



When the bell above the door at the front of the shop rings, it's the first time Jensen's heard it all day. It's instantly irritating. This is his writing time; the fact that he's spent the past two hours alternating between *Minesweeper* and MSNBC.com on his laptop has absolutely no bearing on the issue. Writing time is sacred.

The guy with the hair doesn't know that. He comes up to the counter, where Jensen's sitting next to the cash register and a little rack of candy bars, and says, "Is there a bathroom on the premises I could use?" in a very intense voice.

Jensen's about to say no when he notices the guy is bleeding from the head. A tiny part of him freezes up, just for a second, and his hand jerks up to his own hairline, rubbing at a long, white line of a scar that's all but invisible unless you know what to look for. Or unless Jensen's randomly pointing at it for no good reason. He drops his hand casually to the counter and says, "Are you sure you don't need a paramedic more than a bathroom?"

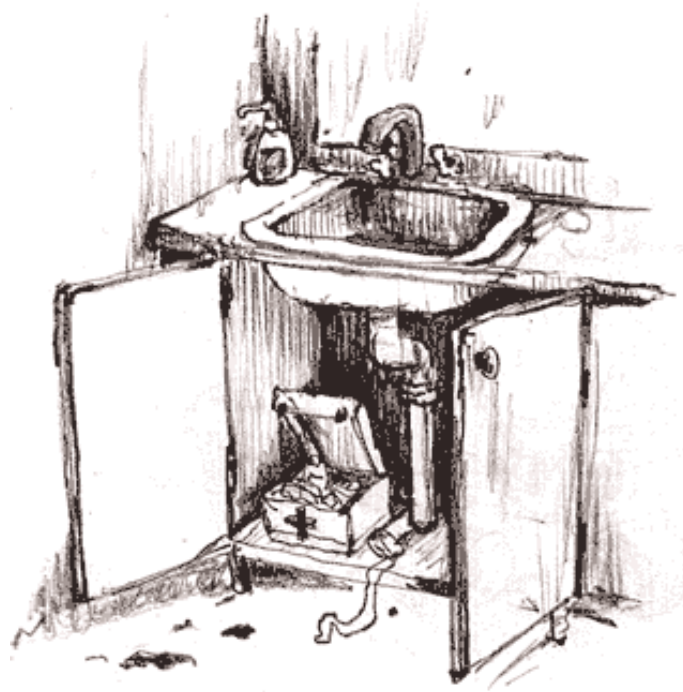
"Just some tissues or something," the guy says. "Some running water. It looks worse than it is."

The cut slants down from his hairline toward his right ear. A steady trickle of blood runs from the gash down to the neck of his t-shirt, which suddenly resolves itself into carnage rather than the bizarro arty design Jensen thought it was at first. Between the shredded edges of flesh, he thinks he can see the guy's brain.

"What happened to you?"

"Hey, I know, let me explain it to you while I bleed all over your counter. I'm sure that will be great for business! Come on, man. Bathroom? Please?"

Not even Jensen can make a case that the sarcasm is unwarranted; it's a bandage first, ask questions later situation. "Sorry. Come on back. I think there's a first aid kit under the sink."



He leads the guy around the end of the counter and into his office. The door to the bathroom is off to the right of Jensen's desk, and there actually is a first aid kit under the sink, though God only knows how old it is. He pulls it out and sets it on the back of the toilet, pulling out a roll of gauze.

"I can handle it, you don't have to—"

"No offense, dude, but you're turning transparent. You should probably sit down."

"It's just a little cut."

"So's the Grand Canyon." Jensen gives the guy the lightest of pushes; he folds down onto the toilet seat like he's been punched in the gut. "Yeah, you're totally on top of this," Jensen says. "Hold still."

He cleans the cut with peroxide and a wad of the gauze, which he very much hopes is sterile. The guy hisses, and lets loose with a moan that would make a zombie's mama proud.

"Sorry, I left the morphine at home." He doesn't actually call the guy a wuss — because that would be rude — but he tries to get the point across through tone and exaggerated eye-rolling. From the way the guy straightens up and glares, Jensen's sure he's succeeded.

The cut really isn't as bad as it looked at first. It's ugly, but not particularly deep. No brain showing after all. Jensen cleans it out and pats it dry while his patient hisses at him, then paints the whole thing with a bottle of iodine of indeterminate age and provenance. When he's done, he covers the cut with a pad of gauze and some white tape, washes and dries his hands, and steps back to survey his work.

"I think you'll live."

"I fell off my bike. Out in front of the shop." Red spots stand out on the guy's cheeks. "There was a cat, on the sidewalk, and—"

"You're not really supposed to ride your bike on the sidewalk."

"Yes, I know that, but—"

"You didn't hit the cat, did you?"

"No, I didn't, but—"

"Where's your bike? If you left it outside, I'm sorry to tell you it's probably already been stolen. The kids in this neighborhood are vicious little bastards and they operate outside of any accepted moral framework."

"My name's Jared," the guy blurts out, "I locked my bike to the 'No Parking' sign before I came in, I didn't hit the cat, and I was only on the sidewalk because I nearly got run down by a catering truck in the street. I just moved here and I'm still learning my way around town. I live out on Button Hill Road, the old place on the pond. I like biking," he finishes in a rush, "It's relaxing."

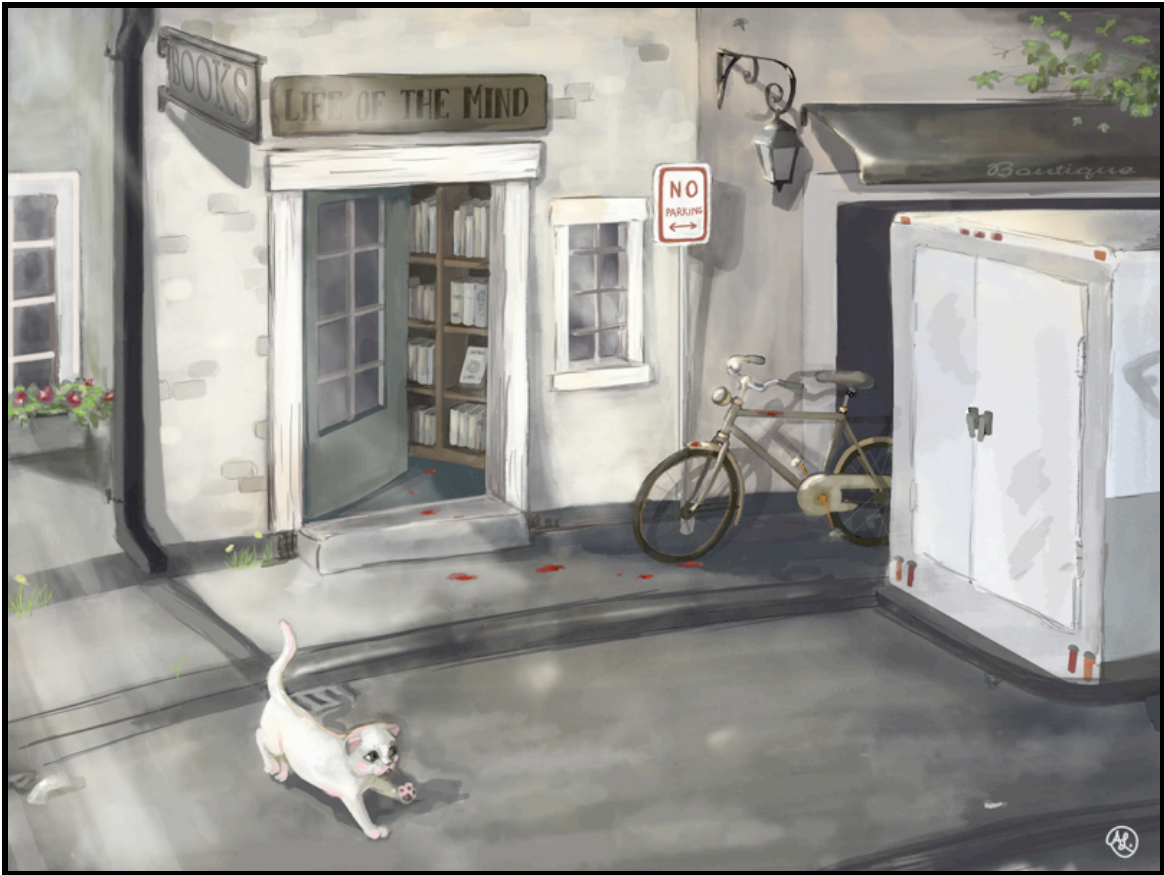
Jensen stares at the guy with the hair, recently downgraded to the guy with the gaping head wound and now upgraded to Jared. "Okay," he says, when he's sure the flood of information has stopped. "I have a spare shirt you can borrow."

Jared says, "Sweet," and smiles up at Jensen. "You don't have to."

"You look like an extra from *Saw III*," Jensen says, but he can't help but smile back; that's the kind of face Jared has. "Can't have you scaring off all my customers. Just give me a minute." He closes the door to give Jared some privacy, goes back into his office and fishes a t-shirt with the store's logo out of the bottom drawer of the file cabinet. It's deep red, short-sleeved, and it's going to look great on Jared.

When he knocks on the bathroom door, Jared opens it and asks, "Hey, what's your name?" He's naked from the waist up, and looks like an ad for sunshine and clean living.

Jensen's forced to re-evaluate. The shirt is going to look fucking *amazing*.



Jared doesn't want to go to the ER. In fact, what he wants is to get on his bike and ride back home like nothing happened. Presented with this dangerously insane decision, Jensen finds it hard not to gape.

"How hard did you hit your head, exactly?" He tries to be discreet about checking the dilation of Jared's pupils. They appear to be about the same size, but the only medical experience Jensen has comes from six months in physical therapy, six seasons of *Grey's Anatomy*, and a CPR course for credit back in high school.

Jared laughs, and it's a little ridiculous. Too many teeth and a flip-top head, like a Pez dispenser. Jensen can't take his eyes off of it. "I'll be fine," Jared says. "It's only a couple of miles."

"It was only a couple of miles here," Jensen points out. "You didn't even have a concussion on the way in, and look how you ended up."

Jared watches Jensen a beat too long to be casual, then leans over the high counter between them, his elbows propping him up. The fabric of the t-shirt (which should

have been at least one size larger, not that Jensen's complaining) stretches across wide shoulders. Jared's eyes are bright and interested. "Yeah," he says in a low, satisfied tone that rakes across Jensen's nerves pleasantly. "Look how I ended up."

