ice skating again since the Christmas fair.”

“You’re taking Sophie along?”

“Mhmm. It was Aster’s idea. I think he’s nervous about getting their approval, so he’s bringing a peace offering,” Jack explained, making Ana laugh.

“What’s to be nervous about? They seemed to like him well enough last time we saw them.”

Jack shrugged and took a seat across the table from his violet-eyed friend. “That’s what I said, but I don’t think he listened.”

“He is stubborn to a fault,” Ana agreed while nodding sagely.

“True, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Jack countered.

“No, it’s not; it just depends on what he’s chosen to be stubborn about.”

“Indeed.”

After a shared smile, the duo fell into a relaxed silence while they sipped their tea and just enjoyed the feeling of having nothing to do until Ana glanced at the clock and asked, “What time do you have to leave?”

Jack followed her gaze and frowned when he saw the time. “It’s that late already? I better go get dressed! We’re supposed to pick the twins up at eleven, so Aster should be here soon, otherwise I’ll have to go over there and wake him up.”
“Then go get dressed, silly!”

Jack gulped down the rest of his tea and obeyed his friend’s command after giving her a speedy salute. Once he’d raced off, Ana got up and took her tea into the sitting room where she could sit at the room’s window seat and watch for Aster’s arrival.

It wasn’t long before a familiar, silver car came rolling down the street and pulled into the driveway. As soon as it was parked, Aster got out of the driver’s seat and then helped Sophie out of her car seat before coming to the door. He didn’t even need to ring the bell, Ana was already there and waiting for him.

“I hear we’re visiting the in-laws today?”

Aster blushed and glowered while Sophie said, “In-laws? We no see in-laws. We go skatin’!”

“That’s right, Soph,” Jack agreed as he came rushing down the stairs, luckily having missed the in-law comments.

The sight of his boyfriend wiped the glower from Aster’s face and, by the time Jack had reached the bottom of the stairs, the artist was smiling brightly. After greeting his boyfriend with a quick peck on the cheek, he asked, “Ready to go?”

Jack nodded and bid Ana a quick goodbye before following the Wilder sibling down the walkway to the waiting car. Once they got there, though, trouble arose.

“Jack sit with me!”

“No, Sophie, Jack’s gonna sit up front with me,” Aster said, kneeling down so that he was on level with his baby sister.

Tears welled in green eyes and Sophie began to whimper.

“Oh, Sophie, it’s okay. You’re gonna get to play with Jack all day once we get to Narvon.”

“I wanna sit with Jack!” Sophie cried, ignoring her brother’s attempts to calm her.

The boys exchanged looks and Jack shrugged. Even he didn’t know how to calm her down here.

From inside the house, Ana watched in silent amusement as Jack took a seat in the back with a very happy looking Sophie while a very put-out looking Aster got into the driver’s seat and pulled out of the driveway. She watched until the car disappeared from view and then headed upstairs to her room to work on homework while quietly thinking that, if those two ever had to raise a child, they’d spoil it rotten.

“They’re gonna be here soon!” Pippa cried in delight as she glanced out the window for the thousandth time in the last ten minutes, making Jamie sigh and put down his book.

“Pip, we have to play this cool, okay? Don’t act overly excited until we’ve given this guy our blessing.”

The young girl just gave her twin a wink and went back to watching the road as their mother peeked into the room and said, “Your blessing?”

Jamie, who’d been about to start reading again, rolled his eyes and let his book fall shut. “Yes, mom. As Jack’s only relatives, it’s our job to make sure this Aster guy is on the level.”
“Haven’t you already met him?”

Pippa looked away from the window and back at her mother with an annoyed frown. “That was before he started to date our brother, mom. Very different situations.”

Mrs. Bennett just looked confused. “Is this why you two have been watching all those old detective movies and practicing threats?”

Pippa was about to reply when the sound of an engine dying and car doors opening reached her ears, making her gasp in delight and return her gaze to the outside world. Seconds later, she let out a delighted squeal of, “they’re here!” and rushed to the front door.

“So you think you’re good enough for our brother, huh?”

Aster blinked in surprise and stared down at the little girl who was glaring up at him with her arms folded across her chest. Before he could even think of what to say, her twin was by her side and giving him an equally menacing gaze.

“Yeah, what makes you think you’re good enough for Jack?”

He could tell Jack was enjoying this by the amused giggles coming from somewhere over his shoulder, but Aster didn’t treat this like a joke. Instead, he knelt down to the twins’ level and looked them straight in the eye as he replied, “I care about Jack very much and he cares about me. Is that a good enough reason?”

The twins traded serious looks and then looked back at Aster.

“That seems acceptable,” Pippa said and then Jamie added, “but you better not hurt him or else we’ll make sure you never paint another Easter Egg, got that?”

Now Aster had to fight a grin, but he managed to keep his face serious as he agreed to the twins’ demand. It looked like the solemn moment was over, but then Pippa’s eyes lit up and she added, “Oh, and we want first pick of baskets for the Easter Egg hunt, otherwise we take back our blessing.”

While that hadn’t been part of the plan, Jamie quickly nodded in agreement and re-schooled his gaze into something fierce and judging.

All was silent as Aster considered the offer and then he extended his hands. As the trio shook on it, he said, “Deal.”

Jack, who’d been watching the scene while holding Sophie’s hand, didn’t look too pleased. “Did you two just sell the right to date me for a pair of Easter baskets?”

Pippa nodded and smiled up at his big brother while adding, “Well, they’re very nice baskets.”

Sophie bobbed her head in agreement and began to jump up and down while chanting, “Skate! Skate!”

Pippa, who’d been so focused on talking with Aster that she’d barely noticed the little girl, let out a coo of delight and asked, “Who’s this?”

“This Sophie!” the little girl replied, waving at Pippa and letting go of Jack’s hand so she could come to stand by her brother’s side. “Sophie Aster’s sister.”
“Hello Sophie, my name is Pippa, I’m Jack’s sister.”

“Sophie knows.” The little girl said, looking affronted at the idea that she wouldn’t know who they were picking up and Aster decided to step in before his sister could get into one of her moods.

“Well, now that that’s all over, let’s get in the car! It’s cold out here and we’ve got skating to do!”

That did the trick and all three children followed after the tan Australian as he led the way to the car. Jack didn’t follow, though. He wanted to make sure Mrs. Bennett didn’t need the twins home early, but before he could speak, she smiled at him and said, “I’m not sure I approve of whatever it was that just happened here.”

Jack smiled back and said, “Hey, at least you’re not the one who just got traded away for a couple of baskets by your own flesh and blood.”

The comment made the woman laugh lightly and smile just a bit brighter. “That’s true. Well, have a lovely day with them Jack, just be home in time for dinner as always.”

Jack nodded and gave the woman a light bow as he said, “Thanks, Mrs. Bennett, I will.”

Then he turned to leave, but before he could take a step, Mrs. Bennett spoke again, “Oh, Jack?”

Surprise and slightly worried, Jack turned around and said, “Yes, ma’am?”

“Please call me Emily.”

Jack smiled softly and nodded once more. “Thanks, I will, Mrs… Emily.”

Then he took off after the others and got into the passenger seat, Pippa and Jamie having taken his previous spots in the back.
Chapter 35

“Apparently skating ability, or in your case inability, doesn’t run in the family, huh?” Jack asked as Aster glared at him from the floor of the ice rink while a giggling Sophie flew by with Pippa at her side. Seeing Aster’s gaze follow after the girls, Jack smirked. “Now, us Frosts, on the other hand…”

Aster’s gaze shot back to his boyfriend and he cut the smirking teen off mid-sentence with a growled, “Stop bragging and help me up!”

Jack grinned and did just that, somehow managing to maintain his balance in the process.

Once Aster was on his feet, Jack said, “So, does someone want to retract his previous statement that he’s ready to skate on his own and admit that he still needs practice?”

The artist glowered at his boyfriend, but it only made Jack’s grin turn into a smile as he leaned in and kissed his boyfriend on the cheek before whispering, “Aster, Sophie doesn’t care if you can skate, she’s two.”

Realizing he’d been figured out, Aster sighed and held out his hands in defeat. By the time Pippa and Sophie had skated around the rink again, the couple had made decent progress, though Aster was reluctant to try anything solo with his baby sister there. This proved to be his undoing as it drew the attention of a very curious two-year-old.

“What doin’?” Sophie asked, pulling Pippa to a stop by the teens and looking at them in confusion.

Jack smiled down at the little girl and explained, “I’m helping Aster learn how to skate, Sophie.”

This just seemed to puzzle the child further. As far as she knew, her big brother could do anything! “Aster no skate?”

“Nope! That’s why I’m helping him learn.”

“Sophie help, too!” the little girl cried, skating over and grabbing at her brother’s hand until Jack let go.

“Yeah, we can teach him!” agreed Pippa, wrestling Aster’s other hand from Jack’s grasp as she said, “You go help Jamie practice his jumps, Jack, we’ve got this covered.”

“Are you sure about this, Pip?” Jack asked, exchanging a nervous look with Aster. It was one thing if the artist managed to knock Jack over, but Sophie was so little…

“We’ll go slow! Promise!”

When he saw the determined gleam in his sister’s eyes, Jack knew that he didn’t have a choice here, so he sighed and said, “Alright, just be careful and let me know if you need help.” Then he waved goodbye to his anxious boyfriend and went to join Jamie on the other side of the rink where the young boy was working on a jumping exercise Jack had taught him.

As it turned out, though, Jack wasn’t the only Frost with a knack for teaching. Pippa’s methods were a little harsher than her brother’s (“come on, Sophie can do it, that means you can too! Now man up and try it!”) but she got the job done just the same. By the time the rink opened for the day, Aster was finally managing to skate by himself without falling over and Jamie had landed his first
“Morning guys, what has you three looking so serious?” Nick asked as Ana, Aster, and Jack got into the sleigh.

The trio exchanged pointed looks, with Aster and Ana clearly wanting Jack to do something he was reluctant to do. Nick and Sandy watched the exchange with growing curiosity until Jack sighed and said, “Okay, fine. I just don’t see why it matters.”

This statement only served to make Nick and Sandy even more curious as Jack turned to look at them. After a moment’s hesitation, the nervous teen spoke again. “I told Aster and Ana this over the weekend and they seem to think that you two should know, too. I don’t know why, though. I mean, it was still my fault, but, whatever...”

The rambling trailed off and, after a deep breath, Jack said, “I didn’t help Pitch start the fire on the props last year.”

Then the albino smiled half-heartedly and leaned back in his seat, clearly considering the issue discussed. Ana was having none of it.

“You didn’t just not help him, Jack, you stopped him!”

“From lighting the fire, sure, but I wouldn’t have needed to do that if I’d just done the right thing and never helped him steal the props in the first place!”

They were glaring at each other now, a staring match that was only broken when Nick said, “Maybe we should start at the beginning?”

Ana nodded in agreement while Jack groaned and stared down at his hands. “I don’t even know where to start!”

No one said anything; they all just waited patiently for Jack to speak again. When he did, it was clear that he’d chosen to just get it over with.

“Pitch was always coming up with plans and ideas to cause trouble. I don’t know why, he just did. You guys were his main target, but he could never seem to come up with the right one. They always had too many issues to pull off and I thought he’d just given up on the idea.

“Then he came to me and told me that he’d finally figured out how to knock you four down of your pedestals for once. He’d discovered that you were storing your props on the stage that year, which made them accessible. He told me we were going to take as many as we could and hide them in the woods, then after everyone had a chance to panic, he’d pretend to find them and save the day.

“It seemed like a decent plan and I knew Pitch had always wanted your limelight, so I went along with it. I didn’t know he was lying until we’d hidden the props and he pulled out a lighter. He said that plan wouldn’t work as it would put too much suspicion on us, so we’d have to burn the props to make sure no one ever found them.

“I was okay with playing a prank, but that was taking it too far, so I stopped him and, well, you know the rest.”

Jack looked up from his hands now and grinned unenthusiastically. “I know it seems like I should’ve realized Pitch had planned that from the start, but at the time I thought it was my fault that he burned them.”
This little tidbit was new information for all of the gang and Aster had to ask, “Why the bloody hell would you think that?”

“Because I told him I was worried about the plan working. Right before he set the fire, he told me that I was right, so I figured he’d made the decision because of me.”

“What, the fact that he had a lighter didn’t tip you off?” Ana asked, but Jack just shook his head.

