

Two Years Gone Novel

Chapter 21

ZANE

A small smile spread on my face as I watched her float in the water with her eyes closed. She really was a beautiful person, and I felt horrible for not letting myself see it before.

I looked down at her, her white soaked shirt clinging to her body. I hadn't planned to jump into the water, only to hike down here for the view and have a picnic, but I couldn't help jumping in. She surprised me when she jumped in as well. I could feel my wolf fighting to get through, pacing in my head as we beheld the gorgeous figure in front of us.

I inhaled deeply and looked up to see Ella's eyes had opened.

"Can I help you?" she teased.

Please don't tempt me, I thought to myself.

"Just glad to see you so relaxed. You work too hard," I teased, my words dripping with meaning.

"Hmm." She smiled and closed her eyes. We swam in the lake, splashing and having some fun before making our way back to the dock.

I followed Ella up the ladder, trying to keep my eyes on anything but her wet form.

We sat down on the picnic blanket on the edge of the dock, letting the sun dry us. I laughed when I heard her stomach rumble.

"Hungry?"

"Mhm."

I turned around and unzipped my backpack, revealing two turkey club sandwiches and some lemonade. I handed one to Ella, and we ate in silence, enjoying the quiet of the lake.

"You could change it, you know."

My head perked up to Ella, who was still facing the water.

“Change what?”

Ella turned to me.

“The way the omegas are treated.”

I tried to hide a scowl.

“That’s not really your business.”

Ella turned to face the water again.

“You say I work too much, but it’s a job I’ve been given, a job I’m required by my status to do. This is my first real time off in almost eight years.”

I looked at her in shock, unable to find words.

“My mom hasn’t had a day off in almost twenty. Except for the occasional sick day.”

I faced the water again, not knowing how to respond. I felt a warmth on my hand and looked down to see Ella’s hand on mine. It felt good, too good. I looked up to meet her eyes as she spoke.

“I’m not saying this to complain or make you feel bad. I’m just saying that as alpha-to-be, you have the power to change it.

“Your dad is a good man, but I don’t think he actually knows what we have to do every day. All the omegas in this pack are treated as though they are slaves.

“The only respect we’ve ever been shown is from your father, and I’m grateful for that. But it doesn’t have to stay this way. It’s all just tradition.

“Like I said, I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I’m just saying that if you want me to have more time, then you’ll have to make changes.

“Because I’m not going to shirk my responsibilities or make anyone else work harder because I want a day off.”

Ella smiled at me, and I knew what I had to do.

I leaned forward and kissed her lips softly, inhaling her scent before pulling away.

“Thank you for telling me that. I didn’t know,” I smiled as I watched Ella’s cheeks blush.

She looked out at the water again and let out a deep breath.

“We should probably head back. I should help with lunch.”

I groaned, not wanting to leave. I was enjoying this time with her. She had definitely given me something to think about.

I stood and packed up our things. We made the hike home, and I knew I didn’t want this day to end.

When we reached the edge of the woods near the pack house, I grabbed Ella and pulled her close. I felt her inhale sharply, and her hands that were now resting on my chest sent tingles through me.

“Can we just not go home?”

Ella laughed.

“I don’t think an alpha can just disappear.”

I kissed her nose, and she squished her face in response before pushing away from me. She was beautiful and adorable.

We walked back to the pack house, not knowing that we had an angry audience to our intimate little moment.

Ella turned around and gave me a warm smile before entering her room and leaving me in the hallway, my heart dancing in my chest.

“Well, damn.” I ran my fingers through my hair and attempted to collect myself.

I took a quick shower and made my way downstairs and into the pack offices. I tapped on the door before entering.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?” My dad looked up from his files and smiled.

“Zane! What’s up?”

“Do you have a minute? I need to talk to you about something.”

. . .

I rushed out of the pack house and to my car. My meeting with my dad had run longer than expected, and I needed to hurry if I was going to make it home before dinner.

I drove the twenty-five minutes to town and stopped at the mall.

When I had seen her old T-shirts and the fact that she didn't have more than an old pair of running shoes for hiking, I made up my mind to surprise her.

I wandered the mall for a few hours, grabbing everything I thought a girl would need. When I returned home, I snuck upstairs and into her room, hoping she wouldn't catch me.