Jensen's face heats up, and he tries to stop the blush, but it's no good. He's got the wrong kind of skin for it, can't even see somebody *else* embarrassed without turning prom-dress pink. "Really," he says, ducking his head and trying to hide a grin. "That's what you're going with?"

"No?"

"No."

Jared picks himself up off the counter and sighs. His entire body shifts from come-on to carefree, and the hotness factor dims to a manageable level. "Can't say I didn't try."

Jensen laughs. "If that was trying, man, I'm very sorry for you. You must not get out much."

"Hey! I do all right. You saying you want me to work for it?"

"Please don't. I don't feel right mocking the wounded."

Jared raises both his hands in surrender. "Okay, but I should warn you, you're going to regret it when you get to know me. I'm pretty awesome."

"I'll find some way to go on." Jensen eyes Jared thoughtfully. He kind of saved the guy, and his conscience is starting to ping; he may not be responsible for Jared from here on out, but at the very least, he should try to get him back home in one piece. He thinks longingly of his laptop and the hour he would totally have spent writing amazing stuff if he hadn't been co-opted into paramedic duty, and sighs. "Look, I've got a truck in the lot out back. We can throw your bike in the back, and I'll drive you home."

"Are you sure?" Jared looks around. "I mean, you're the only one here."

"I'm always the only one here." Jensen goes around the counter and flips the 'open' sign on the door to 'closed.' "Unless somebody else comes by bleeding to death, nobody will ever know I was gone. Or here in the first place, for that matter."

"Your boss won't mind you leaving?"

"He'll get over it," Jensen says. "Trust me."

He completely fails at not staring at the long curve of Jared's back as he unlocks the bike, and then fails at not being noticed staring, too. It's not his fault; the man is

walking art work, and he knows it. Jared's smile is instant and gleeful, and he practically bounces as he straightens up to his full height, puffing out his chest. Jensen laughs, and takes the bike away from him. "Fine, you're hot, whatever. That's not all it takes."

"I got more." Jared falls into step with him. "I'm just biding my time." He tucks his hands into his pockets and walks closer than he has to, so their arms brush against each other over and over. Jensen wheels the bike closer to the edge of the sidewalk, rolling his eyes. He lets Jared take it back when they reach the truck, so he can unlock the tailgate.

"Nice," Jared says respectfully, and thereby wins himself an instant toehold in Jensen's affections.

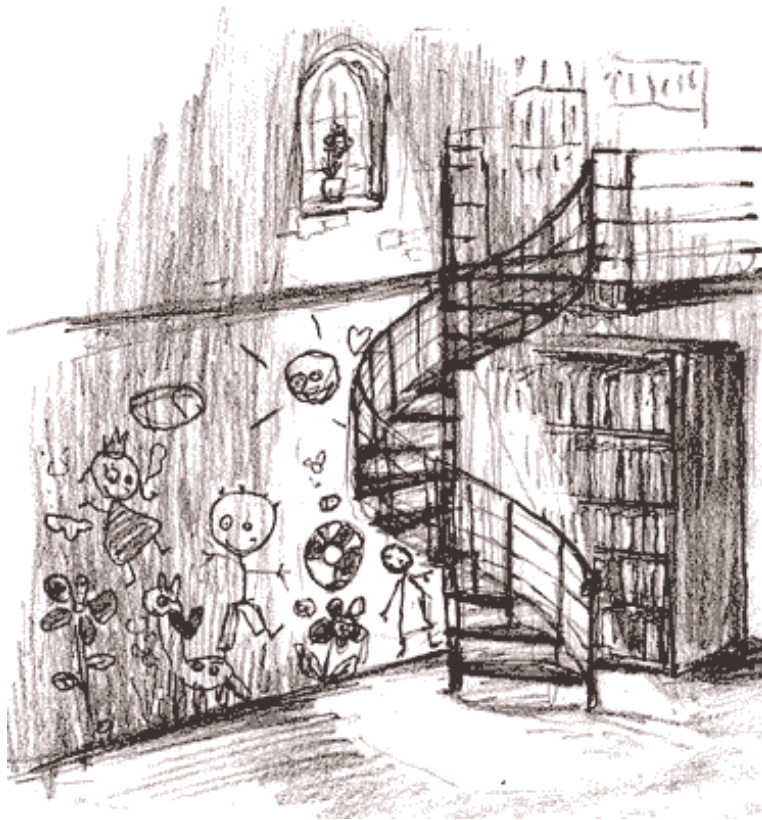
Jensen tamps down a flare of smugness. The truck is sleek and black and unashamedly gigantic, the first thing he bought when Loretta made him start spending his money. He pulls a blanket from behind the driver's seat and lays it out over the bed liner, and Jared hoists his bike onto it like it weighs less than nothing. When he catches Jensen watching, he does something alarming with his eyebrows and flexes his biceps in a very meaningful way. It's far more comic book villain than porn star, and Jared's face falls hilariously when Jensen laughs.

"Get in the truck, Fabio," he says, unlocking the doors with the remote on his keychain. "And try not to bust out of that t-shirt in the process. I'm not giving you another."

"It's like you're made of stone," Jared says.

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In the summer, every Wednesday at two-thirty, Jensen packs up his stuff, closes up the shop, and goes to the library for an hour. He's been doing it for two years now, ever since Danneel started bugging him to do something, anything, outside of his house or the store or the bar. Jensen thinks the house-store-bar circuit is plenty. It's more than most people do — a lot of people don't even bother with the bar part. They just go to work and then home, and maybe sometimes to get groceries. That's all his parents do, which makes him a full social set ahead of his genetic predisposition. But Danny is relentless, has been since ninth grade when she plopped herself down at the desk next to him, grabbed his Algebra book and opened it dead center between them. "I'm new," she'd said, "Mind if I share?" That was the first and last time she'd bothered to ask.

So, the library. And he kind of likes it. He likes the beige carpet and the kid-painted murals where everybody's head is too big and their eyes are different sizes and there are lots of footballs and soccer balls and basketballs and flowers. Not a lot of books in the murals, which he's always thought was kind of odd, but you can't really tell kids what to do with paint once they realize you're actually going to let them at the walls.

When he walks up to the desk, the woman behind it says, "Hey, Jen," and reaches out for the books he brought to return.

"Hey, Gen," he says, grinning. "Those are overdue, by the way."

"You finish any of them this time?"

"Are you doing something different with your hair? It looks awesome."

"I brushed it," Genevieve says. "Honestly, you didn't finish any of them?"

"They were boring."

"They're classics!"

"Chick lit classics," he says, "which is totally different from being an actual classic." He says it just to rile her up and it works; her dark eyes narrow and she shakes her head at him, flipping back her long black hair.

"Jane Austen is not chick lit! My God, there is something wrong with your brain. Get out of my library, you heathen, I don't want you influencing my kids."

"It's still Narnia today, so the kids will be totally safe with me, I promise."

"They better be." Genevieve pokes him in the shoulder. "I will throw you over for the new guy in a heartbeat if you step out of line."

"What new guy?" Jensen says, just as Jared says, "Jensen? What are you doing here?"

Jensen is already frowning when he turns around. "I do *read*, thanks."

Jared ignores him in favor of beaming at Genevieve. "This is the guy I was telling you about!"

Her eyebrows go up to an unflattering height. "Jensen is your mysterious knight in shining armor?"

Jensen turns his glare back on her. "That's so unbelievable?"

"You talking to a stranger is kind of unbelievable," she says, "yeah."

"He was bleeding from the head!"

"I was," Jared confirms, pointing. There's a slightly less amateurish bandage over the cut, which now lives on top of an ugly bruise and a bump. Jensen's not sure the overall effect is an improvement. "Now I'm all fixed up. And I brought cookies." He rattles the pink box in his hands, which Jensen hadn't noticed due to inappropriate ogling. "Chocolate chip, chocolate chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, oatmeal chocolate chip, ginger snaps, sugar cookies, and a couple of raspberry tart thingies."

Jensen blinks. "Dude. Did you rob a bakery?"



"Um. Kinda?"

"Are we supposed to be feeding all this to the story hour group? Because their parents are not going to thank us for that."

Jared's face falls, and Jensen immediately feels like a jerk.

"I guess I didn't think of that," Jared says.

"Ignore him," Gen commands, throwing Jensen a disgusted look. "He's bitter and cranky and he doesn't even like Jane Austen. The kids will love these." She grabs the box out of Jared's hands and pats his shoulder comfortingly. She has to reach up really high to do it. "Thank you, Jared." She gives Jensen one last ugly look and takes the cookies over to the juice table that's already set up for the kids.

Jensen hunches his shoulders and looks up at Jared. "I am bitter and cranky," he says, by way of apology, and Jared breaks into a huge smile.

"Yeah," he says. "I noticed. I'm kind of into it." He shakes his head, never taking his eyes off Jensen; it makes Jensen feel like he's standing under a heat lamp.

"I didn't hate the Austen, though. Just don't tell Gen. She'd consider it a victory. I made her read three Stephen King novels last year and I think she still sleeps with a night light." Jensen clears his throat. "Are you, uh. Are you sticking around for the reading?"

"No, I have to get back to work."

"Oh, good," Jensen says, and immediately his face heats up. "I mean, it's good that you took the time to stop by. The kids really will be thrilled."

Jared's eyes narrow. "Wait a minute," he says. "Are you *doing* the reading?"

"Every Wednesday for two years," Gen says, rejoining them. She's smiling, and she slips an arm around Jensen's waist; apparently, he's forgiven. "The rugrats adore him. Sometimes he brings his guitar and they do sing-alongs. They think he's some kind of rock star."

"Yeah?" Jared says, and his eyes crinkle at the corners, a warm smile making Jensen's breath catch in his throat. "I'm starting to think so, too."

Suddenly there's a lot of Jared, all over town. Jensen sees him at the gas station on the corner of Main and Park, biking down Pond Street while Jensen's driving up to Chris's place, coming out of the Starbucks on Madison. They nod, they smile, they wave, but it's all from a distance; they don't really get a chance to talk. Jensen should be fine with that; he's got everything and everybody he needs in his life, so if this new person that Jensen wasn't looking for and didn't ask for turns out to be just a walk-on player, who cares?