“No, why would it? Pitch always had a couple of lighters on him. His mom leaves them lying about everywhere, so it’s easy to snatch them and she never notices since she buys them in packs. Heck, when we were kids he always joked about burning my books if I started to get too smart.”

Jack had meant that to be a joke, but the horror on the others faces just made him feel ashamed and he lowered his gaze back to the ground as he whispered, “It’s not like he ever actually did it. The books that went missing were just me being forgetful. I even found some of them later.”

While the others continued to look horrified, Sandy gently placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder and waited for his friend to look at him. When he did, he was met with a soft smile that held no blame, only acceptance. The quiet gesture seemed to drain away some of Jack’s anxiety, drawing a smile to pale lips as he said, “Thanks, Sandy.”

By the time he looked back at the others, they’d managed to clear the horror off their faces, too.

Deciding it was time for him to save his boyfriend from all the unwanted attention, Aster said, “In other news, we finished painting the baskets yesterday.”

That did the trick and started Ana off on an update monolog about how they needed to start worrying about candy donations soon and Nick chimed in that they needed to get the plastic eggs out of the storage cupboard to be stuffed, making Aster scowl. He hated the plastic eggs, but Ana had insisted they buy some so that parents didn’t have to deal with dozens of hardboiled eggs. As loath as he was to admit it, she had a point, too, and it did mean that there was a lot less painting to be done.

That didn’t mean that Aster had to like it, though!

“Do you want me to drive you to Burgess after school tomorrow?” Aster asked as he, Ana, and Jack were walking home on Tuesday afternoon, but the offer was quickly refused.

“The busses are good enough for me and I don’t want you waiting around for hours since you’re not allowed in the meetings.”

“Are you sure, Frostbite? You looked pretty shaken up last time.”

“I’m sure, but I wouldn’t say no to another pick up at the bus stop. Wait until I text you that I’m on my way home, though, okay? You’re lucky that you picked the right bus last time or else you could’ve been stuck waiting for another two hours!”

Aster merely grinned and squeezed Jack’s hand before saying, “Hey, it would’ve been worth it.”

Ana, who was walking behind them, actually rolled her eyes at that. Honestly, who knew Aster could be so adorably sweet?

Jack sighed and stared out the window of the meeting room while the lawyer and trial coach talked
with his counselor. It had been a long, draining meeting and Jack was beyond ready for it to be over. Instead, he had an hour long counseling session to look forward to now. Great.

When he saw that the trio were drawing apart, which meant that it was time to go, Jack got up from his chair and headed over to join them.

As Jack approached, all three gazes fell to him and he did his best to avoid squirming. It worked, apparently, since none of them seemed to grow worried like they had last time when Jack hadn’t put up a façade.

Once Jack had reached the group, his counselor said, “Ready to go, Jackson?”

Jack nodded and began to follow the elderly man from the room, but not before the lawyer stopped him for one final reminder.

“Remember Jackson, we’re now certain that the defense doesn’t know, so we have to keep this quiet.”

Jack nodded again and then silently followed after the counselor. There was nothing like knowing that the whole trial was riding on your mental issues to relieve the pressure. Ten bucks said he wasn’t getting to sleep tonight.

This dream started at his parent's graves. Jack was alone, laying flowers against the marble surfaces and whispering to the memories of his parents all about what had been going on in his life as of late.

As he brushed his hand along his mother’s name, the stone crumbled away, turning into dust beneath his fingers and making Jack jump to his feet in horror. All around him, the seemingly endless dream graveyard was crumbling away to dust. Soon, nothing remained but an endless field of pale grey dust. Trembling slightly, Jack bent down and touched the dust, only to recoil in revulsion when he realized what it was. Not dust, but ashes.

He had to get out of here.

Jack started to run, trying to find an end to the pale wasteland, but none came. As he ran, a strange, liquid darkness began to make its way out of the rubble, forming itself into strange creatures that drove fear into his heart at the mere sight of them.

He glanced behind him to see a veritable army of the creatures following close behind him and Jack tried to run faster, but he ran into something firm and found himself falling to the ground.

When he looked up from his new spot, it was to find Pitch standing there, cloaked in darkness and smirking down at him as shadows spun around them.

"Hello, Jack."

Jack made a terrified noise at the sight and tried to crawl backward, but the fear creatures were waiting there, keeping him from being able to escape Pitch.

The dark teen laughed at Jack's fear and leaned down to whisper, "What, afraid of me, are we?" in Jack’s ear.

Jack tried to shake his head, to deny his terror, but this only made Pitch laugh harder.
Then he grabbed Jack and drew the weaker teen to his feet harshly. Jack struggled and tried to pull away, he remained trapped. Pitch was far too strong.

"You're mine, Jack, and you can never change that."

Now Jack stopped struggling to glare up at Pitch, a small and worthless act of defiance that lasted only a second until Pitch pressed his lips to Jack's.

Pitch's kiss made Jack feel like someone was drawing a knife against his lips and the taste of blood filled his mouth, making him want to vomit.

As Jack struggled to break the kiss, he could feel Pitch's laughing against his lips, he could feel claw-like hands gliding over his arms, too.

No, he didn’t want this! This couldn’t be real! He had to wake up!

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Jack woke up drenched in a cold sweat and gasping for air. For long minutes he couldn’t even move from terror, but eventually had had enough energy to turn his head and glance at the clock. Green numbers read 4:16am. That meant he’d managed five hours of sleep. Not bad and certainly more than he’d expected, not that he really felt rested.

He turned his gaze back to the ceiling, willing his racing heart to calm as he closed his eyes and took deep, steadying breaths. It was almost five am by the time he felt mentally ready enough to get out of bed and venture downstairs.

Once there, he quietly made himself a strong cup of tea and then he curled up on the window seat in the sitting room. He stayed there, looking out into the snow covered world and sipping on tea, for a long time. It was only when Ana came downstairs and greeted him with a, “Morning Jack! Happy Valentine’s Day!” that he got up and got ready for school.
Chapter 36

Aster double checked to make sure he’d remembered Jack’s present and then headed out the door to meet up with his boyfriend and Ana for their daily walk to school. When he looked up the street, he could see that the two of them were already waiting for him by the Romoli’s house, so he picked up the pace and quickly joined them.

As he approached, Ana called out, “Happy Valentine’s Day,” while Jack just smiled and waited for Aster to reach them. If the artistic teen had been paying a bit more attention, Jack’s uncharacteristic silence might have worried him, but he was too busy thinking about his present and so the moment slipped by unnoticed, leaving Aster untroubled as he quickly returned Ana’s greeting and then pulled his boyfriend close for a kiss.

Hey, it was Valentine’s Day, a little PDA was allowed, even if it did leave Jack blushing a pretty pink when they pulled apart.

The blush just made Aster smile, Jack was far too embarrassed by this kind-of stuff for someone who was so gung-ho when they were alone. At least he wasn’t pulling out of the hug, though that probably had something to do with the fact that Ana had seen fit to start off without them.

Knowing that they’d soon have to hurry after the blonde and go to school, Aster leaned in for a final chaste kiss and then whispered, "Happy Valentine's day, Frostbite."

At these words, Jack pulled out of the hug with an exclamation of, "Oh, right!"

Then he took off his backpack and set it on the ground before bending down and unzipping the front pouch. "I almost forgot about this."

As he spoke, Jack took out a present that had been messily wrapped in silver paper and then got to his feet. Once he was standing again, Jack held out the gift with a nervous exclamation of, "Happy Valentine’s Day!"

Aster took the present from Jack's outstretched hands curiously and examined it in silence as an amused grin spread across his face.

"You know, you're supposed to unwrap it, silly." Jack commented worriedly when it appeared that Aster had no intention of opening the gift.

The words only made the artist smile grow as he replied, "I'm simply admiring your wrapping job, Frostbite. I didn't know it was possible to use this much tape on such a tiny present!"

Jack grinned and shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry, I've never had to wrap anything before."

Aster stopped examining the gift at the admission and looked at his grinning boyfriend in surprise. “What, really?”

Jack merely nodded and waited for Aster to open the gift.

Though the Australian could think of a few more questions, he didn't say anything. Instead, he unwrapped the present.

When he'd revealed the item hidden beneath the silver paper, all he could do was laugh and lean forward to gently press his lips to his boyfriend's forehead.
Jack had gotten him a small, snow white, stuffed rabbit with an Easter egg wrapped in its arms. Even without close examination, Aster could tell that Jack had repainted the egg by the fact that it was like no other Easter egg he'd ever seen. Instead of some spring time color or pattern, the ceramic egg was painted a soft, icy blue with a surprisingly well done outline of Australia traced in bright green.

When Aster pulled back, Jack was blushing and shuffling his feet nervously, clearly concerned about the quality of his gift. Before Aster could say anything, his boyfriend began to mumble and explanation, "It's a jackrabbit. So, you know, you can think of me when you see it. I know it's not the greatest gift ever, but I thought…"

Aster placed a finger to his boyfriend’s lips, silencing him, and then said, "It's great and I love it."

As Jack grinned with pleasure, Aster reached into his back pocket and took something out. Jack tried to see what it was, but his boyfriend kept the item held firmly out of his sight. "You have to close your eyes if you want your present."

Jack gave Aster a tiny pout, but followed his command.

Once his eyes were closed, he felt Aster's warm fingers brush against his neck, running some kind of cord along his pale skin. When Aster's hand fell away, the cord remained and, after a moment, the Australian’s deep voice said, "Okay, you can look now!"

Jack's eye's fluttered open and he glanced down at his neck. Around it, on a short, almost choker length, black cord hung a simple pendent, no bigger than a pencil's eraser.

After a moment’s hesitation, Jack cautiously reached up and ran his fingers over the smooth, silver and gold charm curiously before looking at his boyfriend with frosty eyes full of questions. Sensing the albino’s confusion, Aster smiled and explained the meaning behind his gift.

"It's an Australian surfer's charm."

That didn’t seem to clear anything up, so Aster began again, looking a little embarrassed this time.

“When I was six years old, my uncle took me to the beach to give me my first and only surfing lesson. I’d been begging to go for years and, since we were moving away, he knew it was his only chance to grant my wish.

“I was absolutely terrible, but it was still one of the best days of my life. When we were all done and I was nursing more bruises that I could count, he took me to a little shop right along the boardwalk. It was full of all these different charms, hand made by the owner. My uncle told me that every real surfer wore one, so I needed one, too.

“He let me choose whichever one I wanted.” Here Aster paused and pointed to the charm around Jack’s neck before continuing on. “And that's the one I picked.

"I used to wear it all the time, but I stopped when the original chain broke. I'd almost forgotten about it, but when I was trying to think of a gift that’d actually mean something it came to mind. Luckily I still had it stashed away in a desk drawer. I think it's technically supposed to bring you good luck or something like that and I know it’s jewelry, which isn’t really your style, but…”

Aster's voice trailed off and he bashfully ran a hand through his hair, waiting for Jack to reply.

Instead of saying something, though, Jack simply leaned forward and kissed Aster tenderly. When he pulled back, he was smiling his Aster smile with his hands clasped around the surfer's charm
like it was the most precious thing in the world. He didn't even need to say anything. The look on his face told Aster everything he needed to know.

The initial plan for after school had been to meet up and their usual spot and walk home, but Ana had ended up going off somewhere with Nick, leaving Jack waiting by himself. When Aster failed to show up, the impatient albino had headed to the art room to find his missing boyfriend, figuring Aster had lost track of time again.

As Jack entered the classroom, the paint splattered form of Marie emerged from one of the many closest that lined the walls with her arms full of paint and brushes. Seeing her heavy load, Jack immediately ran to her side to offer his help which she gladly accepted with a pleased, "Thanks, Jack."

"No problem. Why were you carrying so much at once anyway?"

"Because it's quicker that way and I'm looking forward to heading home today," she replied with a grin.

"Oh, got Valentine's plans?"

Marie set her load down on an empty table and motioned for Jack to do the same as she said, "Of course: go home, curl up with a good horror movie, and avoid the holiday like the plague!"

After that, she started to arrange the pile of arts supplies, but then she noticed the shocked look on Jack's face and started to laugh.

"Oh God, I sound like a bitter old maid! I just don't like Valentine’s Day, that’s all. Call it a hang up from back when I was in high school. My boyfriend knows he's not to even mention the event in my presence if he wants to stay in my good graces."