I walked into her closet and sorted all the things I had bought for her.

I hoped she wouldn't be upset and that she would see how much I had wanted to spoil her. She deserved it, especially after having to deal with me and my ridiculous ability to mess up all too often.

I smiled as I looked at the closet that was now full and made my way back downstairs.

Chapter 22

ELLA

I leaned against the door to my room and exhaled. Today had been amazing. Zane had been amazing.

"No," I shook my head and walked across the room. I still had my reservations. I hadn't forgotten what he had done, how he had made me feel—even within the last week.

I could feel my wolf pacing as well. Maybe he really is changing. Maybe he...wants us, my wolf spoke cautiously.

I shook my head. He didn't want me. He had proven that time and again.

Then why did he kiss us? Why did he hold us?

I stopped. I could feel the hope my wolf had, that maybe Zane had changed his mind and wanted to take back his rejection.

"Let's not get our hopes up just yet," I replied out loud as I made my way to the bathroom to shower and change.

I walked downstairs to the kitchen. Back to the grind, I thought to myself as I stepped in.

"Hey, babe! How was your little adventure?" my mom chimed.

"It was amazing, actually." I smiled, my mind drifting to the lake. To his lips. I shook my head.

"So what needs to be done?"

My mother placed her hands on her hips and looked around the kitchen.

“Almost everything is done, it’s an easy lunch today. Why don’t you come sit with me, and we can talk about your morning?”

I smiled, knowing I wasn’t going to be able to get away with my short answer. My mom loved the details.

“He kissed you?” my mom exclaimed with a cheesy smile and wide eyes.

“Calm yourself, Mom,” I teased, my face blushing wildly.

“It’s not that big a deal.”

“So he’s changed?” my mom prodded.

I shrugged.

“I’m not really sure yet. I want to think he’s trying, but I—”

“You want to be sure before you let him in.” Sophie nodded knowingly.

“What happened two years ago just about killed me. I don’t know if I can open myself up to that again. What if I do and he rejects me all over again?”

I looked down in an attempt to keep the tears burning behind my eyes from falling.

“I mean, he’s only been back for two months. Can someone really change?”

My mom put a warm hand on my shoulder.

“People can always change if they want to. What if he loves you?”

I sighed. I knew I needed to think about this. Decide if I was willing to let him in. We stood up as we looked at the time and started serving up plates to the pack members that trickled in.

I watched for Zane. I knew it was ridiculous, but I looked forward to seeing him.

“Omega, I’m waiting.” I snapped my head up to see Mariah in front of me, her long manicured nails tapping the counter. I faked a smile and handed her a plate.

Mariah rolled her eyes.

“Little nothing,” she mumbled as she walked away.

I tried to act like I didn't hear her. The words still stung no matter how many times they were said. I was surprised when Zane didn't come in for lunch.

I grabbed a plate and walked upstairs, only to find the room empty.

"Hmm..." I mumbled as I closed the door and made my way back down. He didn't make an appearance.

I looked up at the time, noting that dinner started in an hour, and I needed to finish these rolls. I continued kneading then looked up at the clock again. It was five o'clock.

I hadn't seen him for almost the entire rest of the day. It worried me. Maybe he was regretting our morning together and had finally realized again that he didn't actually want me.

He was probably avoiding me so that he wouldn't have to deal with the little omega again.

Five thirty. Still nothing.

Five forty-five. I needed to get out of my head. I took the rolls out of the oven and wiped the hair away from my face.

I needed to take a minute, knowing if I continued down the rabbit hole, I would be a hot mess. I walked out to the hallway and leaned against the wall, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath.

He's probably just been out training or something, my wolf tried to reassure me.

She had a point. Zane was an alpha; he couldn't just spend all day with me.

I took one more deep breath and was about to step into the kitchen when a pair of hands reached from behind me and wrapped around my waist. I stiffened before realizing who it was.

"Hey." Zane rested his head on my shoulder.

"Hey." I exhaled the breath I realized I had been holding in.

"Where have you been all day?"

"Why? Did you miss me?" A smirk spread across Zane's face.

I threw a light elbow into his ribs.

"No. I was enjoying the quiet."

Zane gave a look of feigned hurt and then kissed my cheek.

“I was in meetings all day with my dad. Come with me, I have a surprise for you.”