But there's something about the guy — those hands, and that smile, and that crazy laugh, not that he's made a list or anything — that just gets to him. It takes more than a pretty face, but Jared seems to have more than a pretty face. Jensen's starting to think it might be okay to let him in a little, assuming he still wants in.

He waffles on it; he thinks about calling Loretta. But that would make it a *thing*, and it's not a thing. It's just life, and he's supposed to be getting better at that by now. He makes elaborate plans to run into Jared again, accidentally, then holes up his store with the sign flipped over to *Closed*.

His luck runs out — or kicks in — about a week later. Predictably, during sacred writing time.

This time Jensen's got a file open with some words in it. Granted, he wrote them almost four years ago, when he was still living in an apartment over his grandparents' garage and eating Ramen every other night to save up for a monthly bus pass. But they count, and he's going to add more to them. As soon as he hits Grand Wizard level at *Alchemy*.

Again.

When the bell over the door rings, he slams the lid of the laptop closed, rolls his eyes up toward the ceiling and says, "Seriously? We're closed!"

"Hi!" Jared drops a stuffed paper bag onto the countertop and, a little more carefully, a tray with two paper cups in it. The scent of coffee wafts up from them, appeasing Jensen only a little. "I could see you through the window."

"You're not bleeding again, are you?" he asks, examining Jared's head critically.

"Nope. Not today."

"Okay, look." Jensen reaches for the cup closest to him, and looks at Jared; Jared nods encouragement, so Jensen takes it. "This is really sweet, but —"

"I'm not hitting on you."

Jensen blinks. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, I was the other day. I probably will again in the future. But this right now is just, you know, thank you. For the surgery and the ride."

"Oh. Well, you're welcome."

"It comes with muffins." Jared opens up the bag, and pulls out a couple of paper napkins, two forks, and two of the largest muffins Jensen has ever seen in his life. "Chocolate strawberry," he says. "New recipe. I made them fresh this morning. I'm sorry in advance, in case they suck."

They don't smell like they're going to suck. They smell like they were baked in heaven by the divine hands of the breakfast gods. Jensen's dedication to his imminent literary career wobbles. On the one hand, sacred writing time. On the other...

"Okay," he says, snagging a muffin and a fork, "you can stay," and Jared breaks into a wide, warm smile.

The coffee is pretty good. The muffin is fantastic. It melts on Jensen's tongue and zips through his taste buds straight to the pleasure center of his brain. It's like the platonic ideal of muffins, perfection in a paper liner. Jared watches him take his first bite, and laughs as Jensen's eyes go wide.

"Dude, you made this?" Jensen asks, his mouth still full.

"Yeah. It's what I do. Well, not just muffins, I make other stuff too. Breads, cakes, bagels, pies, brownies. The cookies for the kids at the library. Sometimes a quiche here and there."

"You're a *baker*?"

Jared's smile dims a little, but from where Jensen's sitting it gets a little more personal. "Yeah, Jensen," he says. "I'm a baker. Is that a problem?"

It is a problem. It's kind of hot. Jensen processes this while inhaling the muffin and checking the bag to see if there might be another. He gets an image in his head, a snapshot — well, actually it's more like an X-rated YouTube video — of Jared in a white t-shirt, white apron — long, tan arms flexing as he kneads and molds a ball of dough with those large, competent hands. It's the first time Jensen's ever envied flour.

He fishes out the last muffin. "A baker," he says, cutting it in two and sliding half over to Jared. "You're one of the guys who bought that place on Derry Road? I live about a mile from there."

"I'm the baking guy. Chad's the business guy."

Jensen thinks about that for a minute while chewing. And then he thinks about how hard and repeatedly Jared had hit on him the week before. He frowns and says, "So you two are—"

"Partners, yeah. Sad to say, but I couldn't do it without him. I just bake."

"Ah." Jensen pushes back from the counter, just far enough to prove to himself that he can, now that he knows he should. "You know, this was awesome, but I have to get back to work."

Jared looks around the empty store. "Seriously?"

"There's accounting stuff," Jensen says. "I don't have a business guy."

"But—"

"Really, thanks for breakfast." Jensen puts as much finality into it as he can and looks pointedly toward the door.

Jared stays where he is. He just looks at Jensen, a thoughtful expression on his face that actually makes him look a little vapid. "You know," he says slowly, "I probably should clarify. Chad's my business partner. I don't have a *partner* partner. If I did, I wouldn't go around hitting on random mysterious bookshop employees, no matter how hot they were."

Jensen's face heats up; he feels like he got caught flinching from a punch that was never coming. He should probably apologize for overreacting, but an apology might be an overreaction, too. Instead, he says, "Oh," and "Yeah, well," and hunches his shoulders up, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I'm not all that mysterious."

"You are hot, though." Jared leans over the counter, propping himself up with his elbows and toying with a napkin. "Now I'm hitting on you," he says, and the friendly warmth in his eyes makes something in Jensen loosen up.

"Still takes more than you're bringing," Jensen replies, his eyes on Jared's hands.

"More than *muffins*?"

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Jensen loves the bookstore, but even more than that, he loves his house. It's set back from the road, accessible by a long and slightly curving cobblestone driveway. Tall oaks and maples shield most of the property from view, and give the illusion of more privacy than anybody actually gets in a town like Bishop's Landing. Chris and Mike had argued for some kind of security fence; Mike was pushing for something in the

electrified line, possibly supplemented with a moat. But the only real danger he was in has long since passed, and Jensen doesn't like to let his nerves have that much traction.

The house itself is big. He likes the bulk of it around him, the feel of the smooth white walls that stretch up to the high ceilings, the hardwood and brick and granite of it all. His own private Fortress of Solitude. He thought he'd have a house full of visitors, thought Danny would crash in one of the wings and bring her leather and her books and her fourteen tons of mascara; he thought Chris would sit on the picnic table by the grill and play guitar. But it's been three years, and the time never seems quite right for a party. Danny seems to like her own apartment, and Chris has a grill of his own. Jensen tries not to mind; he kind of likes the quiet.

He settles down on the sofa in the living room, digs out his phone and calls Chris, which is pretty much what he does every day except Fridays, when he's going to see Chris in person.

"Hey, man. You get those papers I sent you?"

"Haven't checked my email yet," Jensen lies. He checked it; he just hasn't bothered to open it.

"You sit around online all day, but you can't take two minutes to open your fucking email? What is wrong with you, man?"

"Sacred writing time," Jensen says, turning on the TV. The screen is as big as a windshield, about half the size of the one he's got set up in the basement, and he loves it more than he loves any of his friends. Especially more than he loves Chris. He mutes the sound, and flips through the channels while Chris bitches about him to Steve and Steve points out Jensen can hear him and Chris points out he doesn't give a fuck.

"I'm just sayin', there's only so much *Popcap* one guy can play."

"Oh, I beg to differ," Jensen says. "If there was a limit, I definitely would have hit it by now. But I wasn't just screwing around today. That guy came back."

There's a moment of silence on the other end of the line. Or maybe a Moment of Silence, given Chris's opinion of Jensen's social life. A memorial moment, to remember the fallen. "The hot guy with the head wound and the cookies? He came back?"

"Yeah."

"How hard did he hit his head, exactly?" Chris asks, and Jensen laughs.

"Pretty hard, apparently. He brought me coffee and muffins."

"Christ."

"Shut up," Jensen says. "It was just a thank you, for not letting him bleed out on my floor."

"A thank you is thank you for that. Breakfast is thank you, and my don't you look fetching in that ridiculous Jedi t-shirt."

Jensen frowns. "That is a deeply cool t-shirt, and I look deeply cool in it."

"Have you explained to him yet how you're a professional recluse?"

"Shut up, and no. He put it out there, I turned him down..."

"And?"

Jensen scratches at the back of his neck, and grins a little to himself. "He didn't seem all that put off by it."

There's a pause, in which Jensen can hear Chris's hackles rising. "Charmingly-persistent-not-put-off, or restraining-order-and-I-punch-his-ticket-for-him-not-put-off?"

"So far, the former. Anyway, I doubt he's serious about it. Nobody plays that hard without being a player."

Chris snorts. "Right. And because if he's just a player, you don't have to do anything about it. So I gotta ask again: What is *wrong* with you?"

"We just met ten minutes ago," Jensen says, rolling his eyes at the ceiling, "and it's not a thing. But hey, seriously, thanks for the feedback."

"Whatever. Send him around, I want to check him out. But you come, too. If you're not into him, you can flirt with my bartender all night, problem solved. But if it turns out you are, that's no bad thing, dude."

"Thanks," Jensen says, and he means it; Chris never changed, even when everything else did. "You know I—"

"Don't go home with my bartender," Chris says, shutting down the moment. "I have to find a new one, I warn you now: It will be you."

Jensen lets out a shaky breath. "Like I need your money, asshole," he says, and Chris laughs.

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Jared doesn't come by for a while. Which is fine. Jensen just met the guy; it's not like they're suddenly soul mates. A little harmless flirting doesn't actually obligate Jared to follow up on it. He's new in town, he's probably meeting tons of people. Actually, he's probably forgotten about Jensen altogether by now. Guys with arms like that generally don't have a lot going on in the way of brain power; it's just as well Jared hasn't been around to speed along Jensen's inevitable disappointment in him.

A few weeks later, Chris has stopped asking about him, and Jensen has stopped making excuses. The guy's gone. Not from the town, maybe, but definitely from the parts of it Jensen hangs out in — all three of them. It sucks, because the play Jared was running was actually working. Over three years since Aaron, and maybe Jensen hasn't been exactly celibate the whole time, but he sure as hell hasn't let anybody else in. With Jared, he was starting to think about it.

Friday morning, to kick off sacred writing time, Jensen opens up his laptop, flexes his fingers, and starts typing. It's an email to his parents with pictures and diagrams showing them how to hook up their TiVo to the plasma screen he had shipped to them last week, but it's words on a page, so he counts it as a win. He's so wrapped up in how much good he's doing himself and everybody else by being a grown-up about Jared's complete lack of interest that Jared's actual appearance in front of him takes Jensen by surprise.

He stares up at Jared with wide eyes, his heart pounding in his chest, and for once it's not from awkward thwarted crushing. This time it's because the guy's a ninja.

"Jesus," Jensen says, "you scared the fuck out of me!"

"There's a bell over the door, dude."