Unsure what to say, Jack simply smiled back and watched as she arranged the pile of paints. He was so busy watching that he didn’t notice that someone was approaching from behind until two, strong, tan arms wrapped around his waist and familiar, warm lips were pressed to his cheek.

After a momentary moment of panic, Jack realized who it was and relaxed into the hug as Aster whispered, "Sorry, I lost track of time working on a new project. Forgive me?"

The question made Jack turn around so that he could smile at his boyfriend and say, “Of course!”

It was only then that Aster noticed the pile of art supplies on the table and he gave Marie a quizzical look before asking, "What’s up?"

The teacher sighed and gave the boys a pained look. "The drama club is once again borrowing some supplies from us. I told them I’d leave the stuff out on the table so that they didn't go messing up my closets this time. Help me with the last load?"

Aster shrugged and removed his arms from around Jack before following the woman across the art room as he said, "I don't know why you don't just tell them no for once."

“School policy, I don’t have a choice,” was the pained reply as Marie handed Aster a pile of supplied to carry.
Once the duo finished arranging the supplies, Aster grabbed Jack’s hand and pulled him into the pottery room with a mysterious statement of, “Come on, I’ve got something for you.”

Once they were inside the room, Aster grabbed an object wrapped in newspaper off one of the shelves and proudly handed it to Jack.

Jack took the offered gift and carefully unwrapped it. When he saw what was inside, he let out a tiny burst of laughter and gave his boyfriend an amused grin before saying, "You actually fired it?"

Aster nodded, looking immensely pleased with himself. "I told you it was one of my favorites."

Jack laughed lightly and looked back down at the gift. It certainly looked a lot better now than it had when they’d made it.

In his hands was the pot they’d created on Jack’s first visit to the art room. Sometime between then and now, Aster had fired and glazed it, transforming it from misshapen lump into something beautiful, a winter scene with two figures standing close together on snow-covered ground, underneath the sprawling branches of a barren tree. Somehow, Aster had taken the lumps in the surface and made them look intentional. What had formally seemed like detriments to the piece, now gave a three-dimensional life to the tree.

Jack looked up at his boyfriend in wonder, completely at a loss for words. He’d always known Aster was talented, but this, this was something special.

"And that's part two of your valentine's present. I figured it'd match your room’s décor," Aster explained before leaning forward and kissing his astonished boyfriend.

The kiss was cut short by Marie, who stuck her head into the room and said, “Okay, as cute as this is, I need to lock up. Go make-out somewhere else!"
Chapter 37

Nick pulled the sleigh to a stop in front of the Romoli’s house and then turned to his girlfriend to say, “Okay, movie time!”

Ana smile back at him. She couldn’t believe Nick had agreed to a romance movie marathon with her, but she was ecstatic that he had!

As the couple exited the jeep and walked towards the house, they discussed what movie to start with and, by the time they’d reached the front door, Ana had convinced her boyfriend to give 10 Things I Hate About You a shot.

When they entered the house, though, all thoughts about movies fled. Something was off. It only took Ana a moment to realize what it was: Baby was supposed to be home today, so why was there no overly-excited five-year-old greeting them?

Nick, who’d initially been too busy removing his shoes to notice his girlfriend’s tense stance, looked up at her and frowned. “Is everything okay, Ana?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied, deciding that the best thing to do would be to check the main living areas before freaking out.

Then the sound of swords clanging together rang through the house and Ana’s eye’s widened. What in the world?

After a brief exchanged of worried looks, she and Nick rushed of, following the noise of fighting through the house to its source.

The sounds lead them to the family’s living room where a completely unexpected sight greeted them.

Aster and Jack were cuddled up on the couch, with Baby sitting by Jack’s side, watching The Princess Bride.

At least, they had been watching the movie, but Ana and Nick’s frantic charge into the room had drawn all eyes from the TV to the newly arrived duo.

For a moment, the only noise was the fight scene currently taking place on the screen, but then Jack said, “Hey guys, is everything okay?”

The question broke Ana out of her surprised stupor and she nodded lightly being asking, “What are you two doing?”

Now it was Aster’s turn to speak, sounding more than a little amused when he said, “Movie marathon. It is Valentine’s Day, after all.”

“You, but, I, huh?”

All three members of the couch where smiling now and Jack decided to explain before his boyfriend could have too much fun. “Aster told me about your tradition and I thought it sounded fun. Plus every restaurant in town is packed, so we were gonna make dinner here. Your mom said it was okay, especially since we offered to watch Baby for the night.”
Ana was still stunned, but Nick was smiling. “It seems like we all had the same plan.”

“Ana, were you gonna force Nick to take my place?” Aster asked while pretending to sound wounded.

“I thought you were gonna do something with Jack!”

“I am doing something with Jack!”

Now everyone was laughing, save for Baby who’s been confused by the teenager’s actions and had decided to just watch the movie instead of trying to figure them out.

When the laughter had died down, Jack said, “Hey, if we’re all having a movie marathon, we should see if Sandy wants to join us!”

Ana shrugged and grinned widely as she replied, “Why not? The more the merrier!”

The idea was agreed upon by all and Baby was left to watch the movie alone while Aster and Nick went off to pick up Sandy and the ingredients for a massive dinner. Seeing how there was no need for all four of them to go, Ana and Jack stayed behind to start the prep work for dinner and to make a few surprises of their own.

By the time the boys got back, warm mugs of tea and hot chocolate were waiting for them along with a pile of carrot cake muffins.

“Carrot cake?” Nick asked, looking sadly at the muffins while Aster happily stuffed his face.

Ana smiled and said, “Jack called dibs on making his treat first, but the chocolate chip cookies will be out shortly.”

Then her smile faded and she glanced at the clock on the wall, only just realizing how long she and Jack had been messing about in the kitchen. “What took you so long anyway?”

Sandy rolled his eyes at the question. If it hadn’t been for him, they would’ve taken even longer, but he didn’t need to offer any explanation, Aster and Nick’s reactions told their significant others everything.

“How long did you two spend fighting over what to get?” Ana asked while treating the duo to an annoyed frown.

“He wanted to get nothing but meat!” Aster exclaimed, pointing accusatorily at Nick, “Like he’d never even heard of a balanced meal!”

“That’s way better than your pasta lover’s idea! There’s no love there, only bland and tasteless noodles.”

“That’s what sauce is for!”

Ana and Jack exchanged amused glances before looking at Sandy. The smallest member of their little group just gave them a pained smile and shrugged.

After a few minutes, when it appeared that the argument wasn’t drawing to a close any time soon, Ana stepped between the bickering men and said, “Alright, next time I’m making you a shopping list! Now please tell me that you actually managed to buy something worth eating.”

“He wouldn’t give up on the meat idea,” Aster explained sullenly.
“And there was no way we were just getting noodles,” Nick added.

“So we let Sandy pick the food.”

Nick gave his Australian friend an amused look and said, “Well, if we’re being honest, it’s more like Sandy got the food while we were bickering.”

Aster glowered, but nodded in agreement before finishing with, “Long story short, we’re having tacos.”

Ana and Jack exchanged relieved smiles and then shooed their boyfriends out of the kitchen to go watch movies with Baby while they cooked. Though Aster and Nick were both decent chefs, it was clear that trying to get them to work together was probably a bad idea.

Sandy, on the other hand, was allowed to stay and even crowned head chef since the tacos had been his idea.

Dinner was prepared in short order and the couches in the living room were pushed to the sides to make a wide space for Ana to lay down blankets on. By the time the Romoli’s were leaving for their dinner party, the five teenagers and Baby were happily having an indoor picnic.

It hadn’t been the way the gang had planned to spend their Valentine’s Day, but it was perfect all the same, even if Aster and Nick fought over every movie choice.

Jack’s eyes shot open. He could feel a wetness streaking down his face that meant he must’ve been crying, but he couldn’t move to check. He was too terrified. His heart was pounding, his limbs were trembling, and the little piece of his brain that wasn’t racing in terror assured him that speaking aloud was not an option.

He wasn’t sure how long he laid there in silent terror before he was finally able to drag himself out of bed, but it felt like hours.

Instead of walking downstairs for tea like he usually did, though, he walked over to his window and stared out at the snow covered world. A light dusting of powder had fallen sometime over the night and the sight calmed him a little, though nowhere near enough.

After letting out a deep sigh, he turned around and looked at the suit hanging up against his closet, a sight that made him shiver.

What time was it, anyway?

5:34am according to his clock. Less than four hours to go…

How had the trial gotten here so fast?
Pitch leaned back in his seat and bit back a smile. Jack had just arrived with his little posy of do-gooders and he looked awful. How marvelous. It looked like his prediction had proved true, but there was nothing surprising about that. Jack had always been prone to bad dreams when stressed out.

As he relaxed and waited for the court to be called to order, Pitch idly wondered just what the albino’s nightmares had contained this time. Judging by the way Jack had flinched when he saw Pitch, the ebony-haired teen had a good idea of who’d had a starring role.

It was really too bad he couldn’t have actually been present for them. That would’ve been fun.

Oh well. At least it looked like it was time to get going. Excellent.

Aster tightly gripped the edges of his seat and gritted his teeth, watching in disbelief as Pitch spun a tale of lies to the court.

“The next thing I remember is waking up to those policemen knocking on our front door. Of course, I didn’t know it was the police at first. It was only when I got downstairs that I found out who was making all the fuss. That wasn’t what scared me, though. I only got scared when I saw Jack’s friend with them and then they said I was being accused of murder and I, I started to run away. I’m sorry. I was scared and frightened. I’d only just woken up and, well, no one makes the best choices while barely awake.” Pitch finished his statement with a sniffle and then rubbed his hand across his eyes as if brushing away tears.

Even from his seat in the back of the room, Aster could see that the jury was buying it. They looked totally taken in.

He tore his eyes away from the group of adults before he got too angry and glanced over at Ana. The blonde was holding onto Nick’s arm tightly and staring across the room with eyes full of worry and concern.

Aster didn’t even need to follow her gaze to know what she was looking at, but he did so anyway. Jack.

The albino looks so fragile right now, so weak and tired. They all knew Jack hadn’t been sleeping well, not that he’d told them, but it hadn’t been hard to guess. They’d all tried to ease his mind in their own way, but nothing had worked. They’d had to watch, helpless, as Jack once again grew fidgety and frightened. Aster didn’t know how could Jack possibly sway the jury given his current state, but he had to hope that there was a plan.

After all, the lawyer Jack had been working with had to know about the issue what with all the meetings they’d had over the last few days and he still looked confident.

They just had to have a plan!

Apparently it was time to find out, because the prosecution had just called their star witness to the stand.
Jack rose to his feet, shot his friends a final, terrified glance, and took the stand.

Pitch really wished someone was recording this. Watching Jack stammer and stutter his way through the testimony was priceless and it was such a pity that Pitch couldn’t truly enjoy it. Breaking out into laughter would, unfortunately, irreparably undermine his testimony.

Even his moronic lawyer seemed to be realizing this. The man had been practically downtrodden when the trial began, but now he was really getting into it! Firing off question after question at poor little Jack.

“And you claim that he locked you inside of the building with the key?”

“Well, well, yes, but…”

“The key that he picked from your pocket?”

“Yes?”

Pitch glanced behind him at the gang. The looks of dread on their faces just made this whole thing even more delicious.

By the time a trembling Jack retook his seat, Pitch’s lawyer had proved himself surprisingly competent. Even the buffoons in the audience had to have realized that only circumstantial evidence placed Pitch at the crime scene and that, if Pitch was innocent, Jack was guilty.

He could just hear the thoughts running through the jury’s head right now.

Did those stutters and trembles came from a fear of being caught in his crimes? Was Jack’s ridiculous story really true? What evidence did they have but his word?

Oh, this whole thing was delightfully fun! Pitch had never know being on trial was such a thrill.

Ah, and now it was time for the prosecution to call another witness, which they didn’t have, which meant that this little game was almost over.

When the insufferable man who called himself the prosecution stood up, though, Pitch’s good mood soured. Why did he look so confident?

Mr. Farley rose to his feet and marched onto the courtroom floor with a smile on his face. It was clear that everyone thought Pitch had won, but he hadn’t. Everything was going exactly as he’d expected. Even Jack’s abysmal testimony was playing into the plan. Now it was time for a little surprise, time to call forth the real star witness of this trial, but first he had to set the stage.