I smiled and followed him upstairs. I gave him a curious look when he walked to my closet but when Zane opened the door, I let out a gasp.

I walked in, a bright smile beaming on my face. My closet was filled with clothes. Tops, bottoms, dresses, shoes, you name it.

“Zane? How did you...?”

He smirked.

“I have my ways. Do you like it?”

“Zane, you really shouldn’t have.” I turned to him, a little hesitant to accept such a big gift.

“I could tell today that you didn’t have much. I wanted to say sorry for being such a jerk in the past. Besides, you deserve to feel good.”

I jumped and threw my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you, Zane.” He hugged me back tightly before we made our way downstairs.

Zane sat down at the island, and I could feel his eyes on me. Watching my body. I suddenly felt self-conscious.

“Want to watch a movie tonight?” My head perked up at Zane’s request.

“Depends on the movie. You’re not one of those blood and guts guys, are you?” I replied as I squished my nose at him.

Zane laughed.

“Depends on the movie. How about you pick, then?”

My mom let out a scoff from the other end of the island, and I smirked. This boy didn’t know what he was in for.

I spent the evening racking my brain on the most cringey, gooey, cheesy movie I could think of before settling on the perfect one.

Zane went up before me, probably to clean up his room. I finished cleaning up and then jogged upstairs to my room. I grabbed the movie and changed into some shorts and a comfy tee.

I opened the door to Zane's room and walked in.

"Hey! So you're in for a real..." I trailed off as the scene in front of me sank in.

Zane was sitting on the chair in his room, straddled by a very naked Mariah. She gave me an exaggerated look of fake shock before a smirk spread across her face.

I gritted my teeth.

"Seems like you're busy."

I walked coldly out of the room before running into my bedroom and slamming the door.

"I knew it. I knew it!" was all I said as I paced my room. My wolf whined, angry but sad at the same time.

It had all been too good to be true. The date, the clothes, he was just buying me so his father would make him alpha.

We had both hoped things were different. We had both begun to open up to the idea of letting our mate back in.

Chapter 23

ZANE

I opened the door to my room and walked in, looking around at the clothes thrown everywhere, the towels on the ground, and the unmade bed. I had to act fast. Wait a minute...

I did a double take as my eyes hit the bed again. Kneeling on my bed in all of her naked glory was Mariah.

"Come play with me, baby," she purred.

"Mariah, I thought I told you never to come in here again," I growled. She got up and walked toward me.

"You didn't mean it."

"I'm actually positive that I did." I walked away from her, picking up clothes on my way.

I made it to the little sitting area before she caught up to me. Mariah pushed me down on the chair and straddled my lap.

"You're telling me that little nothing of an omega is enough? That she can do the things I can to you?" Mariah hummed seductively.

I glared at her.

"Mariah, that little omega is more woman than you'll ever be to me. She's my mate."

I could see my words had stung, but Mariah wouldn't back down. She ground her hips into mine, and I could feel my traitorous body responding to her.

Mariah giggled.

"I knew you missed me."

I growled and grabbed her waist to lift her off.

"Hey! So you're in for a real..."

My eyes widened as I saw Ella enter and take in what she saw before her. I knew exactly what it looked like. Before I could even respond, she was gone.

I pushed Mariah off and started toward the door before I was pulled back.

"Zane, don't bother chasing after her. Stay here with me and take me in all the ways I know you want to. All the ways I know she won't let you."

I stopped, my eyes fighting the darkness.

"Mariah," I growled.

"Get. Out."

She whined and let her hand travel up my arm. I snapped away, grabbing her wrist and yanking her to the floor. I stood above her and summoned all the alpha presence I possessed.

"Mariah, if you ever so much as step foot in this room again I will have you exiled from this pack. Do I make myself clear?"

Mariah scowled at me, angry that she had no choice but to submit. She grabbed her clothes and put them on in a rush before sulking out of the room.

I stood in the middle of the room, frozen as I attempted to control my wolf. I knew I needed to be level-headed when I talked to Ella.

I took a breath and walked out of the room, taking a moment before entering hers.

“Ella?” I poked my head through the door before stepping in.

I jumped when I heard Ella yell at me. She was standing near her closet, fury in her eyes as she hurled a hairbrush at me. I ducked before looking back at her in confusion.