"I didn't think you were coming back," Jensen says, and immediately cringes from his own lack of smooth. "I mean. I hadn't seen you around, so I didn't know if —"

"I've been stuck at work about thirty hours a day, getting everything ready for the grand opening." Jared unloads the tray, pushes coffee at Jensen, and pelts him with little packets of sugar. "I'm exhausted. I haven't slept since the last time I saw you. Here, drink up. You aren't really good with mornings, are you?"

Jared does look a little white around the eyes, and his smile isn't quite the epic golden beam Jensen's soft-lens memory made it out to be. Still, it's pretty nice, and it doesn't appear to be trying to let Jensen down easy. A wave of relief, totally out of proportion to the extent of their interaction so far, takes Jensen not at all by surprise.



"I'm not an addict," Jensen says, hugging his cup close to his chest and inhaling the steam rising up from it. It's not clear to him if he's talking about the coffee, or Jared. His smile gets away from him when he meets Jared's eyes, and he feels so much better about life, he doesn't even care. "What's in the bag?"

"Raspberry chocolate croissants."

"I'm embarrassed to tell you, I can be had for less."

Jared's face goes a little pink, and he becomes suddenly absorbed in managing his own cup and laying out breakfast. "You go all slutty at the sight of pastry. Noted. Did I mention I own a bakery?"

Jensen laughs. "Yeah, I think you did."

He doesn't have a lot to say for a while after that, what with his mouth being stuffed full of croissant. Jared is in much the same condition, but doesn't let it prevent him from talking, which is the grossest and cutest and most hilarious thing Jensen's ever seen. From the smug look on Jared's face after he swallows, Jensen's pretty sure Jared knows exactly what he's doing.

"So," Jared says finally, wiping a trace of raspberry from the corner of his mouth. He props himself up on his elbows on the counter, his coffee cup looking like a kid's toy between his large, square hands. "This place. It's yours, right?"

Jensen isn't expecting the question; he straightens up, looking around the store defensively. It's not that he doesn't know it's a little weird; it's just that everybody he knows already knows everything about him. "I — yeah," Jensen says finally, hunching his shoulders. "Basically."

"I can't help but notice you don't have any customers. Like, ever. I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but maybe you should think about hiring someone a little more skilled in the customer relations department."

"Hey!"

Jared leans in a little closer, and drops his voice to a whisper. "Come on, Jensen. You can tell me. Mafia front, right? I've seen your truck, too, it's sweet. What are you, like, the long lost Soprano or something?"

"Got it in one. Jensen's actually a traditional mob name. It means 'shut up about my store or I'll kick your ass, even if it is two feet higher than the asses of normal-sized people.'"

"Wow. It's like your mom could see the future!"

Jared hits him with a smile bright enough to black out the Eastern seaboard, and Jensen can't help but laugh. He shoves at Jared's shoulder and says, "Don't talk about my mom, dude," but Jared doesn't seem to care at all about Jensen's mom. He just looks at Jensen like he'd rather be touching him instead, and it makes Jensen's head spin. That's how good it is to have somebody look at him like that.

To have Jared, specifically, looking at him like that.

"Here's the thing," Jared says finally. "The only friend I have in this town is Chad. And Chad is like — you know, you want him around if your house has been robbed or your heart's been broken, or if you wrecked your car or pissed off your sister. He's great in a crunch. But the rest of the time...."

"Yeah?"

Jared pushes the bag with the last croissant in it slowly across the counter, until it nudges up against Jensen's hand. "Do you maybe want to have breakfast with me? Like, a lot?"

"Yeah." Jensen curls his hand around his coffee cup, a little embarrassed at how fast that came out. "But we're going to have to talk about sacred writing time."



Jared agrees to avoid the bookstore when Jensen's trying to write, and Jensen agrees to start trying to write *after* Jared comes around with breakfast. It's a workable solution, and it holds steady for the next couple of weeks. Jared spends a lot of mornings trying out strange new muffins on Jensen and complaining about the contractor renovating the bakery's kitchen, while Jensen spends a lot of time appreciating Jared's hands, his pastry skills, and his ability to speak in complete sentences after getting up before dawn to bake. More or less in that order.

"A while back, I almost joined the Peace Corps," Jensen tells Jared over a newspaper and coffee a week later. It's donuts this time, glazed and chocolate and jelly filled, and a couple of bagels.

It's not something he could tell anybody who already knows him. Half his friends would laugh, and the other half would laugh and then yell at him. But he did think about it; he filled out the application and everything. He's been thinking a lot about his life lately, and he wants to do something. Especially since he's been hanging out with Jared, who seems so ridiculously self-actualized he could be a self-help commercial.

He just can't figure out his thing. Writing is the only thing he's ever really been good at, and he hasn't been good at that in a really long time. He wants that thing that Jared has, that sense of doing the thing he was meant to do, being the person he was meant to be. When Jared's around, Jensen almost feels like he could have it.

To his credit, Jared doesn't even twitch at the non sequitur. "Yeah?"

"I looked into it. Talked to some people. Found out I was completely unprepared. Everybody was really nice about it, but I was just going to end up fetching water and coffee for people who actually knew what they were doing."

"Somebody has to do that stuff, though, right?"

Jensen doesn't look up from the article he's reading, but there's a warm tug in the pit of his stomach, a visceral response to the concern he can hear in Jared's voice.

"Yeah. But I wanted to feel like I was doing something, making a difference somewhere. Bottom line, I wanted to go for myself. There are people who are really serious about it, committed to it, you know? I was just gonna be in the way." He sent a check instead, because he's pretty good at that part of it. He just wishes he could be good at something better.

Jared dumps another packet of sugar into his coffee and stirs. Jensen waits it out, letting him think. "I think it says something good, though. That you wanted to do something."

"I still want to do something," Jensen says. Signing checks is doing something, but it doesn't feel like a valid life plan.

"I have a new theory," Jared says after a while, around an entire donut.

Jensen looks at Jared over the top of the paper. "A theory about what?"

"All this." Jared waves a hand, and Jensen understands it to mean the store, and Jensen, and everything. "You have a secret identity."

"I thought we already did that one. Or do you mean... like Bruce Wayne?" Jensen can get behind that one; he can definitely see himself as a masked crusader for justice by night, manic-depressive businessman by day.

But Jared's expression, half amusement and half disgust, puts that idea in the ground. "I'm thinking some famous writer who churns out a best-seller a year," he says. "Sells the movie rights, makes a summer blockbuster, makes a bundle, right? But a recluse. Doesn't want the fame, just the fortune. Like Stephen King, or Neil Gaiman."

Jensen laughs. "I hate to disillusion you, Jared, but Stephen King definitely wants the fame."

"*Like* them," Jared explains patiently. "Not *actually* them."

"I know, I'm just saying. Wrong and wrong. Feel free to keep guessing, though. I don't have anywhere to be."

"No cross-cultural journeys of self-discovery in your immediate future?" Jared's not looking at him, but there's color in his cheeks, and he's listening like the answer really matters.

"I think it's best I leave the on-the-ground stuff to people with actual skills."

"Good," Jared says firmly. "I like you here. Here is good."

Jensen keeps his eyes on his screen, biting back a pleased grin, and starts an email to Loretta; until he figures himself out, bankrolling dedicated people is the least he can do.

"Sacred writing time?" Jared asks, watching him type madly away.

"My summer blockbuster," Jensen says.

~

It takes a while to build up to hauling Jared off to Kane's. Partly because Jensen's not really comfortable with what his friends might feel drunkenly compelled to spill about him, but mostly because the next move Jensen's waiting for never quite happens. Jared does a lot of looking, especially when he thinks Jensen's not paying attention, and he does a lot of teasing, but he doesn't put himself out there again. Jensen has just about convinced himself that Jared never really meant anything by it; he was only being friendly, in his bizarrely cute and suggestive way. He probably come-hithers everybody he knows like that. It's fine; friendship is a good thing, and Jensen can work with it. Friendship is easy.

Kane's is on what passes for the main drag of Bishop's Landing, and it's the main hangout for the post-college slacker crowd, which most of Jensen's friends belong to. It's always crowded on Friday nights, but the big press doesn't start till around ten. Jensen and Jared get there just past eight, while there are still open tables here and there. Jensen steers them through the crowd and up to the bar, orders a couple of beers, and gazes a little longer than necessary at Tom's shoulders as he hands them over. He figures that will send the right kind of message: I'm absolutely chill, Jared, see? Not pining at all. Not even a little.

Tom is, beyond question, the most classically handsome person Jensen has ever seen in real life. He's got the blue eyes and the square jaw and the cinematic ideal of a smile, and he's not all that bad below the neck, either. He's calm and centered and wiser than his years, and by all rights Jensen should be head over heels for him. But he's never had even a flicker of interest in Tom, and Tom knows it, so when Jensen's eyes linger on him, Tom's eyes flick over to Jared.

"I'm not your decoy, Ackles," he says, and slams the bottles down on the bar with more force than is strictly required. "And you can tell Chris to go fuck himself for even suggesting it."

Jensen's head falls forward and his shoulders slump. The other thing Tom is, is really fucking smart.

"Tom Welling," Tom says to Jared, stretching a hand out over the bar. "You must be the new guy." They shake hands, smiling at each other from their ridiculously attractive faces, and for a second there's a hot spark of jealousy in Jensen's chest.

"Jensen brought me here to scare me off," Jared says cheerfully, and the tiny spark gutters mercifully and dies.

"How's that working out for him?"

Jared smiles down at Jensen, his eyes warm and amused. "Not really all that well."

Jensen grabs both bottles and points a warning finger at Tom, who grins and zips it instead of saying whatever unfriendly, un-back-having thing he was about to say. There's a table in the corner by the window, not too far from the bar; it's the same table Jensen always takes, and he drops into the same chair he always does, waving at Jared to sit wherever he likes.

Jared likes the chair next to Jensen's, and he likes it closer than is really necessary. When he takes his beer, his arm brushes up against Jensen's, and he gives Jensen a long, smoky look that lets him know Jared did it on purpose.

"I see what taking my time gets me," Jared says darkly, knocking Jensen's friendship theory off the table.

"We'll have company in a few," Jensen says, looking out at the street. This early in summer, twilight comes a little later every day. The evening has gone pale blue out there, cool and shadowy under a slowly darkening sky. "You call Chad?"

"No." Jared ducks his head and laughs. "I, uh. I don't really bring him along for first impressions."

"That's cold. Does he know you ditched him?"

"It was his idea! He knows what he's like, he just can't help it. Once your friends are crazy about me, I'll bring him in to meet everybody. They'll love him by proxy. Or at least tolerate him, which is good enough for me, and more than he gets from most people."