“What the defense has told you is true. The only individuals capable of starting that fire were Pitchford Black and Jackson Frost. Though we do know with absolute certainty that only one of these two boys started the fire, it is also true that Mr. Black’s presence at the crime scene is only established by circumstantial evidence. Should the defendant be found not-guilty, Jackson Frost will indeed be accused of the crime and stand trial. With that in mind, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, please pay the upmost attention to my next witness.”
Here he paused and turned towards the audience before saying, “The prosecution would like to call Dr. John Hutchinson to the stand.”

Pitch frowned, both at the lawyer’s confident tone and the strange witness. What was going on? He looked at his lawyer in confusion, but the man seemed just as lost. Not that it surprised Pitch, this fool was clearly useless if he didn’t even know about this surprise witness. Who in the world was John Hutchinson?

Apparently he was the balding man in a crisp, navy suit currently walking to the front of the room. Knowing that there was nothing he could do, Pitch sat back and waited to see what was going on.

Once the elderly man had taken his seat before the court, Mr. Farley began his examination.

“Dr. Hutchinson, you are a licensed psychiatrist, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And how long have you held that title?”

“Thirty-seven years next October.”

“Would you please inform the court of your professional credentials?”

Before Dr. Hutchinson could answer the question, Pitch’s lawyer called out, “Objection, your honor, what is the point of all of this?”

Once the question had been finished, the judge looked expectantly at Mr. Farley and said, “I assume there is a reason for this?”

“Indeed there is, Your Honor. I would argue that Dr. Hutchinson’s testimony is what will ultimately prove Mr. Black’s guilt.”

Clearly intrigued, the judge nodded and said, “Objection overruled, please continue Mr. Farley.”

Mr. Farley bowed lightly and said, “Thank you, Your Honor,” before turning back to the witness and continuing with his examination. “Returning to my previous query, Dr. Hutchinson, would you please inform the court of your professional credentials?”

The man assented and rattled off a rather impressive string of titles, apparently having served as some form of military psychiatrist for the majority of his career until he’d decided to pursue a quieter practice ten years ago.

Once he’d finished, Mr. Farley said, “So you’ve been working as a professional in Burgess for how many years now?”

“Ten years.”

“And, during that time, you were asked to perform a series of counseling sessions for a young boy who had just lost his parents in a fire, correct?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Could you please tell us the name of that boy and when this occurred?”

“The boy’s name was Jackson Nathaniel Frost and this happened roughly seven years ago.”
“The same Jackson Frost who earlier gave testimony to this court?”

“The very same,” Dr. Hutchinson replied with a smile that sent chills down Pitch’s spine. What was going on here?

On the court floor, Mr. Farley returned the Doctor’s smile and said, “Now, Dr. Hutchinson, as part of that counseling you diagnoses Jackson with a psychological condition, yes?”

Dr. Hutchinson smile turned sad as he nodded and said, “That is also correct.”

Mr. Farley could barely contain his glee. It was clear from the looks on the defense’s faces that they had no clue the bomb he was about to unleash. This was the kind-of case he loved, the reason why he’d gone into law, but he maintained his professional composure and continued with his questions. “Recently, you have undergone another series of sessions with Jackson at the request of this court. Did you find that diagnoses to still hold true?”

“I did indeed. In fact, the boy’s condition seems to have worsened.”

And here it was, the moment of triumph. There was no escape now. That little psycho would pay and Jack would finally rest easy. “Would you please inform the court as to the nature of that diagnosis?”

“Certainly. Seven years ago I concluded that Jackson suffered from a phobia due to the nature of his parent’s deaths. That diagnosis still holds true: Jackson Frost is pyrophobic. The boy can’t even go near a fire without suffering from mild paralysis. It’s my professional opinion that there is no way Jackson Frost could’ve set that fire.”
Chapter 39

Murmurs ran across the room, whispers of shock and confusion, but Pitch was too busy starting at Mr. Farley and Dr. Hutchinson to pay them any mind. Pyrophobic? He could’ve kicked himself. Of course Jack was pyrophobic. How had he never noticed it before? He prided himself on working out people’s greatest fears and yet he’d somehow missed this one. No wonder he could never get Jack to do anything with fire. How had he missed that pattern? He’d been an idiot and now it was going to cost him.

Pitch barely registered the scrapping sound as his lawyer got up to cross examine the witness, but it’d do no good. They’d been played and there was nothing they could do to save this. No, there was no way he’d win in a fair trial.

“Order! Order in the court!”

Pitch started and stared up at the judge, who was currently glaring around the courtroom.

“The audience is reminded that they are expected to be quiet during these proceedings and if they cannot do this, then they are kindly asked to leave this courtroom. Now, Mr. Brown, please resume your cross examination of the witness.”

Pitch’s lawyer bowed lightly and did so, but it was clear that he had no idea what to ask. What could he ask? Even Pitch couldn’t see a way to worm himself out of this one.

No, this trial was over. Jack had won.

The whole gang was grinning by the time that the judge dismissed the jury to their deliberations and adjourned the court for a recess. Their fears had vanished the moment Pitch had slumped in defeat and they’d spent the remainder of the trial trading happy looks and watching the psycho squirm in his seat.

Their gazes all swiveled away from Pitch when Jack rose to his feet, the first person in the room to do so. They couldn’t understand why he’d chosen to sit on his own, but it didn’t matter. Now was a time to celebrate! After all, the jury couldn’t take too long to reach a verdict and then… These thoughts and their grin’s disappeared when, instead of walking over to join them, Jack took one look at them and bolted from the courtroom.

After a moment of shocked silence, the gang got to their feet and hurried after him.

It was no good, though. By the time they reached the building’s entrance, Jack was long gone.

As they stood in the chilly, winter air and scanned the streets for any sign of him, Ana asked, “Where could he have gone?”

“The Rec Center?” Nick suggested, but Aster shook his head.

“Nah, he wouldn’t go there. If he doesn’t want to talk to us, there’s no way he wants to talk to Mr. Kaufmann.”

“Where else is there, though? It’s not exactly like he’s got a home in Burgess he can run to,” Ana
Aster’s eyes widened at her words and he took off down the street without another word. Ana called after him to wait, but it was no use and the gang didn’t even try to follow. None of them were anywhere near as fast as Aster.

Aster’s breaths were little more than short gasps by now and he knew he couldn’t keep up this speed for much longer, but he didn’t need to. Ahead of him say a familiar church on the edge of a sprawling cemetery.

Good, he’d remember the way here.

As he slowed down and took a chance to catch his breath, he began to scan the area for signs of his boyfriend. He’d been hoping to at least see Jack before this, but apparently the albino had gotten enough of a head start that even Aster’s speed wasn’t enough to catch him.

Either that or Aster had gotten it wrong and Jack wasn’t here.

He really hoped that wasn’t it because he didn’t think he could run much longer without a good break and he had no idea where else to look.

He needn’t have worried. He’d guessed right.

Before he’d even entered the cemetery he saw the familiar form of his boyfriend crouched on the ground before the Frost’s graves.

Now that he’d found Jack and he could stop worrying, Aster found himself starting to get mad. First Jack had tried to get them to let him go through the trial on his own. Then he’d refused to sit with them and now he’d run off when they should be celebrating. What was his problem?

Aster stalked through the cemetery with these thoughts racing through his head and, when Jack finally heard him and looked up, the Australian greeted his boyfriend was a loud, “What the bloody hell was that about?”

For a moment, Jack looked hurt, then indignation spread across his face as he rose to his feet and shouted, “Did you follow me just to yell at me?”

“No! I followed you because I was worried, you idiot!”

“Which is why you’re yelling at me?”

“You’re yelling, too!” Aster retorted, feeling his temper starting to boil.

“Only because you started it!”

The two teens glared at each other for a moment and then Aster spat out the words, “You do realize that you won the freaking trial, right?”

“Of course I realize that!”

“So why are you running away? What the hell is your problem?”

Jack groaned and ran a hand over his face before glaring at Aster and saying, “I didn’t ask you to
“Follow me.”

“No, I followed you because I’m your bloody boyfriend and I was bloody worried about you! What did you expect when you bolted from the courtroom like a bat outta hell?”

“I just wanted to be alone, okay?”

“Yeah, well, tough luck, Frostbite! With me around you’re never going to be alone!”

The comment made both boys’ anger evaporate instantly and Aster’s face turned crimson while Jack stared at him in shock.

Neither spoke for a long time and then Jack whispered, “Really?”

Aster’s face went even redder, but he nodded and said, “I mean, I’m not gonna follow you around all the time or anything like that, you can have your own space. I think we’d kill each other if we didn’t have time alone and it’d be weird if we did and…”

He let the sentence trail off before taking a deep breath and starting again. “I’m your boyfriend, okay? I’m bad at this whole emotions thing and clearly you’re not much better, but, well, you have to at least let me try, okay?”

Jack nodded, but he didn’t smile and Aster could feel the tension between them growing once more. Honestly, what in the world was Jack’s problem?

In spite of his quickly returning anger, Aster was able keep the annoyance from his voice as he said, “Frostbite, you won! That pyrophobia think was brilliant!”

Jack let out a harsh laugh and turned away to look down at his parent’s graves before replying. “Yeah, it’s great. I mean, I can’t even blow out candles on a freakin’ birthday cake, but at least it got me out of an arson charge!”

Suddenly, it all made sense.

Aster’s lips formed into a small ‘o’ and he felt like an idiot. No wonder Jack hadn’t wanted them to come to the trial! They were idiots and he was the biggest idiot of the bunch. “You didn’t want us to know, did you?”

Jack didn’t reply. He just stared at the ground and clenched his fists even tighter.

For a long while, all was silent. Then Aster said, “I’m terrified of dogs.”

Jack’s spun around to face his boyfriend as his eyes widened in shock. “What?”

Aster shrugged and looked over at the tree by the gravesite, unable to look Jack in the eyes as he explained the origins of his fear. “My uncle used to have this huge German Shepard. When I was two, we went over to visit and the dog attacked me.”
“It attacked you?” Jack interrupted, looking horrified and making Aster wince in embarrassment.

“Well, attacked is probably the wrong word. It really just knocked me over and started to lick my
face, but I was little and had no idea what was going on, so I freaked out and wouldn’t stop crying. My folks took me home and I refused to go back until the dog was gone. Apparently my uncle gave
it to some friends so that I’d be willing to go over there again.

“I don’t remember any of this, mind you. I only know about it from stories, but I’ve hated dogs for
as long as I can remember and that’s probably why.”

The boys exchanged small smiles and then Jack said, “Well, I guess that puts an end to my dream
of owning a greyhound someday.”

The comment made Aster glare at his boyfriend, but there was no fire behind the look and it
quickly faded to a grin followed by a question of, “So, do you actually wanna go back and see
Pitch get carted off to jail or would you rather we just head home?”

Jack grinned back and walked over so that they were standing mere inches apart. “I think I’d really
regret it if I didn’t see the end of this mess.”

The determination with which Jack said this was somewhat undermined by the large yawn that
followed the statement.

As Aster chuckled, Jack sheepishly added, “And then maybe a nap before we celebrate?”

“Sure thing, Frostbite,” Aster whispered before leaning down and pressing his lips to Jack’s.

When the brief kiss was over, Aster held out his hand, an offer Jack happily accepted as they began
the walk back to the courthouse.

As they walked, Jack asked, “So, do the others know about the dog thing?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” the artist replied with a grimace. “But, then again, we all know that Nick
can’t stand spiders and that Ana’s terrified of cavities.”

The second fact made Jack laughed out loud. “Cavities? Where did that one come from?”

Aster grinned at the welcome sound of Jack’s laughter and then answered the question. “You
know, I actually know the answer to that. She used to hate brushing her teeth and, well, you know
how her dad’s a dentist?”

Jack nodded.

“Apparently he used to show her pictures of horrible cavities and tell her that’s what would happen
to her teeth if she didn’t brush and floss.”

“That’s awful!” Jack cried, trying to sound appalled but failing miserably.

“Oh, you should’ve been there when we found out! We were watching a video on taking care of
your teeth in third grade and, but the end of it, Ana was hiding under her desk!”

Jack couldn’t hold back his amusement now and his laughter echoed through the chilly air.
By the time Jack and Aster got back to the courthouse and dealt with assuaging the gang’s concerns, the court was being called to session.

This time, Jack sat with his friends and held tight to Aster’s hand as the jury gave their verdict of “guilty on all charges.”

In the front of the room, Pitch slumped in his seat, barely listening as the judge pronounced his sentence of ten years in prison. He could hear his mother sobbing behind him, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was that, once again, Jack had beaten him.