“Ella, wait!”

Ella glared at me before walking back into the closet.

“I don’t want to talk to you, Zane!” Anger dripped from every word.

“Ella, would you let me explain?!”

Ella emerged from the closet with an arm full of shoes. She cocked her arm back.

“There’s nothing to explain! Get out, Zane!”

I stood my ground. I was an alpha for heaven’s sake. I wasn’t going to be intimidated by this girl with a shoe.

“Ella, would you just listen?”

Shoe launched.

I ducked again, impressed with her aim. I shook my head.

“Ella, nothing happened.”

“That sure didn’t look like nothing, Zane. Get the hell out.”

“No,” I replied sternly.

Second shoe launched.

I stepped to the side and moved closer.

“Ella, she ambushed me in my room. I didn’t ask her to be there.”

“You’re saying a big, bad alpha couldn’t keep a little woman off his lap?” Ella scoffed.

I winced.

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Third shoe launched.

“Zane, just go! I knew this wasn’t going to work. I knew you just wanted me to forgive you so you could be alpha! She obviously has something more that you want.”

I growled in irritation. She wasn’t hearing me. I stepped toward her again.

Fourth shoe launched, this time connecting with my head. Ella smirked in victory.

“Would you stop that?!” I hollered as I rubbed my head. The girl had an arm, I had to give her that.

“Not until you leave me alone. I’m... I’m nothing.” I could see Ella’s resolve was beginning to crumble. Tears welled in her eyes.

I shook my head and looked at the floor.

“Ella...”

When she didn’t respond, I looked up to see her arm ready to fire another shoe, tears streaming down her face. It broke my heart, and I could hear my wolf whining, wanting to hold her and comfort her.

I decided to risk it and lunged forward. She attempted to throw the shoe, but I dodged it, grabbing her hand and pulling her close to me.

I cupped her cheek in my hand.

“Ella.”

She met my eyes, her fury now replaced by hurt.

“I promise you, you are not nothing to me.”

Her shoulders heaved and I pulled her to my chest, my cheek resting on the top of her head. After a few minutes, I swept her legs and carried her to the bed.

I kicked off my shoes and removed my shirt and crawled beneath the covers. I didn’t do anything, I just wanted to be close to her.

She took my hand, confirming that she wanted me near as well.

Chapter 24

ELLA

I opened my eyes to my alarm. I turned it off and lay there for a moment. Last night was horrible. I was so mad at him.

I was lost in thought when I just about jumped out of my skin as I felt movement beside me. I looked to my right to see Zane cuddled up in my bed, his large size making the bed look small.

He looked peaceful sleeping there. I had the weird desire to touch his face. To run my hand along his jaw.

My hand seemed to have a mind of its own, and before I knew what I had done, I lightly brushed my finger along his cheek. Zane's eyes opened and I snapped my hand back, my eyes wide.

"Good morning," he said with a sleepy smile.

"Good morning," I replied quietly, hoping he hadn't felt my hand on his cheek.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, rolling over to stretch. I nodded and then sat up.

"What do you have going on today?" he asked as I stepped out of bed.

"The usual," I replied calmly, hoping he wouldn't know I was freaking out on the inside.

"Cooking and more cooking."

Zane hummed before sitting up and looking at the clock.

"Geez, Ells, it's five in the morning." He threw himself back onto the pillow and closed his eyes.

I laughed.

"You act like that's something new."

"Yeah, but I don't get up at five!" he replied.

"Oh, the charmed life of an alpha!" I teased, laying my hand on my head and pretending to faint.

Zane gave me a sarcastic glare before I smirked and walked into the bathroom. I enjoyed teasing him just as much as I had enjoyed waking up next to him this morning.

I could get used to this, my wolf purred.

"Oh, shut up," I mumbled before hopping in the shower. I walked out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, water still beading on my shoulders.

Zane was still lying in my bed, his eyes now wide and growing dark.

"I-I, uhm..." I stammered, words failing to find me. I dashed into the closet and dressed quickly. Zane was gone by the time I was ready.

I was a little hurt that he had run away after seeing me half naked but shrugged it off and made my way downstairs for breakfast.

This evening was the monthly pack barbecue. The pack held weekly meetings, but once a month, we would all gather for a party afterward.