"I have a friend like that. We should probably keep them apart for the safety of the town."

"Chad with a partner in crime," Jared says thoughtfully. "That's going to give me nightmares."

"You don't know the half of it." Jensen leans back in his chair and waves toward the crowd with his beer. "You're about to, though. I don't hide mine in the attic."



Jensen likes Mike the way some people like Shark Week on the Discovery channel. He's awesome, as long as he's somewhere else. He's not somewhere else right now, though; he's pushing his way through people and tables and lounging to a stop directly across from Jensen. "Oh, Christ," he says, "seriously? I thought you were supposed to be on hiatus."

"Jared," Jensen says, "ignore everything this man says. He's a soulless liar and an enemy to children and small animals."

It doesn't work. Jared's already on his feet, reaching out to shake Mike's hand. "Jared Padalecki. Hiatus from what?"

Mike looks from Jared to Jensen without letting go of Jared's hand, then sighs and rolls his eyes at the same time. "Life," he says, and Jensen releases a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "Jensen's a shut-in."

"Fuck you," Jensen says. "I get out. I make friends."

"With children and small animals," Mike says drily, but his smile loses some of its sharp edges. He looks Jared over with a speculative gleam in his eyes. "Mike Rosenbaum. At your service."

Jared tugs his hand out of Mike's. "Uh. Thanks."

Mike pulls out a chair and falls into it, hooking an arm over the back, turning his torso into a long smooth arch. When Jared fails to look impressed, Mike arches an eyebrow at Jensen. "Hiatus, my ass," he says.

"Tom's watching," Jensen says, toying innocently with his napkin.

The change is instantaneous; a blush rises in Mike's cheeks, his smile melts away, and he leans in over the table, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. "Did he—"

"See you slobbering over the new guy?" Jensen grins. "No. Lucky for you, he's distracted by that cute little thing with the pony tail."

Mike's head whips around; and there's Tom, cleaning a glass and chatting comfortably with Chris. Mike turns back, his eyes glittering with cheerful malice. "You are an evil son of a bitch, Jensen."

Jensen nods, and tips his beer in Mike's direction. "And don't you forget it."

Jared leans back, draping his wrist over the back of Jensen's chair. If he flexed his fingers he could touch Jensen's shoulder, and Jensen wants him to; he really, really does. That's how Chris finds them.



"Jenny," he says, clapping Jensen on the shoulder Jared isn't almost touching. "Look at you, you made a friend! Hang on a sec while I alert the media."

"Ass." Jensen leans back; for a second, Jared's hand is warm against his shoulder blade. Then it's gone, Jared on his feet again, shaking hands with Chris and introducing himself.

"Ass is just a title," Chris says. "I go by Chris Kane."

"So this is your place."

"Mine and Jensen's, yeah. He put up for half of it, not that he does a lick of work around here. Too busy with his rich and famous lifestyle to put in an honest day with the middle class."

Jared's eyebrows go up and he tilts his head at Jensen, like he's checking for dollar sign tattoos that he somehow overlooked before. Jensen gives Chris a rude shove, glaring at him so he doesn't have to meet Jared's eyes. He's used to people just knowing his financial status; hell, a few years back it was on CNN. It's been a while since he met anybody who might need cluing in, and he has no idea how to go about it. If he just comes out with it, it feels like oversharing; if he lets Chris ramble on, he'll come off like some kind of Hiltonesque freak. Chris means well, and that's about all Jensen can say for him some days.

"Don't listen to him," he tells Jared, trying to blow it all off. It's becoming kind of a theme. "He's just mad because I don't have time to be bothered with his boozery. I'm a silent partner. Very very silent."

"Like a mime," Chris agrees. He gives Jensen a pointed look, but lets it go at that, and turns to focus on Jared. "For instance, he never once told me his mystery patient was hot as hell and the size of a small tree."

"I object to the small part," Jared says. "Hot, though?" He lays a hand over his heart, and turns sad eyes on Jensen. "You didn't tell them I was hot? That hurts me, man."

"I didn't write your name in my Trapper Keeper, either," Jensen says. Some of his tension bleeds off under Jared's warm gaze, and he picks at the label of his bottle, trying not to smile. "Anyway, they have eyes, don't they?"

"Aww." Jared smiles, quick and genuine, and leans in close to Jensen. "That's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," he says, low enough that only Jensen can hear.

"Don't get used to it," Jensen says, just as quiet. But his cheeks are warmer than the crowded bar can account for, and when Jared's hand moves to the back of his chair again, Jensen leans into it.

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Jared fits in. It's not like Jensen didn't expect it. Why wouldn't he? He's sharp, easy-going, funny in a way that's completely devoid of malice... okay, that's not exactly the norm among Jensen's friends, but it's a refreshing change. He talks business with Chris, tats with Danneel, bizzarro cocktail requests with Tom when Danneel takes over for him at shift change. He tells the story of how Jensen 'rescued' him in a way that has even Jensen tearing up with laughter. There's a kind of warmth and weirdness to him that ties Jensen up in knots, makes him want to listen to Jared talk forever.

He thinks about that as he walks Jared back to the shop at the end of the night. It's not far, just under a mile, but his knee starts bugging him around the third block. It doesn't slow him down, doesn't ever evolve into real pain anymore, but his cane has only been in the closet for a year, barely long enough to gather dust. He wants to reach out; he could just grab Jared's hand, he could just say something. But the ache in his leg and the cool night air are making it a little too easy to remember things he doesn't want to associate with Jared.

They don't talk much. It's not an awkward silence, nothing Jensen feels like he has to fill with small talk or explanations. Jared keeps that same distance between them, a inch of space or more.

"Thanks," Jared says when they're standing next to his car. He's got his hands in his pockets, his arms straight, his shoulders high. It's the first sign of nervousness he's shown since Jensen first met him; he doesn't wear it well. "It was good to get out, meet some people. I appreciate it."

"They're good guys."

"Yeah. Tom says I'm gonna have a busy morning, he told everybody he served about the bakery. I told him to come by for all the muffins he can eat, any time. Chad will be over the moon. "

"That's awesome, man." Jensen's keys jingle a little in his hand, which seems to be shaking; he closes his fingers around them in a fist.

Jared laughs quietly. "Okay." He takes a breath, takes a step toward Jensen. "I can't really get a read on you, Jensen. So I'm just gonna do this, okay? If it's a problem, you just say so." He reaches out, both hands warm and careful around the back of Jensen's neck, thumbs sweeping up over Jensen's jaw. "And if it's not, just... come here..."

Jared takes it slow, like he really does think Jensen might not want it; pulls him in, takes a breath against Jensen's mouth and breathes out, "Okay?"

"Jesus." Jensen steadies himself, hands clenched in the fabric of Jared's shirt, and pushes up into it. For a second it's just relief — *yes, thank God, you want it, too* — and then the ground falls out from under him. It's been a long time, and Jared's hands on him are good, strong and wide. They tilt Jensen's face up to just the right angle, open him up in just the right way.

Jensen was already on the edge, but the slide of Jared's tongue against his cranks him up even higher. His dick throbs in his pants, want hitting him harder and faster than it has in years. His hips jerk against Jared's, and there's a moment when Jared freezes, just a second. He makes this sound, hot and low, like a growl from deep in his chest, and his hands come down to Jensen's hips, his leg slides between Jensen's so they can both get just what they need.

That's it for Jensen; he hasn't had anything like this for so long, he doesn't know how to keep his guard up. He just wants — Jared's hands, his mouth, his body, everything, and he doesn't care much how he gets it. He rubs against Jared, and it's good, heat and pressure, ramping up with every push. And Jared's still kissing him like nothing in the world can stop him, licking into Jensen's mouth like they're fucking right there, like they're going to be fucking any second. They could be; anybody could see them from the street and Jensen's not sure it would stop him, not sure there's anything he wouldn't do to keep Jared under his hands, keep Jared's mouth open on him until he comes apart from it. It's been nothing but friendly hands in convenient places for years, and now Jensen feels like he's drowning in it.

The shock of it races over his skin like ice water, electric and sharp. He says, "Stop," mainly because he doesn't want to and he doesn't know how to handle that. He pulls back, breath coming in short hard gasps. Jared makes that sound again, and follows; Jensen's heart thuds in his chest and he grabs at Jared's collar and holds him off, just for a second. He just needs a second, to breathe, to get himself on solid ground. Jared reaches for his face, and Jensen flinches, he can't help it, pushes Jared away and takes a step back himself, cool night air flowing between them.

He crosses his arms over his chest and tries to breathe slow, even, calm. He doesn't look at Jared; not now, not until he stops feeling like his lungs are caving in.

When he does, he realizes he didn't need to worry. Jared's pressed against the door of his beat-up car, eyes on the ground, as far from Jensen as he can get without actually leaving.

"I'm sorry," Jared says, "I'm so, so sorry. I just — I didn't get it right away, and I didn't mean to —"

"Hey, no. It's not — you were fine." Jensen shakes his head. He's shaking, but it's not Jared, he knows that; it's not anything Jared did, or didn't do. It's something inside him, cold and clawing its way up from a mental cellar he thought he'd sealed off for good. "I'm just not... I can't do this."

The words come out of him fast and unsteady, not what he meant to say at all. But once they're out there, he knows it's true, because he can't — he can't do this. He can't feel for somebody this much, can't want somebody this much, and keep himself safe. He's felt safe before. When that nasty bit of logic clicks into place a chill slides through him, builds itself up around him like a wall.

"It's okay," Jared says. He looks up, looks at Jensen for the first time since Jensen pushed him away. "You don't have to. I won't push. I don't have to be asked twice. I'm not that guy."

"I'm so fucking sorry." Jensen's stomach is clenched like a fist inside him, a wreck of nausea and stress. "I'm just—" Terrified. Stupid. Making a horrible mistake. "I'm sorry. I'm a little fucked up, I just didn't know how much. It's not that I don't want to."

"Don't worry about it," Jared says, and he's trying so hard to make it all okay, to make Jensen feel better — it breaks Jensen's heart. Jared smiles crookedly, playing it out like he's not upset at all; Jensen can see straight through it, but he can't make himself change anything, can't say any of the things that might make a difference.

He says, "Jared," hoping something worthy will follow. But it doesn't. He's gone past that now.

"Jensen. We're good." Carefully, telegraphing every move, Jared takes a step closer and wraps his hand gently around Jensen's arm. "I promise. We're good."