Somehow he managed to stand up when the police officers came to get him and he didn’t even try to avoid letting them slap a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

As they lead him towards the courtroom’s exit, he glanced up and saw Aster Wilder pressing a kiss to Jack’s cheek.

Pitch’s despondence evaporated instantly, replaced with cold rage.

In his anger, he couldn’t resist stopping in front of the gang and glaring at Jack as he said, “I always knew you were pathetic, but this really takes the cake. They died years ago and you’re still scared of a little fire?”

The comment clearly shook the albino and he refused to meet Pitch’s amber eyes. The ebony-haired teen smirked, pleased that his last sight of Jack would be of the albino trembling in fear, as the officer at his side reached to grab his arm and guide him away. The man wasn’t fast enough. Before he’d had a chance to even touch Pitch, Aster had whirled around and punched the psycho in the face.
“Court mandated anger management? Can you believe that?”

Ana rolled her eyes and shot Aster a disbelieving look before returning her gaze to the glowing screen of her computer as she said, “I would hardly call the judge telling your mother to get you into counseling ‘court mandated anger management.’ It was little more than a suggestion.”

Aster’s scowl deepened as he ignored Ana and added, “I should be getting a medal!”

That comment made Ana scoff and look up from her laptop at the whiny Australian who was currently lounging on her bedroom floor. “They practically did give you a medal! Nothing’s going on your permanent records, they only held you until your mom got there, and they’re not even making you stand trial. You’re just lucky that Pitch doesn’t have the money to press charges.”

Aster sat up and stared at her, looking wounded. “You say that like he would’ve won!”

“You assaulted him!”

“Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t want to punch him, too!”

“Yes, but I didn’t because I don’t have anger management issues!”

“I don’t have anger issues!”

“Then why are you yelling?”

Aster glowered and was about to spit out an enraged retort when the door to Ana’s room swung open, revealing a very sleeping looking Jack.

At the sight of their drowsy friend, the arguing duo’s rage turned to shame and they began to wonder just how loudly they’d been shouting.

Too tired to notice their discomfort, Jack yawned and rubbed his eyes before asking, “What’s going on in here?”

“Nothing,” Ana replied far too quickly.

The unusual speed of her response failed to register with the sleepyhead as he blinked in confusion and said, “Then why was there loudness? No, wait, that’s the wrong word…”

Aster smiled softly at his sleepy boyfriend before saying, “Jack, you’re exhausted, why don’t you go back to bed?”

Jack shook his head and yawned again before slumping onto the ground by Aster’s side and snuggling up to his boyfriend. “No, worried ‘bout you. Mad Aster gets in trouble.”

After he’d recovered from the initial surprise of a very sleep-addled Jack latching onto his side, Aster kissed his boyfriend’s forehead and whispered, “I promise I won’t punch anyone, okay?”

Jack mumbled something that might have been a disagreement, but it was hard to tell and Aster
didn’t ask for clarification. He just waited silently until his exhausted boyfriend has fallen asleep.

He didn’t have to wait long, but that wasn’t surprising. Jack had only been asleep for an hour or so before they’d woken him with their argument.

Aster still felt guilty about the whole thing. After the trial, Jack should’ve gotten to take a nice, long nap. Instead, he’d been stuck freaking out at the police station while the officers decided whether or not to charge Aster with some form of assault. It was only sheer dumb luck that Jack had been with it enough remember that he knew a lawyer who might be able to help and to then call Mr. Kauffman and ask him for advice.

After Jack has spent a few minutes babbling, Ana had taken the phone away from him and calmly explained what had happened. Mr. Kauffman had come right away and pulled some strings to get Aster off the hook. By the time a very worried Mrs. Wilder arrived at the station, her son had been cleared of the charges and was free to go home. That hadn’t stopped the judge, who’d swung by on her lunch break, from advising that Aster get some counseling to deal with those anger issues.

Mrs. Wilder had taken the suggestion as if it were a real sentence and now Aster was looking at several meetings with Dr. Hutchinson in the coming weeks.

To say he was less than thrilled would’ve been an understatement.

Even worse, he knew that Ana was right and that he was incredibly lucky that Pitch would be too busy trying to get his own case appealed to even think about trying to press charges against Aster.

With a sigh, the artist buried his face in the snowy-white mane currently resting on his shoulder and whispered, “I’m sorry, Frostbite, just don’t have any nightmares on my account, okay?”

Ana, who’d been watching the exchanged with a mixture of amusement and worry, smiled softly and went back to working on her laptop. Now that the trial was over and all was right with the world, they really needed to start working on Easter plans. After all, the big day was just a little over a month away.

Jack stared at his boyfriend for a moment before saying, “Tai Chi?”

Aster nodded, looking uncharacteristically excited about the idea. “Yeah, Dr. Hutchinson told me it’d be a good way to learn focus and anger repression. There’s a studio in Burgess, too, so why not? It could be fun!”

“How in the world is learning to punch people supposed to help you control your anger?”

“It’s about learning how to focus your emotions.”

“What’s about learning how to focus emotions?” Ana asked as she reentered Aster’s bedroom with a plate of cookies.

“Aster’s taking karate lessons,” Jack deadpanned, making his boyfriend scowl.

“Tai Chi isn’t a form of karate! It’s a martial art.”

“There’s a difference?”

Before the two could really get going, Ana cut in with a, “Wait, what?”
“Dr. Hutchinson recommended that I look into joining that local Tai Chi studio. He thinks it’d help me learn to better control my emotions,” Aster explained.

“And I’m seriously questioning that man’s credentials,” Jack added.

“Actually, I agree with the good doctor,” Ana replied, surprising both boys. Then she set down the cookie plate and joined them on Aster’s bed before continuing. “I don’t know much about martial arts, but the little I do know shows that it’s all about learning focus and self-discipline. Plus it seems like the kind-of thing you’d like, Aster.”

The Australian looked pleased at his blonde companion’s comments and Jack looked thoughtful.

After a brief silence, the albino nodded his head and said, “I see your point.”

"Good, now can we focus on planning this egg hunt?"

Aster nodded and started to get out his notes while Jack said, "I take it Nick and Sandy won't be joining us?"

Ana sighed and glanced out of the window before saying, "Yeah, the snow's too heavy for Nick to drive here and I told Sandy to just stay home. I didn't want him walking that far in this blizzard."

"Eh, we don't really need them for this part anyway. All we're doing is going over the logistics. Heck, you didn't even need to come along, Frostbite."

The comment made Jack smile as he teasingly asked, "Oh, did you want me to go home then?"

"Not on your life," Aster replied while leaning over and pressing his lips to Jack's forehead.

Ana giggled and shook her head before starting to go through her notes with Aster as Jack flushed a light pink and reluctantly grabbed his book from where it was laying at his side. He was going to finish this stupid series if it was the last thing he did and then he was going to burn them because, really, this plot was starting to get on his last nerves.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, Jack's on book two of Cassandra Clair's Mortal Instrument series and he's seriously questioning his little sister's judgment at this point. Also, sorry about the posting delay, I've been traveling and can't write on planes without getting sick.
Chapter 41

Jack slammed the book closed with an excited cry of “I finished it!” startling Aster from his doodling and almost making Nick choke on his food.

When he looked up at his friends and saw their shocked stares, the albino’s grin lost its manic qualities, replacing them with embarrassment.

“Sorry, just excited that I’m done with the series.”

Aster shook his head in amusement and was about to reply when he noticed three girls come marching out of the lunch room, clearly searching for someone. He wouldn’t have cared much if he hadn’t seen the way their faces lit up in excitement the moment their eyes fell on the gang’s table.

The artist only had a second to mutter, “What the?” before they were upon them.

“Jack! There you are!” said the first girl, a blonde whose name was Marie? Mary? Aster couldn’t remember.

“We’ve been looking for you everywhere!” added her brunette friend whose name was Clara. At least, Aster was pretty sure that was it. He knew it started with a C or was it a K?

While Aster tried to remember their names, Jack paled and stared at the girls, looking like he wanted to turn invisible as he nervously said, “Oh?”

“Yeah, we wanted to know where you learned to do that! You took off so fast that we didn’t have a chance to ask,” concluded the final girl, another brunette named Erin? Erica? Aster had never been very good with names.

Jack didn’t reply out loud, he just smiled nervously and shot the gang a look that clearly meant, “help me!”

Ana did just that, cutting into the conversation with a quick, “What are you three going on about?”

“Gym class,” they chorused, baffling the gang even further as Jack slumped in his seat.

“Gym class?” Aster asked while glancing worriedly between his nervous boyfriend and the excited trio of females.

Realizing he was doomed, Jack groaned, hid his face in his hands, and muttered, “That’s the last time I let myself zone out.”

Before the girls could reply to that, Ana spoke once more. “Okay, could someone please tell us what’s going on here?

Erin or Erica grinned and said, “He did a split in gym class!”

While the rest of the gang exchanged puzzled looks, Sandy figured it out and started laughing.

Jack glanced up at the sound and looked over at his golden eyed friend with a glower. “Yeah, yuk
Sandy winked at Jack and continued to chuckle to himself at the mental image of what the girl’s faces must’ve looked like while the rest of the clueless gang tried to figure out what was going on.

Before things could get even more confusing, another girl came rushing out of the cafeteria and made a beeline for their table. The second she got there, she asked, “Jack, is it true that you can do a vertical split?”

Jack nodded helplessly and the new girl’s eyes began to sparkle. Without further ado, she leaned over so that her face was inches away from Jack’s and said, “So, how long have you been skating and are you any good?”

Jack leaned back, trying to reassert his personal space as he replied, “Since I was three and sort-of?”

The new girl grinned in delight and pulled back with a delighted cry of, “Excellent! How do you feel about partner based routines?”

“Wait a minute, back up, what’s going on here?” Ana asked as she stepped between the new girl and Jack. Her sudden movement startled everyone and Aster was left wondering when she’d stood up. He certainly hadn’t noticed.

Apparently the new girl hadn’t either, because it took her a few seconds to recover from her surprise and start talking again. “He did a vertical split in gym today and, well, you know what that means!”

“No, we don’t, so please explain,” Ana replied in the kind-of deadly calm voice she normally reserved for when she was truly angry.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t the new girl who answered this time, but Jack.

“Vertical splits are a hallmark of figure skaters. Gymnasts do them too, of course, but only a figure skater hears someone say “do a split” and immediately thinks of the vertical kind,” the albino explained in a flat voice before quickly adding, “Also, no.”

“No?” the girl cried, glanced at him over Ana’s shoulder and looking crestfallen. “But I haven’t even asked yet!”

“The answer’s still no, Katharine. I’m not good enough for what you’re scheming. I’ve barely touched the ice for seven years.”

“But you must have been practicing off ice. If you can still…”

“You think I’m at competition level after only doing off ice gymnastics?” Jack exclaimed in disbelief, cutting the girl off mid-sentence.

Katharine frowned and then said, “Why don’t you show me? Then I’ll tell you what I think.”

Jack groaned and looked over at Aster. “Tell her that we’ve got too much work to do for Easter.”

“Too much work for what?”

“For Jack to join the skating team,” Katharine explained. “We don’t have any guys on the team and, if Jack’s even a passible skater, that means we’d be able to enter the partner competition.”
“I don’t have the kind of upper body strength to lift someone,” Jack protested, but Katharine just rolled her eyes.

“It’s high school level, Jack, not the Olympics.” Then she reached over, grabbed Aster’s pencil out of his hands, and wrote down a number on the back of Jack’s bookmark before anyone else had time to register what was going on.

“Here, that’s my number. If you change your mind, we practice Mondays and Wednesdays. Now, come on girls, let’s leave these guys to their lunches.”

After a quick goodbye, the four females left the gang and headed back into the cafeteria. Silence ruled in their wake until Jack finally spoke up, giving his friend a forced smile as he asked, “So, who wants to hear about the book I just finished?”

Aster’s reply of, “We have a skating team?” was proof enough that the albino wasn’t getting out of this that easily.

Chapter End Notes

You know, Jack wasn't supposed to have to deal with a skating team until college. Apparently this story had other plans....
“No, seriously, since when did we have a skating team?” Aster asked again, making his boyfriend glare at him.

“And of course we have a skating team, just like we have a hockey team.”

Aster raised an eyebrow and said, “We have a hockey team, too? Well, aren’t we fancy?”

Jack started at his boyfriend as his glare faded to a look of shock. “Wait, you didn’t know we had a hockey team?”