It was one of the few pack events I got to attend instead of work. But it also meant my day leading up to the party was extremely busy.

"Good morning!" I sang as I entered the kitchen.

"Mornin', hun." My mom smiled, handing me my apron.

"The barbecue is tonight, so we have a busy day. No running off to make out with your boyfriend, got it?" she teased.

I rolled my eyes.

"He's not my boyfriend, he just..."

I shrugged. I didn't know what we were.

We weren't mates. We weren't a thing. Were we dating? Were we friends? It was all too complicated to focus on right now. I had a lot of work to do today.

"Okay. Go over the list with me." I crossed my arms and listened to my mom go over everything for that evening.

"We have six hundred burgers. Do you think that's enough?"

"It should be plenty. And we have a bunch of chicken in the deep freeze if we run low on patties."

"Oh, good idea." My mother scribbled down on her paper. She began to list off the different sides and salads we needed to make as well as the desserts.

"I think we're set, Mom." I nodded my head and began on breakfast. We kept it simple today on account of all the other work we had to do.

Pack members began to trickle in as I finished the last of the pancakes. Zane walked down and gave me a warm smile. I offered him a plate and he gave me a wink before sitting down. Breakfast passed and I continued working. By lunch, I was tired and could feel the beginnings of a headache.

"You alright?" I snapped my head up to see Zane looking at me curiously.

"Yeah," I breathed.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You don't look okay..."

"Well thanks, that's a real confidence booster," I replied sarcastically.

"You know what I mean, Ella. Have you taken a break at all today?"

I sighed and closed my eyes, rubbing my head.

"Ella?" I could hear the worry in his tone.

"Zane, I'm fine, I've worked through the day before. I just have a little bit of a headache coming on."

Zane glared at me before taking my arm. He took me out to the hallway and bent down in front of me.

"Hop on."

I laughed before jumping on his back and he carried me piggy-back up the stairs.

He set me down on the couch in his quarters and wandered to the kitchen, returning with a large glass of water and a couple of ibuprofens.

"Here, take these."

I smiled up at him, enjoying being taken care of. I took the pills and drank the full glass of water, not realizing how thirsty I was.

Zane sat beside me and rubbed my shoulders. I rolled my head down and let him continue, letting out a long breath.

"You need to take care of yourself too, not just everyone else," he whispered as he continued massaging my shoulders.

I hummed before straightening myself.

“Thank you.” I smiled warmly at him and then squeezed his hand.

“I should really head back down.”

The rest of the day was a blur of chopping and baking and sautéing. The other cooks and I made so much food. But we were ready for the pack, all four hundred of them.

We had an hour before we all needed to be in the meeting hall. Just enough time to shower and change into something other than leggings and a dirty T-shirt.

I showered and changed, deciding to make more effort than usual. I pulled out a yellow floral summer dress.

It was sleeveless and stopped a few inches above my knee. It was light and feminine and made me feel cute.

I threw on a light cardigan to ward off the evening chill and my favorite pair of strappy wedge heels. I fixed the few rebellious waves in my dark hair, letting it flow down my back.

After applying some light makeup, I looked in the mirror and smiled.

Damn girl! my wolf howled.

I laughed and walked out the door, checking the kitchen before making my way to the meeting hall.

I sat at the back as usual, saving a seat for my mom so we could make a quick escape once the meeting was done.

Everyone hushed as the alpha walked into the room, followed by the leaders of the pack, my mom included. This was a serious meeting if every department head was involved.

Declan jumped quietly into the seat next to me.

“Hey, Ells, am I late?”

I smiled at my friend.

“No, they’re just about to start. Where have you been?”

“Eh.” Declan shrugged.

“I’ve been giving you some space. I know Zane isn’t my biggest fan, and I don’t want to cause you more problems.”

“Welcome! Please be seated!” Alpha Daniel smiled, and everyone sat down, curious about what was so different about tonight.

“Alpha Zane and I have spent the last few days working on a new pack dynamic.”

My breath hitched.

“He didn’t...,” I mumbled to myself.

“We have decided that we no longer like the way some of our lower rank members live and we aim to change that tonight.

“Starting with higher-ranked families, we will be holding interviews to see if the families are still eligible for their rank.