It lasts long enough for Jensen to register strength, and the heat of his hand; then Jared's backing away again, fumbling with his own keys and turning to his car. "Okay," Jensen says as Jared climbs in and shuts the door. "Good, that's good."

He's not even sure Jared hears him. The engine purrs to life, headlights come on, and Jared's backing out of his spot, pulling out of the parking lot. Gone.

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Jensen goes home, locks his door and climbs the stairs to his room. He doesn't really sleep. He tries, tosses and turns and twists his sheets into knots looking for a position that doesn't make his head throb. He has some weird dreams that don't have anything to do with anything. In between he lies awake and thinks about the weeks he spent counting tiles on a white hospital ceiling, always a little colder than he wanted to be, lonely and bored and pissed off and scared. The last thing was the worst thing. He's not a scared guy.

"I'm fucking things up," he tells Danneel on Saturday night, sprawled out on his bed watching MASH reruns with the sound down, the phone tucked between his shoulder and his ear.

"Is this about the new guy?"

"He kissed me, or I kissed him, or something. And I pushed him away. He said it wouldn't be a thing, he wasn't that kind of guy. But it's turning out to be a thing after all."

"Definitely the new guy, then."

"I like him." Jensen takes a deep breath, and closes his eyes. "I really like him," he says when he exhales, and it's enough to make him dizzy, just saying it out loud. "I'm such an idiot."

"For liking him, or for pushing him away even though you like him?"

"Both."

"Come over here." Danneel doesn't sound half as sorry for Jensen as he feels he deserves. "I'll paint your toenails, and we can eat ice cream and drink mojitos and read *Marie Claire*. It'll be awesome."

"Gee, thanks, but I'm actually being serious here."

"So am I. If I were kidding, I would have offered to braid your hair. Look, I get why you're having a hard time hooking up with somebody new. But honestly, I think you're still so fucked up over Aaron—" She pauses. "There was going to be more to that sentence, but I think that pretty much covers it. At some point, you're going to have to start living your life again."

"Your relationship advice sucks," Jensen says. "Just so you know."

"That's because I'm not giving you any. I'm banging my tattoo artist; I'm nobody's love guru. And for the record, Chris isn't either, but who you choose to run your life when you're too lame to do it yourself is none of my business."

Jensen flops over onto his back, pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead. "You know, a mojito doesn't sound half bad right now."

"Then get out of your fucking house and go get one," Danneel says, and hangs up.

Monday morning he drives down to Boston, skipping rush hour and hitting the tunnel at ten-thirty, an easy twenty minutes from his driveway to the firm's valet parking. He hands his keys and a tip to a red-haired twelve-year-old with so many freckles on his face they bleed together. The kid hops in his truck and drives off toward the roped-off spots, so he can't really be twelve, but *damn*.

The receptionist waves him down the hall to Loretta's office, where her door is already open. She smiles and stands up when he walks in, a full head shorter than Jensen and still one of the scariest people he's ever met. She's got a sweet round face, dark skin, dark eyes, and she takes Jensen's hand in both of hers and gives him a long, searching look. He holds still for it, knowing she'll see right through him if he tries to hide. When she's done, her smile is softer, a little sad. "You look like ten miles of rough road, boy," she says.

"It hasn't been the best week." Jensen waits for her to take a seat in the big leather chair behind her desk, then drops into one of the two smaller versions of it across from her. "Nothing I can't handle, though."

Loretta's opinion of what Jensen can and can't handle is written in the unimpressed downturn of her mouth. "I've heard that one before."

"I must've taken a wrong turn coming out of the tunnel, ended up at my therapist's office by mistake."

She cracks out a big, warm laugh. "Like anybody with half a brain would even apply for that job."

"Come on, Lo. Wouldn't you rather tell me how much money I made this month than hear about my social life?"

"We've got an hour. I can do both."

"Money first," he bargains, leaning back in his chair. "After that, we'll see."

Loretta's smart, scary smart, and her knowledge of Jensen's finances is far more comprehensive than his own. She lays things out for him, the status of his investments, what he's made and what he owes and what she's doing about it. She's got a list of everything he's bought on his house account, into which he pays himself a ridiculous allowance, and something to say about almost all of it. One thing Loretta Devine is not: shy about her opinions.

When she gets down to the bookstore and its utter lack of income, she drops her printout onto the desk in front of her and leans back, watching Jensen carefully and toying with a sleek silver pen. "You're not listening to a word I say, are you," she says finally, shaking her head.

"I'm listening! I'm only understanding every third word or so... but I'm definitely listening."

"Jensen Ackles, you did not come all the way down here today to hear what I'm doing with your money. You know we could have covered that over the phone. So why exactly am I sitting here looking at the most miserable rich, young white boy in the continental United States when I could be getting an early start on a well-deserved series of lunchtime martinis?"

Jensen leans in and props his elbows up on his knees, dropping any pretense of interest in his interest rates. "I need to get out of here, Lo. I need to be doing something. I'm just kicking around that empty house all the time; I feel like I'm haunting it instead of living in it. I need to do some work I can put my hands on." He looks away, over at the hazy city view outside her window. "Maybe someplace out of town."

"This sudden need for something to do somewhere else," Loretta says gently. "Does he have a name?"

He can feel the blush working its way up his throat and into his face. "It's not like that."

"I wasn't born yesterday. I can see it's exactly like that."

Jensen wipes a hand over his face, and when he looks up at her again, it's like she's looking straight into his heart, reading him cover to cover. "Honey," she says, "I can drop you somewhere if that's what you want. I can send you off wherever you want to go. Something is always on fire somewhere, and the Good Lord knows there's no shortage of places in this world that could use an extra pair of hands. But this office is the farthest you've been from your front door in three years, and even if you were ready to expand that circle — which you are not — whatever's got your engine running would be sitting right where you left it when you came back."

"Maybe a little expansion is what I need."

"Maybe." Loretta nods, spinning her pen again against the glass desktop. "Or maybe what you need is something you can find closer to home."

Jensen raises his eyebrows. "Sounds like you have something in mind."

"You were in school when all this fell on you; why did you quit?"

Jensen starts to answer, is *ready* to answer, when he realizes he doesn't actually know. "Nobody ever asked me that before," he says. "I don't even think I did. It seemed like the normal thing to do."



"And what part of going from being Sallie Mae's bitch to being able to put your entire town through college, all in the space of one day, would you call normal?"

"I don't know. It's not like I needed to start a career to support myself. It was a lot of money, and I had no idea what to do with it, and Aaron said—"

Jensen stops, his throat closing up around the words. *Aaron said*. He feels like there's something pressing down on his chest, forcing all the air out; he grips the arms of his chair hard, to keep his hands from shaking.

Loretta just watches him and waits it out.

"Fuck," is what he says when he thinks he has control of his voice again. "God damn it. Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell is wrong with me?"

"Watch your mouth," Loretta says calmly. "You can cuss at your therapist if you want, but we don't take the Lord's name in vain in this office."

"Sorry. I can't believe I was just about to quote him to you."

"People plant seeds in each other every time they meet. Every time you find one, it's because you dug down deep enough to let the light in."

Jensen laughs, a little too loud for the room. "Great. Got any weedkiller?"

"Spoils the earth," she says. "What you do is yank them up, and plant something better."

"Like what?"

"Like life, Jensen. Something that isn't empty, like that bookstore or that house you're haunting."

"Get a life," he says. "That's your prescription for me. Thank you, Ms. Shatner. That's profound."

"And a job, while you're at it. Work is good for you. I don't think it matters much what it is, as long as it keeps your butt out of my office for more than a week at a time."

Jensen laughs tiredly. "You're *worse* than my therapist."

"I'll send you a bill." Loretta stands up. "You just think about it, Jensen. What you're doing now, the money you're giving to good people and good causes, that's no small thing. And if you want to do more, get on the ground with them and help with your hands and your heart, I think that shows you're a damn fine kid, even if you are a little touched. But if you really want my advice?"

Jensen nods; it's what he came for.

"Fix your head first. Figure out what you can do best for people, and do that, whatever it turns out to be. There's no rule that says you have to be rich for a living, Jensen. You can still be whatever it was you wanted to be when you grew up."

"I don't know." Jensen stands up, too. "I think it's a little late to enroll in astronaut school."

She smacks him on the arm, then opens the door to show him out. "You know what I mean."

"I do," he says, and just narrowly avoids adding the 'ma'am' that he knows would get him smacked again. "I'll give it some thought."

"Not too much," she says kindly. "I doubt you have all that much to spare."



There's no reason to expect Jared to interrupt sacred writing time with food and coffee on Tuesday; there's no reason to expect Jared to come back at all. Still, Jensen spends too much time listening for the bell over the door. It never rings. He gets no writing done, which is not unusual, but this time he kind of blames Jared for it. He spends the morning flipping back and forth between Metafilter and his empty story file, bored by both. At lunch time he walks over to Kane's to grab a sandwich, and kills some time talking to Danny.

She's got a new tattoo on her arm to go with the tattoo artist in her bed, and she's not sure which one she likes best. She rolls her sleeve up and peels back the bandage to show him; if ink skill translates into bedroom skill, the artist is a keeper. He gets his lunch free when he says so, which would impress him more if he wasn't already part-owner of it.

Wednesday is not much different. No writing. No bell. No Jared. Jensen brings his lunch in and doesn't bother Danny, but everything else is the same. Jensen tells himself it's for the best; he's not ready for Jared, for how he feels when he's with Jared. But he didn't think he'd shut *everything* down. He didn't think Jared would vanish completely. Jared said they were good.

On Thursday, Jensen doesn't wait for the bell. He leaves the house at eight, his laptop and notebook in his backpack, and walks down the hill, past the pet boutique and the pharmacy and the farmer's market. He can smell fresh bread and warm sugar long before he turns the corner. It's another block, just past the library, before he stands in front of the bakery, his hand white-knuckled around the strap of his backpack, his jaw aching with tension. He's annoyed about having to be here in the first place, out of his usual territory, and he's freaked out about facing Jared again. He's seriously considering leaving when a legit customer says "In or out, buddy," from behind him, and pushes past him to reach for the door.

Jensen braces himself, and follows her in.