All four of his friend shook their heads, but then Nick added, “I knew we had a baseball team, but not a hockey one.”

Jack couldn’t help laughing at that and, when he saw his friend’s puzzled expressions, he just laughed harder. When he finally caught his breath, he said, “We don’t have a baseball team!”

“We don’t? Then what’s the baseball diamond for?” Ana asked as Jack stared around at his friend with growing disbelief.

“You guys seriously don’t know this stuff?”

“Why would we, Frostbite? Have you ever heard any of us talk about sports?” Aster countered, looking amused as Jack slumped in his seat and considered the question.

After a short silence, the albino shrugged and said, “Fair enough. I only know about the different teams from reading the school paper.”

“We have a school paper?”

Ana’s question made Jack start and he turned towards her, ready to make some sort of scathing remark, but then he saw the way that everyone was grinning and the words died on his lips to be replaced with, “Very funny.”

The grins just grew wider and Sandy even started to giggle, but then Ana remembered what had started this little conversation and asked, “So, why don’t you want to join the skating team?”

Jack shrugged and ran a hand through his hair, looking decidedly uncomfortable as he said, “I don’t know, it’s just, skating’s about freedom. It’s not about landing just right or being at the right angle when you do Camel spin, it’s about having fun! Competitive skating cares about that stuff. I don’t know, maybe I could do free form skating, but partner skating? That’s really complex! I’d have no life off…”

“Frostbite,” Aster said, interrupting his boyfriend mid-rant, “we’re not gonna force you to join the skating team.”

Ana nodded and added, “A simple “I don’t want to” would’ve been enough, silly.”

Jack smiled sheepishly and said, “Oh, well, that good. Besides, if I was gonna spend all my free time working on something, it’d probably be learning how to deal with psychos trying to overpower me since I’d rather not go back to the hospital.”

He’d meant the comment as a joke, but he could see from the looks on his friends’ faces that it’d
just served to bring back bad memories. Only Aster seemed to have taken it well. Instead of wincing or looking upset, the artist looked pensive and an unusual gleam had taken root in his spring-green eyes.

At the others looked at him curiously, the Australian smiled and said, “Now there’s an idea.”

Ana looked up from her homework and grinned as Aster flopped down on the bed next to her and let out a low moan.

“I take it practice went well?”

The Australia ignored the question as he looked up at her and asked, “Did you know that Jack’s been doing **gymnastics** in his free time?”

Ana rolled her eyes. “Well, after seeing him skate, I figured that was probably the case. Didn’t you ever wonder why he’s so flexible?”

Then a thought struck her and she added, “Where is he, anyway?” before Aster could answer her first question.

“Getting me a drink.”

“What, too lazy to get your own?”

Aster glared up at her as he debated how to respond to that. He too tired for this. Tai Chi was **hard**.

He was saved from having to think up a witty retort when Jack entered the room with a glass of water and joined the duo on the bed.

Aster gazed up at the water hungrily, but Jack refused to give it to him until he sat up. With an exaggerated groan, Aster did so and then grabbed the glass from his boyfriend’s hand.

As the Australian gulped down the cool liquid, Ana asked Jack about his first practice, making the albino smile.

“It was great! Si-Fu Kaye is an amazing teacher.”

“I take it this means we’re going to have two kung-fu master’s?”

“Maybe,” Jack replied with a grin. “I’ll definitely keep at it until we head off to college at the very least. After that, well, we’ll see.”

“College, right, I keep forgetting about that with all the craziness going on as of late. Have you heard back from anywhere?”

Jack looked over at Aster, who was frowning, and said, “Sorry, Ana, I can’t tell you while he’s here.”

The blonde blinked in surprise and glance between her friends with a worried look. “Why not? Is something wrong?”

Aster finished his water and set the glass down on the bedside table with a sigh. “No, nothing’s wrong. It’s just that we agreed that we shouldn’t tell each other where we’re going or even where we’ve been accepted until we’ve both picked a place and accepted the offer.”
Jack nodded and smiled sadly as he added, “It was my idea so that we’d both choose what was best for our dreams instead of what let us stay together.”

“Together physically, that is,” Aster amended as he leaned over and kissed his boyfriend’s forehead.

When he pulled away and looked back at Ana, she’d steepled her fingers and adopted a pensive look. After about a minute of silence, she nodded and said, “That’s a fair point, but I don’t think that you two should be the only ones to do it. We all wanna stay together…”

“What are you suggesting,” Jack asked, though he already had a good idea where this was headed.

“I think we should all make a pact that none of us will tell anyone else where they’re going until we’ve all chosen a college and accepted the offer,” Ana explained firmly, though there was a sadness in her eyes.

The boys exchanged looks and then nodded.

After a deep breath, Ana forced herself to smile as she said, “Great. Let’s tell the others tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Yeah, good idea, tomorrow. You know what, it’s late, I, I should head home for dinner,” Aster replied absentmindedly as he got off the bed.

Jack rose with him and, after telling Ana that he’d be right back, he followed his boyfriend downstairs to the front door.

Once the boys had gone, Ana resumed working on her homework and tried to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

What if they all chose places miles away from each other? Wasn’t picking a college supposed to be fun? It certainly didn’t feel like it.
“Ana, is everything okay?”

Ana looked up from her dinner and smiled across the table at her worried boyfriend.

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

Nick smiled back. “Oh, okay… So why did I have to ask you that four times before you answered?”

The blonde winced, realizing she’d been caught, and flushed a light pink as she said, “Oops, sorry Nick.”

The burly teen shrugged. “It’s okay. If you don’t wanna talk about it…”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just that there’s nothing you or I can do about it, so it seemed a little silly to bring it up.”

“Can I ask what ‘it’ is?”

“Oops, sorry again.”

Nick nodded in acknowledgement of the apology and then waited for Ana to explain what was on her mind. He didn’t have to wait long.

“It’s this whole college thing. I mean, I was all excited about it and now…” Ana let the sentence trail off as she looked over at her boyfriend and gave him a half-heated smiled.

The smile made Nick’s heart clench so he reached across the table and took her delicate hand in his massive one before asking, “Are you worried about us?”

Ana thought about the question for a moment and then shook her head. “No, actually. I mean, we’re both pretty independent and prone to loosing ourselves in our work, so I don’t think distance will be that much of an issue for us. Not that I won’t miss you!”

Nick laughed and squeezed his girlfriend’s hand lightly, stopping her before she started spewing apologies. “No, it’s fine, I get it and you’re right. I mean, we’ve been dating for over a month now and this is only our second date.”

Ana laugh, looking a little embarrassed when she replied, “I didn’t even realize we’d only had one until Jack mentioned it.”

“Sandy was the one who pointed it out to me,” Nick admitted with a grin.

“Wanna bet that’s who mentioned it to Jack?”

“Probably, I think our golden-haired friend has caught some sort of matchmaker bug.”

“Well, he is pretty good at it.”

After another exchange of smiles, Nick said, “So, if we’re okay, what’s got you worried?”

“Jack and Aster.”
“Oh.”

“Yeah. You’ve seen what they’ve been like these past few weeks.”

“The whole glued-at-the-hip thing?”

Ana nodded. “You think it’s bad at school? Well, you should see them at home.”

Nick looked confused and Ana could tell what he was thinking, so she answered the unspoken question. “No, they’re not making out all the time or anything like that. They’re just… inseparable. They’ve gone out to dinner, what, like 6 times in the past two weeks? And they go to Tai Chi together and Aster visits the twins with Jack every weekend and Jack always does his homework at the Wilder’s and…”

“I see what you mean,” Nick agreed, cutting Ana off mid-rant. “You think they need to spend some time apart?”

“No, that’s not it either. They’re happy as it is, but it has made realize something.”

“What’s that?”

“You, me, Sandy, and even Aster aren’t like Jack. We like being off in our own spaces and just hanging out every now and then, but Jack? For all his loner tendencies, he’s not a loner.”

“You noticed that too, huh?”

Ana looked surprised. “When did you pick up on it?”

“When we were arranging the fair. No one who likes being alone volunteers themselves for the kind-of things Jack did. The rest of us have known each other for years and none of you ever offered to help me make something in the workshop, I’ve always had to ask. Not that I minded, I didn’t even think about it until Jack asked and I realized no one else ever had.”

Ana looked thoughtful as she slowly said, “Yeah, yeah, that’s true. No one else ever offered to help me with my planning, but he did and no else can stand to watch Aster paint for hours, but Jack loves it!”

Nick nodded. “I think he just likes feeling wanted.”

“Well can you blame him?”

“No, but do I think you’re worrying too much.”

“How so?” Ana asked, sounding surprised as she stared at her boyfriend in bewilderment.

“What’s Jack planning to study?”

Ana tried to remember and then shrugged when she realized that she didn’t know. “Now that I think about it, I never actually asked him. We’ve been avoiding the whole college thing, but I’m sure it’s got something to do with kids. Maybe teaching?”

Nick nodded in agreement. He couldn’t think of a better field for his frosty-eyed friend. “Okay, so let’s assume Jack’s gonna be going into education. What’s Aster going to school for?”

Ana didn’t even need to think about that one, having discussed the topic with her Australian friend many times during the summer when they were talking about where to apply. “Art with a dual
major in education since art based jobs are hard to find.”

“Exactly. Now, can you see either of those two going somewhere far away?”

Ana was puzzled again. “What’d you mean?”

“Think about it, those two are the most involved big brothers we know! Can you really see them picking schools that are far away from Sophie or the twins?”

“Oh. No, not really.”

“Okay, so we’ve got two homebodies who are both going into liberal fields. How likely is it that they’ll pick the same college?”

Ana was smiling now. “You know, you make an excellent point.”

Nick grinned back and winked at her. “Hey, I may not be good at that emotion stuff that you’re always going on about, but logic? I’m good with logic.”

“It’s a good thing you wanna be an engineer then.”

“Only because there’s no direct program to be industrial designer,” Nick replied with a shrug. Then he added, “I can’t wait to tell you what school I’m going to, though. They’ve got a great program for mechanical engineering and a lot of their students have interned for toy companies.”

“You already picked?” Ana asked, but she didn’t sound surprised.

Nick nodded. “Haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I have. Accepted the offer, too.”

The admission made the Christmas-lover smile and he grabbed his water glass off the table as he said, “A toast, then. To our future colleges, whatever they may be.”

“To us!” Ana agreed and she clinked her glass with his before taking a sip of the cool water while silently adding, and to Jack, Sandy, and Aster. Good luck with your choices, guys. I know you’ll pick well.
Chapter 44

Sandy hit the accept button and then leaned back in his chair. When he’s applied to colleges, he’d honestly expected to be going somewhere a lot further from home, but that was mostly because he’d never expected to get in there. CU had quite the selective screening process for their psychology majors, but it looked like he’d passed.

Well, now that he’d made his choice he could finally relax and stop making lists of pros and cons for different school.

With that happy thought in mind, Sandy grabbed his pile of lists and dumped them into his recycling bin. Then he glanced at the clock on his computer and blinked in surprise. It was that late already? Well, there’d be time to relax later. Right now he had a party to go to!

Ana slammed her back into the wall and looked over at Nick and Sandy. Both of her teammates were breathing heavily and the orange glow of their jackets showed that it had all been in vain. They were hit, down for the count for a whole minute.

Laughter echoed from across the room and she could just picture the smug looks on the enemy’s faces.

Once she caught her breath, she declared, “Okay, new rule, Jack and Aster are not allowed to be on the same team next round.”

The boys nodded in agreement and then Nick said, “Any ideas how to hit them? I’d like to end this round with at least one point.”

His teammates shrugged, looking hopeless, and Nick couldn’t allow that. They were going to get that point no matter what!

With a determined frown, he motioned for the others to gather close as he said, “Okay, okay, here’s the plan…”

Jack jumped over the barrier and landed next to his boyfriend while declaring, “All clear, commander! The enemy is on the run!”

Aster just laughed at his boyfriend’s antics and leaned over for a quick kiss. When he pulled away, he smiled at his still grinning teammate and said, “You’re crazy, you know that?”

Jack winked and then rose to his feet so that he could check over the barrier and make sure that the others weren’t in sight as he replied, “Yeah, yeah, I love you, too.”

The seconds the words left his lips, Jack froze. Then he gulped, slowly turned to face Aster again, and started stammering. “I, I, um, well…”

That was all Jack had time to say before Aster surged to his feet and cut off his boyfriend’s stutters with a kiss.