Some members of the pack have not been acting in the ways a higher-ranked member should act. The omegas will now be given updated wages and a rotating schedule.”

I gasped, along with most of the other pack members.

Daniel continued, “Please see your specific lead to find out your new schedule. If there are any questions or concerns, feel free to speak to me or Alpha Zane. You are dismissed.”

I rushed out of the room, as usual, to be the first one down the hill to make sure everything was ready. I was still in shock when I felt hands wrap around me, and I relaxed at the familiar touch.

Chapter 25

ZANE

During the meeting, I tried to search the pack for Ella, but there were too many people, too many faces. I had wanted to see her reaction.

Afterward, I made my way down with everyone else, and I spotted her at the bottom of the hill. She turned, and I felt like the air had been punched out of me. She was stunning.

I’d never seen her look so good, and I could feel my body responding instantly.

I watched as her long waves danced down her back as she walked, the sway of her hips, and the way that dress draped over her body.

I slid my arms around her waist, and I felt her relax into me.

“You look beautiful.”

I heard Ella chuckle, and she smacked my arm away.

“Oh, hush.”

I smiled and kissed her cheek before walking off to speak to a group of pack members. As the evening went on and dinner was over, I knew Ella could finally relax.

I grabbed Ella’s hand, walked her to the middle of the makeshift dance floor, and wrapped my arms around her.

“I-I don’t know how to dance,” she said quietly, looking down at the floor.

I raised her chin with my hand and smiled at her.

“Then I’ll teach you. Hold on to me.”

I spun her around the floor, our bodies close to each other. The pack members were watching us. Ella had noticed their eyes as well. It was the first time I had shown my affection to her in public.

The entire pack watched as we danced, and I knew that they all understood that she was mine now.

As the night ended, the pack members all returned to their homes. Ella and Sophie sat at the kitchen island, toasting to a successful event. Everyone was exhausted. It had been a long day.

“Ready to go up?” I asked.

Ella turned to me and nodded with a sleepy smile. After a round of hugs from everyone, I took her hand, and we went upstairs together, Ella walking slowly with her sore feet.

I smiled at her and swept my arm under her, picking her up and carrying her bridal style to her room. I set her down on the bed when we made it inside, and I knelt in front of her, slipping off her heels and rubbing each foot for a second.

“Mmm...” Ella closed her eyes and hummed in bliss as I rubbed her sore feet.

“Better?” I looked up at her and smiled as I watched her relax.

“Better.” She looked down to meet my eyes before hopping off the bed. Ella went into the closet and came back out in a tank top and silky pair of pajama shorts.

She crawled into bed and patted the spot next to her. I smiled and joined her. We both let out a breath as we lay there, letting our exhaustion take over.

"Thank you for today." Ella turned to me and smiled.

"I barely saw you all day," I said, laughing.

"Yes, but you took care of me today. It was nice. So thank you."

I laughed and turned to her, propping myself up on my elbow. I laid my hand on her cheek and said softly, "Ella, I plan to care for you for the rest of my life."

Ella smiled. For a moment, I thought I saw desire in her eyes.

"Goodnight, Zane," she turned around and went to sleep.

"Goodnight, Ella," I whispered.

That night as we lay in bed, I was about to kiss her when she pulled away and went to sleep. It stung. I wanted her to be close to me. I wanted to touch her, to hold her, and she wouldn't let me.

But when I woke in the morning and she was in my arms, I smiled.

I lay there holding her, gently pushing my face into her hair and smelling her sweet scent. It was intoxicating, and I could feel my body reacting to her.

Ella stirred in my arms, and I didn't move, hoping this moment wouldn't end. She stiffened, and I knew she was awake. I closed my eyes, pretending to sleep as she slowly turned and faced me.

Silence.

I opened one eye cautiously to see her smirk and push my arm off her.

"I knew you were awake," she giggled.

I wrapped my arm around her again, quickly pulling her body closer to mine.

"Maybe I was enjoying you being near," I whispered in my husky morning voice.

She inhaled sharply. I didn't want to push my luck, but I also didn't want to let go.

"Spend the day with me," I whispered as my eyes met hers. I could see her hesitation, so I gave my best puppy-dog eyes.

Ella laughed before rolling her eyes.

“Okay...”

I smiled and kissed her nose before hopping out of bed.