He's got a speech ready, about how he went to all the trouble of introducing Jared to his friends because he thought Jared was a good guy, and now Jared's being all weird and it's not cool at all; about how it's a small town and they're going to run into each other a lot and there's no point in trying to avoid each other. It's kind of an angry speech for being about how they should both suck it up and deal, but it's been a long time since Jensen felt inclined to keep somebody new in his life. And maybe he doesn't know Jared really *really* well yet, but he's pretty sure Jared will accept his logic; he's a rational person, and he doesn't seem like the type to hold a grudge.

The problem is, the guy behind the counter isn't Jared.

The guy behind the counter has spiky blond hair and a sharp chin and a bad attitude, and he glares like he thinks Jensen might be there to rob the place.

"Quit staring," the guy snaps. "I may be the hottest thing in the store, but I'm not on the menu. What do you want, dude? There's a line."

"Wow," Jensen says, enlightened. "You're Chad."

"Do I know you?"

"Uh, no. I've heard a lot about you though, most of which turns out to be extremely accurate."

"Oh?" Chad says, leaning forward with a menacing slant to his eyebrows. And then: "...oh! Oh, hey, you're that guy. The paramedic." Chad's face rearranges itself into something less threatening, but still not particularly friendly. "Jared mentioned you."

That doesn't bode well. "I'm not actually a paramedic," Jensen says, but Chad's not listening. He's yelling, instead — for Jared, at top volume, not even bothering to turn around.

When he's done alerting the county to Jensen's presence, he drops his voice back into a more normal range and says, "I'm not gay."

"Well, damn," Jensen says, blinking. "There go my plans for the night."

"He said you were funny." Chad doesn't look even a little bit amused. "I'm just telling you in case you thought I was fucking Jared."

"Thanks. But no, he cleared that up right off the bat." Having met Chad, he'd sooner suspect Jared of kicking kittens. "You say pretty much whatever comes into your head, don't you."

"It saves time," Chad says frankly. "It would suck if I got people to like me and they only found out what I'm like later."

"Finding out up front's not all that great either," Jared says, coming through the door behind the counter. "Hey, Jensen." He's wearing faded jeans and a black t-shirt under a white apron. There's a smudge of flour across his right cheekbone, and a little dusting of it along the tops of his arms. It's obscenely close to Jensen's initial run at mental baker-porn.

Jared watches him with those stupidly sweet eyes, warm but not exactly comfortable, not exactly smiling. Jensen feels like too much of a dick in that instant to even think about being upset; instead he just wants to fix what he broke, fast. He wants Jared to go back to looking at him the way he did that first day in the shop, or the other night in the bar, or really any time they've been together that Jensen hasn't acted like a complete idiot.

"Jared," he says. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure." Jared looks around the store like a private spot will manifest itself between the cupcake display and the coffee bar. "Yeah, okay," he says, "I guess — you want to come around to the kitchen?"

"Don't mind me," Chad says, "I'll just stay out here and take care of the entire breakfast rush until the pastry runs out."

"Hey, Chad, you know what?" Jared claps him on the shoulder. "Shut the hell up. Jensen, come on back."

Jensen follows him, past Chad and past racks of bagels and croissants and muffins. The place smells like heaven, but Jensen's too tense to enjoy it. Jared stops by a long, bare stainless steel counter next to a deep sink with a sprayer dangling over it. He

leans against it, his legs stretching out for miles. His face is a blank slate. "So, what's up?"

"You didn't come by." Jensen feels like a moron the second he says it, but there it is. Jared didn't come by after that night at Kane's, and it hurts. "So I thought, maybe there was something we needed to talk about."

Jared laughs; it sounds weird, strained and unhappy. "Yeah, well," he says. "Sacred writing time, and all..."

"Bullshit."

Jared's head snaps up, a flare of actual anger in his eyes. It's gone as fast as it came, but Jensen's grateful for it, glad he saw it. The thought of Jared just blowing him off, not *caring* — that sucks. That's what he can't handle, the idea of Jared being indifferent to him, the idea that maybe Jensen's already screwed it up just that bad.

"Look," Jensen says in a softer tone. "I'm not exactly the easiest person to get along with. I mean, I'm no Chad or anything—" Jared snorts, and Jensen lets himself relax enough to smile. "I'm just saying, I don't actually like most people. I don't really go out of my way to make friends. I was kind of thinking we were on the way there, though, before I spazzed out the other night."

"Dude." Jared comes off the counter and stands in front of Jensen, a weird distance halfway between too close and not quite close enough. "I was giving you some space. I took a shot, you shot me down. I just thought you'd appreciate a breather, that's all."

"Oh." Jensen looks up at Jared, with his earnest face and sincere eyes and it's all he can do not to tackle him right there. "Oh," he says again, "I thought. I thought you were—" he waves a hand aimlessly at the space between them. "Whatever."

Jared grins, dimples on full display, and Jensen can suddenly breathe again. "I'm not whatever," Jared says, and gives Jensen's shoulder a little shake. "But dude, if you're not putting out, you don't get the free muffins every day. A guy's got to have some standards."

"But I saved your life," Jensen whines, and Jared laughs and gives him another shake, and then carefully — like he thinks Jensen might bolt again — hooks him into a hug. It's like getting mugged by Bigfoot, though Jensen imagines Bigfoot doesn't smell quite so strongly of warm chocolate, and it's the best thing that's happened to Jensen since the last time Jared had him this close.

"Okay," Jared says quietly into the top of Jensen's head, "fair enough. For service above and beyond the call, I guess I can spare a muffin now and then."



Jared's a great baker. If Jensen didn't already know that from the key lime cupcake Jared picked out for him, he'd know it from watching the guy move. He's traded places with Jared, parking himself at the counter by the sink while Jared moves around the giant butcher's block island that takes up most of the space in the kitchen. He's got a dozen different things going on — balls of dough sitting around at random, mixing bowls filled with thick batters and thin, a couple of pies at various stages of completion. He knows where everything is, never seems to lose track of what he's doing or what he needs to do. And he's having a blast, keeping up a running commentary like one of those cooking shows on the Food Network. Jensen thinks Jared would be awesome at that, except for how the show would be X-rated.

There's a pause in the flow of sound coming from Jared's direction, and Jensen raises his eyes to find Jared staring, waiting for a response to something that didn't register the first time, for reasons Jensen won't be sharing. He replays it back to the last thing he actually heard and says, "So, wait... there's bread math?"

"There's bread math," Jared confirms. "Okay, look, come over here."

Jensen looks down at his shirt. It's dark purple, and it has a nice subtle sheen on it, and it's new. "I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Hey, I ruined a shirt at your place of business. It's only fair. Anyway, flour washes out."

"If I get flour all over this, I'll have to walk back to the store looking like I had a tragic baking accident. I had a spare shirt for you. And anyway, it's not like I made you bleed all over yourself. This is totally different."

"You think we don't have marketing? We have marketing." Jared vanishes into a store room that Jensen had mistaken for an office, and comes back with a black t-shirt wrapped in cellophane. He slaps it against Jensen's chest and steps back, leaving Jensen no choice but to grab it. "Had to guess at the size, but if it's too big I don't care, and if it's too small I won't mind." Jared grins, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "So come on, man. Math time."

Jensen looks at Jared, then at the shirt. A few white strokes and a neon orange spiral give the abstract impression of a cupcake, over the word *Hearthstone* in a quirky font. It's cool — far nicer than the one he gave Jared, which was printed by the same place that does the local Little League uniforms. "Okay," Jensen says, and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

"Um, what — hey!" Jared's eyes widen, then abruptly snap shut. He claps a hand over them. In a slightly strangled voice he says, "There's no nudity in baking, Jensen!"

"Freak." Jensen slides his shirt off his arms, then pulls the t-shirt on. It fits just right, maybe a little tight across the shoulders and in the sleeves, but not too bad. "You can look now, Grandma. I'm decent."

Jared levels a finger at Jensen. "You're kind of a priss about your clothes, dude."

"I prefer the term 'metrosexual.'" Jensen shakes out his hands, flexes his fingers, and steps up to the counter. "Are we gonna do this thing, or what?"

Jared leads Jensen around to the other side of the counter, and nudges him at a bowl full of pale white goo. "Wet your hands down, here," he pushes Jensen's hands into a bowl of clear water, "then reach in and grab a big handful of dough."

Jared eyes the tub of dough. "I don't want to."

"Tough. My shop, my rules."

Jensen sighs, and reaches in. The goo affixes itself to his hand instantly, the water only helping a little. It clings to his fingers, to itself, and to the sides of the bowl with a million tiny strands that apparently have invisible suckers at the ends. A nice beery smell drifts up from the hole he's made in the stuff, and there ends the list of things Jensen enjoys about this activity.

"I've seen this movie," he tells Jared. "It doesn't end well for the town."

"Now, drop it onto the loose flour, here."



"I don't think I can." Jensen tries to detach bits of it from himself, and only succeeds in getting more of himself stuck. He shakes his hand experimentally to dislodge it through the application of physics; no luck.

"You're a riot. Hold still."

Jared wets his hands and scoops the dough out of Jensen's, nothing left behind. It's like magic, or, well, like it's Jared's job. He plops the wad of dough onto the floured counter space and sprinkles a little more flour on top. His eyes are intent, crinkled at the corners in concentration, and Jensen's amazed all over again at how well Jared fits into his own life. He's jealous and impressed, all at once.

"Is this how you usually do it?"

Jared shrugs. "Nah. I mean, sometimes, yeah. I like working with my hands, you know? I have equipment and stuff for bigger batches, or for when I get behind or if we're in a crunch, but this is more fun." He pushes his hair out of his eyes, leaving a white streak of flour slanting across the side of his face.

"It is fun," Jensen says quietly, because it's just...nice, somehow, to watch Jared work, to see how much he likes it, how into it he is. Somehow, Jensen's feelings about *World of Warcraft* don't seem to measure up.

Jared's face lights up. "Good. I'm glad."

"Me, too."

"I mean, not just that you get it. I'm glad you came. I wanted to come by, I just... I wasn't sure you would want me to. I guess I was just being weird." Jared's face gets redder the longer he goes on. "I'm just glad you're here."

Jensen can't find a way to say it back to him, and he'd probably say it wrong anyhow. Or choke on it halfway through, a distinct possibility. He can do this, though: he reaches up and brushes back Jared's hair. He drags his thumb across Jared's temple, then goes back, and makes another sweep. That gets it all. Jensen's heart pounds, too fast, and his hand shakes a little; he pulls back and takes a steadying breath. He's not flipping out, he's just... taking it slow. "You, uh. You had." He holds up his thumb to show Jared the residue of flour, then dusts it off. "Sorry."