After he got over his momentary shock, Jack kissed back, letting go of his laser gun and throwing his arms around his boyfriend’s neck as Aster threaded his fingers through Jack’s hair and pressed their mouths together as tightly as possible. It actually hurt a little, but neither of them wanted to
When they finally pulled away from each other, they were both smiling and Aster opened his mouth to say something, only to be cut off by an electronic voice that said, “You have been hit.”

Both boys stared down at their jackets in surprise as Nick jumped from around the corner and triumphantly cried, “Got ya!”

When he saw the shocked looks on their faces, Nick’s grin just grew wider and he said, “Sorry, guys, you didn’t stand a chance against my ultimate plan.”

“Yeah, no, the plan worked because they weren’t paying attention,” Ana explained when she and Sandy left their hiding spot and came to join the little group just as the announcer came over the loudspeaker and declared that the round was over.

As the five teens started to head back towards the starting area, Ana looked over at Jack and Aster with a puzzled frown. “What happened, anyway? You do realize that you’re premature victory kiss cost you a perfect score, right?”

Neither boy spoke and, when she realized that they weren't going to answer the question, Ana rolled her eyes and added, “Oh, by the way, we’ve decided that you two aren’t allowed to team up again. You’ve had two near-perfect games in a row and that is more than enough.”

Aster and Jack exchanged slightly sheepish looks. It was true that they’d kind-of been dominating as a team.

Having reached a silent agreement with his boyfriend, Aster looked back at Ana and said, “Fine, you and Jack can switch places, Ana.”

The proposal was agree to by everyone and so Jack and Ana exchanged jackets, then the two teams set off into the arena for round three.

Aster and Ana finally found a good hiding place just as the countdown began over the loudspeaker. They took their positions as the electronic voice said ‘four,’ were ready for a fight by the time the voice said ‘two,’ and then, right as the announcer said ‘one,’ Aster’s eyes widened and he practically shouted, “Oh, crap, I never said it back!”

Ana glanced over at him as a look of pure confusion spread across her face and she couldn’t help but ask, “What?”

Aster’s eyes were wide as dinner plates when he replied, “I never said it back! I just kissed him and that’s not the same!”

“Said what?”

“That I love him, too.”

After taking a moment to process what Aster had just implied, Ana’s face became a mask of horror. “Wait, Jack told you that he loved you and you didn’t say it back?”

“No, I didn’t!” Aster cried, looking a little desperate.

Ana gulped, this could be bad. “Did he notice that you didn’t say it back?”
Jack tried to pay attention to the announcer’s voice as it began the countdown, but he couldn’t seem to concentrate. All he could think about was that Aster hadn’t said it too, but that was because Nick had shown up, right? Right? …what if it wasn’t right?

Sandy, who’d been busily watching for the enemy, glanced over at Jack and then didn’t look away. Instead, he nudged Nick and pointed towards their white-haired teammate.

When he saw how awful Jack looked, Nick’s eyes widened and he immediately moved over to stand by the albino’s and ask, “Jack, are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You’re hyperventilating.”

“Oh, am I?” Jack asked, sounding a little breathless. “Well, it’s fine, don’t worry.”

Nick shook his head and said, “Yeah, it’s a little late for that. What’s wrong?”

Realizing that there was no way out of this; Jack took a deep breath and told them what had happened.

“So we just have to find Jack and then you can tell him and everything will be okay, alright?”

Aster nodded, but he still looked totally freaked and Ana was slightly worried about her Australian friend’s ability to speak, let alone his ability to make declarations of love.

“Or you could just tell him late when you’ve had time to calm down a bit?”

“No! I have to tell him now! What if he thinks that I don’t…”

Aster’s third freak-out was cut short when Ana slapped a hand over his mouth and glared at him.

“Yes, I get it, okay? Let’s go find your boyfriend.”

Jack was leaning against the wall where he’d demanded Sandy and Nick leave him. The older boys had wanted to stay, but Jack had insisted that he was fine and that he really didn’t want Aster to worry, so the best thing for them to do was to go out and play the game so that Aster didn’t realize that something was wrong.

That plan would’ve worked out a lot better if Aster hadn’t come rushing around the corner less than a minute later.

The two boys’ eyes locked and Jack immediately rose to his feet while giving his boyfriend what he hoped was a dazzling smile.

He was just about to grab his gun and do his best to pretend everything was okay when Aster surged forward, wrapped his arms around Jack’s thin frame, and whispered, “I love you, too.”

For a moment, Jack felt like he couldn’t breathe, but he somehow managed to say, “What?”

“I realized I didn’t say it back and…”

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t,” Jack said, cutting his boyfriend off mid-sentence as he tried to pull away, but Aster just held on tighter.
“But I do.”

Ana glanced over the wall to where Jack and Aster were caught up in a tight embrace and sighed before looking over at Sandy and Nick. “Remember when we were supposed to be playing laser tag?”

Sandy shrugged and gave her a pointed look that made Ana smile. “Yeah, okay, this is better than laser tag.”

Nick nodded and added, “Besides, we wanted it to be memorable and I don’t think Aster will be forgetting this birthday for a long time.”
Chapter 45

Jack looked out over the field where the kids were busily collecting eggs and smiled while trying desperately to keep his mind off of what was coming afterwards: they were going to tell each other their college choices.

Apparently he wasn’t doing too good a job because a little voice asked, “Jack, are you okay?”

Forcing his lips into his most winning smile, Jack leaned down to Baby’s level and said, “I’m fine, Baby, just thinking about stuff.”

Then he looked into her basket and gasped. “Wow, look how many eggs you found!”

The little girl giggled and grinned in delight. “Yeah! I found eight!”

“Well then, let’s see if we can make it ten!”

Baby enthusiastically agreed and dragged Jack off to help her with her search.

Across the field from Jack and Baby, Aster was busily fiddling with his Easter present from Pippa Bennett and counting down the minutes until the hunt was over.

When Ana took a break from taking pictures and noticed her friend’s frown, she rolled her eyes and said, “Oh, don’t look so dower, Aster. They’re cute!”

“Oh goody, I look cute, that’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” Aster replied as he looked out across the field and tried to gauge how many eggs were left.

As he looked, he saw her, the little devil who’d given him this burden, marching across the field with her posy of evil. Aster glared at his nemesis, making her grin as she came to a halt before Aster and said, “We wanna take a picture with the Easter Bunny!”

Aster’s glare transformed to a glower. “I told you, no pictures.”

Pippa widened her eyes and her lower lip began to tremble. “But, but I spent my Christmas money to buy you that gift and now you won’t even let me get a picture with you?”

Aster tried to remain stoic as the little girl’s eyes began to water, but he couldn’t do it. “Oh alright, fine, one picture.”

“What you, Aster!” Pippa cried, hugging him around his stomach and motioning for her friends to gather around while a giggling Ana took a picture of the group.

As the kids rushed away to continue with their egg hunt, Ana looked at her Australian friend and said, “I’m impressed.”

Aster sighed. “Yeah, well, I didn’t wanna let them down on Easter.”
“No, not with you, with Pippa. I don’t even think Jack could’ve gotten you to take a picture with those ridiculous rabbit ears on, but she did. Kudos to her!”

Aster didn’t know what to say to that, so he just glared at his now laughing friend until the rest of the gang joined them to inform them that all the eggs had been found. The hunt was over.

Aster put the last basket on the shelf and then turned to face the others. “Okay guys, the kids are gone and cleanup’s done. You know what that means.”

The others nodded and Aster began the countdown, “Five, four, three, two, one…."

As soon as that last number left his lips, five voices chorused “Curator University.”

There was a moment of silence as the gang looked at each other and then Ana said, “Wait, what?”

“You mean to tell me that we all picked them same place?” Jack asked, staring around the group in disbelief.

As the surprise started to wear off, the gang began to smile. Nick was positively beaming when he said, “Well, it is one of the most prestigious universities in New England!”

“Not to mention the only good art school that’s close to home,” Aster added as he winked at Ana. “I shoulda known you’d be headed there, too.”

“Wait, art?” Jack asked with a puzzled frown. “You’re going into art?”

“Well, kind-of. I guess fashion design counts as an art.”

“Fashion design,” Jack exclaimed, looking a little embarrassed as he added, “How did I not realize that after you made me that stunning Halloween outfit?”

“Speaking of that outfit, thank you very much for inspiring it! I’m pretty sure it was the piece that sealed my acceptance.”

“You used it in your application?”

Ana nodded and Jack blushed, but he looked quite pleased.

Then Nick said, “I just didn’t realize CU had a good education program.”

“Education?” Jack asked, then he made a little noise of understanding and said, “Oh, Aster’s dual major, right!”

But the Australian was shaking his head. “No, their education program is actually pretty mediocre and I’m actually thinking about just sticking to my BFA.”

Now it was Nick’s turn to look puzzled. “But, if they don’t have a good education program, why are you going there, Jack?”

Jack blinked in surprise and then said, “Education? Me? I don’t wanna be a teacher!”

“You don’t?” Ana and Nick asked in chorus, earning looks of amusement from the other three.

“No, I don’t,” Jack replied with a smile as Aster took hold of his hand and gave it a reaffirming squeeze.
Jack squeezed back and said, “I guess I only talked about it with Aster and Sandy, but I’m gonna be a social worker. Well, that’s the plan, anyway.”

“Oh, like you won’t be amazing at it,” Ana said sarcastically before smiling and adding, “I can’t think of a better job for you.”

For a moment, all with happy silence as the gang traded grins, but then Jack said, “I just can’t believe we all worried about this for nothing!”

Nick shrugged. “Hey, at least we can only blame ourselves if we don’t like it there.”

“Don’t like it?” Ana asked with a mock gasp. “With the five of us around, there’s no place that we can’t make feel like home.”

As the others laughed, Aster leaned over and kissed Jack’s forehead before saying, “Since my best friend’s coming with me, I guess I don’t have to look for a roommate, huh?”

Jack smiled up at his boyfriend, but then Ana spoke, drawing everyone’s attention, “Sorry Aster, I don’t think they let girls live in the boys dorm. So, thanks for the offer, but I think you’ll just have to live with Jack.”

As the others began to laugh, Aster rolled his eyes and said, “Oh great, four more years of this! Exactly what I’ve always wanted.”

While Ana stuck her tongue out at him, Nick grinned and declared, “Four more years? Aster, you’re stuck with us for life!”

Chapter End Notes

I couldn’t send just one or two of them to a school with that name, now could I? (For those who don’t get it, Curator is Guardian in Latin. Curator University = Guardian University.)
Jack pushed open the door to the studio and stepped inside. It looked like class was already done for the day since only a few of the highest ranking students were still there, working on their sparing from the look of it. As the door closed behind him, the small group stopped practicing and turned to greet their Si-fu's husband.

After a quick exchange of pleasantries, one of the older teens asked, "Do you wanna join us, Mr. Frost?"

"We'd be happy to teach you the basics!" one of the other students added with a grin.

Jack simply smiled back and said, "Maybe next time. Is your Si-fu in his office?"

The students nodded and Jack passed through the training area before entering the back office where he found his husband sitting on the floor, curled into the lotus position, clearly deep in personal meditation.

Instead of breaking Aster's concentration, Jack took a seat across from him and mirrored his husband's position as he waited for the Australian to finish.

It didn't take long and soon spring-green eyes were looking at him with amusement as a deep, accented voice said, "You know, one of these days you're gonna have to tell those ankle bitters that you outrank all of 'em."

Jack shrugged. "It doesn't bother me and it clearly doesn't bother you or else you would've told them."

"Yeah, well, that was before you got promoted."

Jack let out a short laugh and then said, "It's not like being the association's staves master changes anything. I didn't even go up in rank."

"I still think you should tell 'em," Aster repeated as he got to his feet and held out a hand to his husband.

Jack took the offered hand with a smile and said, "You just wanna brag."

Aster pulled his husband to his feet and said, "Damn straight I do and your humbleness is depriving me of that privilege."

Jack's smile grew even brighter and he pressed a light kiss to his husband's lips before saying, "Why don't you stick to bragging about your own titles, oh Master of Throwing Weaponry."

Aster frowned. "See, now, that just doesn't sound anywhere near as cool as Master of Staves."

Jack rolled his eyes at the complaint. "Might I remind you that you're the one who insisted that "Master of Throwing Knives" was too limited a title?"
"Well it is," Aster countered. "I don't just work with knives."

"Mhmm, but they are your main choice."

"Only 'cause you need a lot of space to use a boomerang!"

Jack laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, yeah, come on Si-fu Wilder, let's go say good-bye to your students and head home."

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**Author's Final Note**: …where the heck did this story come from? I don't even ship Jaster (jackrabbit, snowbunny, whatever)!

Jack and Aster didn't seem to care about that little fact, though. As I'm sure many of you know, characters have a mind of their own and such was the case here. The two boys kept telling me that this is what they wanted, so I decided that I might as well write it.

The initial plan was to write a short story that would function as a final chapter to For The Kids, but then I realized I really ought to do something where we actually got to see the boy's feelings develop, plus I wanted to see Pitch's trial and so this was born! Ta-da! (Why is it so long…) I know FTK was the better story, but this one was still fun to write and it seemed like a lot of you enjoyed it, too!

Now, on to other things I feel like talking about!

**Sequel?**

Yes and no. I don't think there's another full story to write here, there's just nothing in the gang's future or past that warrants a full story like FTK or T&T (thus the mini-essays on each character included below), but there are still stories to be told. The sequel to all of this (which I've already started and published) will be a collection of short stories called "For the Memories." These stories will be whatever I come up with or whatever you guys want to hear. I'm very open to suggestions and will write anything that I feel has potential. T&T will probably get a final edit like FTK did at some point, but I've no idea when.

**The Legal Stuff**

I did take some creative license here simply because the law is complex and weird so it's hard to research. However, it's mostly factual. Just because Aster punched Pitch doesn't mean he'd really face jail time. Pitch would have to sue Aster for that to happen since it was a personal crime and Pitch doesn't have the money to do that (even if he did, Aster would probably get off with little more than a fine if he was found guilty, especially since he waa a minor). Pitch's jail sentence is also pretty factual. The level of arson he committed would only get him a year max, but since he also had aggravated assault charges, that netted him a few more years. He didn't actually try to kill Jack, so there was no attempted murder charge. It sucks, but I wanted to sentence to be realistic.

**Foster Care/The Overlands**

There are a lot of Foster parents like the Overlands. People who think they're going to be giving a home to a fun and happy child, but wind up with a kid who has major issues and then don't know what to do. The Overlands decided that Jack was too mentally messed up to punish and, well, over time it just got to be that he was more of a tenant than a son.

**Jack's Character**
Jack is, by forced habit, a loner in both stories. That doesn't just go away. Sure, he has friends now, but he's still not used to the idea that they're here to help him or that he can go to them for help. Jack also is very quick to take blame for things. If you watch the scene right after Pitch lures Jack away, when the Guardian's think that Jack has betrayed them, Jack barely defends himself. He's very quick to think that everything is his fault.

Jack is also acting a lot less happy go lucky in this story, but that's got a two-fold reason. First off, he is slightly more comfortable around his new friends, so he isn't hiding his emotions as much as he used to. Secondly, a lot of the depressed scenes occur when Jack is alone or thinking to himself. Think of the Jack we see just briefly in the movie, the one in Pitch's layer who is terrified and freaking out. This story takes the idea of how Jack acts in that scene and uses it to try and create how Jack would be when plagued with night mares/terrors. Jack never loses his center, though. Even terror stricken or sad, fun is still his core. He's amazingly strong given what he's dealing with.

Aster's Character

I really tried to make Aster's center shine here. Sure, he's gruff on the outside, but he's still an incredibly hopeful person who cares deeply for those he loves. Hope is often something we hide, secret hopes, thus Aster's shy nature when it comes to sharing things about himself. I also tried to makes his thoughts very jumpy and quick, like a bunny.

Ana's Character

While Aster's loves Easter and Nick loves Christmas, these aspects are just a part of their characters, extensions of the boys' personalities more than anything else. Tooth's love of teeth, on the other hand, has nothing to do with her personality or center. It's simply because she's the tooth fairy and teeth contain memories, but under that we see a woman who's driven and passionate with a love of multi-tasking to the extreme! I originally considered making Ana want to be a dentist, but I just didn't feel that it fit the personality of the character I'd created. She does actually develop a love of teeth later on due to a very interesting series of events, but that's a story for another day.

Also, a minor note on Tooth's center: while tooth is the guardian of memories, I've never considered that to be her center. Memories isn't really a personality trait like hope, fun, or wonder, thus I've always considered Tooth's center to be innocence. She protects 'the most important memories of childhood,' memories of innocence. That doesn't mean Tooth is harmless and childlike, it just means that she always sees the best in the world. That's my head cannon, deal with it.

Btw, fun fact, Tooth's name in the books is Toothiana. Can you guess where Ana's name came from?

Pitch's Character

If you watch the DVD commentary for the film (yes, I'm that nerdy) Patrick Ramsey says "that's how fear works, it seduces you into thinking that it makes sense and that it's best for you" in reference to Pitch and that's the idea I rolled with for both stories. I know several people felt that Pitch didn't have a strong motivation and that he was just evil for evil's sake, but I was going with the idea that fear is Pitch's core and spreading fear is what would drive him. His motivations in the film are his hatred of the Guardians and wish to be believed in. His motivation here is his hatred of the gang and wish to control people.

Nick's Character

Nick and Sandy are more of a supporting cast in this while Ana, Aster, and Jack take main stage,
but that doesn't mean that I didn't think about these two, though I don't have a ton to say on them.

North is a man of action, not emotions, though he does care for his friends and is willing to be there for them whenever they need him. He tends to steam roll over other people's statements when he's excited. Thus the idea that Nick would be a little oblivious when it came to more delicate feelings like crushes and romance, but good at motivating people and making them feel cared for.

**Sandy's Character**

I view Tooth's center as innocence, I view Sandy's center as imagination/inspiration. Dreams inspire us, Sandy inspires his friends to do things that they wouldn't otherwise do. It fits. The other thing I should comment on here is "can Sandy talk?" Yes, he can. Sandy *does* talk in the books and none of the media about RotG ever said Sandy was mute, it just said that he chose not to speak to avoid waking sleeping people.

The same is true here. Sandy can speak, but his mother has chronic migraines and his father's works the night shift at the local hospital. This meant that Sandy learned to be very quiet at all times as a child. In fact, he and his father have even developed their own special signs so that they can communicate without speaking when his mother is having an episode. Due to this, Sandy's most comfortable communicating without speaking and he's quite good at it, so he just doesn't talk unless he feels that he has to.

And that's everything! Happy (Belated) New Year everybody!

~Miki
Appendix I: Timeline

Timeline

2001

April 6 – Aster moves to the US

April 14 – Aster Meets Gang (Age 6)

2013

December 31 to January 1 = Wilder's New Year's Eve party

January 3 – School restarts

January 7 – Ana and Aster Fight/Jack gets call about trial

January 8 – Ana steals Aster's seat

January 12 – Trip to Burgess/Jack Freaks out

January 13 – Shopping trip #1

January 14 – Outfit reveal

January 16 – Jack's Testimony Taken

January 19 – Cleaning out Shed

January 24 – Jack has a nightmare at lunch/Sandy starts to research

January 26 – Australia Day

January 30 – Jack realizes he's got a crush

January 31 – Jack starts avoiding Aster

February 1 – FINALLY (Jack and Aster get together)

February 2 – First Date

February 3 – Shopping with the Twins/Jack Moves out

February 4 – Gang decorates Jack's room

February 5 – Nick asks Ana out/Jack's first pre-trial meeting

February 5/6 – Jack has another nightmare

February 8 – Nick and Ana's First Date/truth about Christmas 2011 comes out

February 9 – Taking Sophie and the twins skating

February 10 – Nick and Sandy learn truth about Christmas 2011
February 13 - Second pre-trial meeting

February 14 – Valentine's Day

February 20 – Trial

February 25 – Aster's first counseling session

February 26 – Aster tells Jack about Tai Chi/Snowday

February 28 – Jack does a vertical split in gym

March 5 – Jack's first Tai Chi class

March 6 – Silence pact

March 16 – Ana and Nick's 2nd date

March 21 – Aster's Birthday

March 30 – Easter Egg Hunt, Gang decides on colleges
Appendix II: 2025 Character Bios

These profiles are essentially a glimpse of where the gang ends up right around 2025. Aster's 30, Jack's 30, Ana's 30, Sandy's 31, Nick's 31, and Pitch's 31.

Jackson Wilder-Frost

Spouse: Aster Wilder-Frost

Job(s): Social Worker and Children's Book Author

Children: None (yet)

Jack and his husband live in Burgess where Jack works as a social worker for the local area and spends his free time writing children's books and teaching ice-skating at the rec-center. While the two live close to the town that they grew up in, they've both developed a bit of a wanderlust and use the money from Jack's books to travel the globe. Their goal is to visit a new country every year.

Aster Wilder-Frost

Spouse: Jackson Wilder-Frost

Job(s): Freelance Artist and Tai Chi instructor

Children: None (yet)

Aster and his husband live in Burgess where Aster spends his days working on art commissions in their apartment. In the early days he was mostly doing small stuff for local companies, but then he started to illustrate Jack's books and a lot of people liked his style. He now spends nearly all of his time illustrating children's books, but he does make the odd exception for Ana when she needs something special for her business' website.

After college, Aster also started to work as an assistant instructor at his old Tai Chi studio. He got the shock of his life when his Master retired and passed the studio over to Aster's care in 2024.

As a side note, Aster tried out boomerang throwing when he and Jack went to Australia on their honeymoon. It turned out that he was pretty good at it, so he started learning how to use other throwing weaponry. Jack picked up staves because he wanted to learn how to block projectiles.

Ana St. North

Spouse: Nicholas St. North

Job(s): Fashion designer

Children: Tiana Rose (adopted) age 5, Kristopher Michael (adopted) age 6, and Holly Marie age 5

Ana and her husband live about two hours away from Burgess due to Nick's job, but are frequent visitors. Following college, Ana worked as a seamstress for a wedding boutique, but decided she wanted more freedom and left the boutique to start her own home business when she got pregnant.
with Holly. The business is marginally successful with most of her work being alterations to wedding dresses, business suits, and the like. However, in recent years, her children's Halloween costumes are growing quite popular and starting to take up more of her time, much to her delight as she was worried she'd be bored when her two youngest entered kindergarten.

Nicholas St. North

Spouse: Ana St. North

Job(s): Toy designer

Children: Tiana Rose (adopted) age 5, Kristopher Michael (adopted) age 6, and Holly Marie age 5

Nick works fulltime as one of the head toy designers for a small company in Maine. He loves the freedom his work gives him and has come up with many interesting and popular toys. Following the birth of his daughter, he and Ana had a long talk about what they wanted for future children. They both agreed that they wanted a large family, but that there were far too many kids out there who needed home for them to feel right having more than one child of their own. Thus they adopted two children, a little boy from Russia and a little girl from Australia, much to Aster's amusement. Jack and Aster are the girl's godfather's and Sandy is Kristopher's godfather.

Sanderson Mansnoozie

Spouse: Unmarried

Job(s): Child Psychologist

Children: None

Sandy lives and works in Burgess as a Psychologist, but his specialty is dealing with children, especially those suffering from nightmares and night terrors. He is Jack's go-to recommendation for children in need of counseling.

While Sandy has dated a few women over the years, he only recently started to date someone very seriously, a young woman named Katherine who works at the local greenhouse. Ana and Aster have a bet going as to when Sandy's going to propose. Unfortunately for them, he knows this and is going to propose in the exact center so that neither one of them wins.

Pitchford Black

Spouse: Unmarried

Job(s): Factory Worker

Children: None

Pitch was released from prison about 2 years ago and is currently working to get his life back on track by going to a community college. He lives in the Midwest and has no plans to ever return to Burgess. Hopefully those plans never change.

Bonus! Sandy's Girlfriend's Bio!
Katherine Kozmotis (aka Kitty)

Height: 4'11"

Eyes: Dark Green

Hair: black hair that she wears loose and wavy when she's not working

Skin tone: Tan (think stereotypical latino)

Favorite Color: Tropic colors

Normal Outfit: Kitty loves casual, sun-dresses, so those are her go to when she's not at work. In the winter, she wears skirts, leggings, and warm sweaters.

Favorite Sport: Does gardening count? No? Okay, then I pick swimming!

Birthday: June 21st 1998

Talents: Gardening

Fun Fact: Katherine is a very quiet person, as is her boyfriend. A lot of their time together is spent in comfortable silences, but they like it that way.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!