"No problem," Jared says, his voice a little strained. "Thanks."

"I'm really sorry," Jensen says. "About the other night. I was just a little..."

"Fucked up?" Jared nods. "It's still okay."

Jensen ducks his head, hiding a smile. He's really glad he's here, too.



"You're such an asshole," Chris tells him later that night, when Jensen's expecting him to be all impressed.

It's completely unfair. It's his house, Chris is sitting on *his* kitchen counter, and Jensen has provided sustenance in pizza and beer format. He deserves praise for his food-gathering skills, if nothing else. Instead he gets Chris giving him that look, that steely-eyed cold-hearted *I will fuck your shit up and not even break a sweat* look he usually reserves for rowdy drunks at the bar. And insulting him. In his *kitchen*.

"First," Jensen says, "The last time that look worked on me I was ten years old and had just found out you were the one who bit Joey Navarro's ear off in the little boys room."

"Half off," Chris says calmly. "They sewed it back on later."

"Second, how am I an asshole here? You're the one who keeps saying I need to get back out there. I'm just following your sage advice, like you always told me I should."

"What does he know about you?" Chris leans back on his hands and gives Jensen a measuring look. "Anything? At all?"

Jensen looks away. "It's early days. I don't know that he needs to know anything right now—"

"So, nothing. Hey, man, look at me." Jensen does; Chris's eyes are softer, but not by much. "You know that's not gonna work."

"It's worked okay so far —" Jensen starts off, but it's half-hearted; he can hear Chris's argument before he even starts in on it.

"I'm talking about long-term. You didn't meet this guy on a dance floor in the city, man. He's moving in right on your home turf. Sounds to me like he's looking to get attached. If you are, too, you need to let him know what he's getting himself into."

"You know exactly why I don't want to do that."

"Yeah, I do," Chris says. "And believe me, if I thought you could be a *happy* monk, I'd shave your head myself. My heart could stand a few more years between me and your next boyfriend drama. But since I can't actually lock you up and post a guard, I think it's about time we both crawled back out from under the pile of crap that landed on you three years ago."

"I'm trying to do that," Jensen points out. "Right now."

"Yeah, well, you might make a little more progress if you went all in once in a while. That's all I'm saying."

"I've been all in." Jensen's heart kicks into high gear, and his throat gets tight, aching around every word. "I went all in with Aaron. It got me half a year in rehab for a knee that still doesn't work right, headaches that laid me out for days, and three years cuddled up to a shrink that costs me more in a month than I used to pay for rent in a year. I'm a little reluctant to pull Jared *all in* to my shit."

He takes a deep breath and turns his back on Chris, shuts his eyes and shakes his head. It takes him a few seconds to start breathing right again, and when he does, it's a little longer before he can speak again. "We're just getting into this. Figuring out if there's anything to get into at all. What he doesn't know about me isn't going to hurt him any."

~

Jensen's not writing. He's not doing anything. He's staring at the walls and at the clock, which is probably broken, because he could swear it's been ten till seven for about three hours now. He could just close up and go home, but it rain is coming down in buckets outside and he can't decide between sucking it up, or sticking it out. He hasn't seen Jared in days and he doesn't know what that means, and he doesn't want to leave too early in case he misses him.

When the downpour starts to slack off, he closes his laptop and stows it in his messenger bag along with his pristinely empty notebook and untouched pens. He locks the register (also empty, except for six one dollar bills, a pack of gum, and half

a roll of quarters) and hits the lights. In the glow from the exit sign and the light in the display window that never goes off, he hits the night button on the store phone, gives the counter a quick check to make sure he didn't leave his keys or his cell, and heads for the door.

Jared's on the other side of it.

He's got two bags from the Wendy's down the street in one hand, and a six-pack of Corona in the other. He looks awful — circles under his eyes, skin too pale and pasty, shoulders slumped like he doesn't have the energy to hold himself all the way upright. Jensen watches him trying to find a way to juggle the bags and the beer one-handed, and yanks the door open.

The bell overhead rings loud and long, and Jared laughs tiredly, his head falling back. "Man, I've been missing that sound all week," he tells the night sky, and shoves the six-pack into Jensen's arms. "Tell me you've got an extra chair in the back. I don't think I can do this at the register today."

"Uh, yeah. Come on in." Jensen steps back to let Jared pass him, then flips the sign on the door to 'sorry, we're closed' and locks it. "You know the way."

Jared heads straight into the back room, and sags into the arm chair in front of Jensen's desk. He drops the bags on an unopened ream of paper next to a printer that's never been turned on, then lets his chin drop to his chest, like somebody found his off switch. He barely looks up when Jensen sits down across from him, so Jensen investigates the bags on his own, fishing out two bacon deluxe double cheeseburgers and two orders of fries. The other bag comes with a side salad, two containers of chili, two baked potatoes with bacon and cheese, and two cups of mandarin orange slices.

"This is great," Jensen says, staring at the food spread across his desk. "But what are you gonna eat?"

"Do not make me laugh." Jared groans, and flops forward at the waist, burying his head in his arms on Jensen's desk. "I'm too tired to laugh. Or breathe. Or eat. Just leave me here, all right? Let me expire in peace."

"No way, dude." Jensen pushes at Jared's head, but can't dislodge it. "You brought all this crap, you're gonna help me get rid of it."

"Not counting blood relatives, you're the meanest person I know."

"What are you doing here if you're this tired?" Jensen frowns. "For that matter, why are you this tired? I thought your baking duties were usually done by noon."

Jared does raise his head at that, and stares at Jensen. "Three-day baking conference in Texas? Restful family visit after? I'm not sure which was more exhausting." He

yawns, not bothering to cover his mouth, and stretches; arms at full length, he can nearly touch the walls on either side of him. "None of this is ringing a bell?"

"I thought that was next week."

"Dude, I emailed you from the conference!"

Jensen blinks. "Oh, um... yeah. Right."

"Jensen-underscore-Ackles! Lifeofthemind.com, right? You're saying you didn't get it?"

"I'm saying, I'm not really great about checking my email," Jensen mutters, scratching at the back of his neck, head ducked so he doesn't have to meet Jared's eyes. He pulls one of the bowls of chili closer to him, pops the top off and says, "Did you get crackers?"

When he does look up, Jared's still staring. But there's a warm light in his eyes, and he doesn't look as tired anymore; he looks kind of smug, which is odd, but there it is. He tosses a packet of crackers across the desk at Jensen, shaking his head. "You are so, so very weird."

"So." Jensen clears his throat and swings the conversation back to Jared. "Good baking conference?"

"Yeah." Jared grins. "You know how I love the bread math."

"So that's where you've been all week." It comes out weird, and Jensen immediately wishes he'd kept his mouth shut. "I didn't have time to stop by the bakery," he explains, "so I didn't know you were gone," and it's just getting worse with every word, so he clamps his mouth shut after that and decides it's time for a beer. He knocks the cap off against the edge of his desk and passes one to Jared, then opens one for himself.

Jared wraps both hands loosely around his bottle, and watches Jensen fidget. "You thought I was here," he says slowly. "And just...not around."

Jensen shrugs. "Like I said, I was kind of busy."

"With your lack of a job or, in fact, any discernible source of legal income."

"I do stuff," Jensen says. "All kinds of stuff."

"Witness protection program!" Jared grins. "You're not the missing Soprano, so... maybe you saw him get whacked in an alley somewhere, and now the Feds have squirreled you away out here in the middle of nowhere, in this one-horse town—"

"Hey, I like this town!"

"— and they're keeping you in style because you're their star witness, you're the one who can crack their whole cartel!"

Jensen laughs. "It's a cartel now?"

"Syndicate," Jared amends, waving a hand to demonstrate that he absolutely does not know the difference. "Whatever. I'm right, aren't I?"

"And you say I'm weird?"

"Yeah," Jared says. "I do. And you know what else?"

"What else?"

"I wouldn't just not be around, you doofus." There's a funny look on Jared's face, kind of soft, kind of warm. "You do get that, right?"

"I get that." Jensen really is starting to get it; starting to understand Jared, what kind of person Jared is. And Jensen could have Jared in his life, being this ridiculously honest, decent, amazing person, if he could get over his own drama long enough to just grab hold. "You're a good guy, Jared. You should..."

"I should what?"

Jensen shakes his head, and starts loading food back into the bags Jared brought. "You should come to my place," he says finally, and whatever shit Chris gives him for it later, it feels right. Jensen's earned it; he's had a shitty week. "I have a great kitchen. I can't actually cook anything but soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, but within those limits, I do all right. Better than this crap," he finishes, and gives a particularly hard shove to one of the baked potatoes. "Certainly less likely to kill you."

"Is this a good idea? Because it seems like it might kind of blur the lines."

"I like them a little blurry." Jensen says it straight out, honest, out of respect for the honesty Jared's always shown him, and the way Jared's eyes crinkle when he grins—that's the best reward there is.

Jared's eyes widen and darken at the same time. "Well, now," he says in a long, soft drawl. "Coming from you, this is almost like a *move*, Jen."

"It may be," Jensen says; and it feels good to say it, to be able to do it. "But if you give me any shit about it, I'm taking it all back."



The driveway is long and steep. From the road, it winds up a small hill and around behind the main house. The garage is big enough for a fleet, but so far there's only Jensen's truck. It's attached to the main house by a narrow hallway made mostly of glass.

Pulling up the drive, Jared doesn't even pretend he's not peering through the trees, angling for a glimpse of the place. Jensen watches him look for it, and when another curve brings it into view, he watches Jared's jaw go slack.

"Be it ever so humble..."

"You're such a pathetic show-off," Jared says without missing a beat, but he doesn't look away from the place. Jensen's surprised to find he likes that. He expected to be nervous, letting Jared in this far. He expected to freak out a little. Instead, he finds he kind of enjoys showing his place off to Jared.

"I've lived here almost three years," Jensen says, pulling up into the garage. "I think there are still bits of it I haven't seen."

"That's because it's the size of a small country. Like Iceland," Jared says. "Or the Shire."

"I had it completely renovated when I bought it — I had to, really, it was basically a shell. Nobody lived here for ages. There's a local legend that it's haunted."

"Is it?"

Jensen shrugs, and turns off the ignition. "If there are any ghosts in there, they don't make a racket and they pick up after themselves, so I've got no complaints."

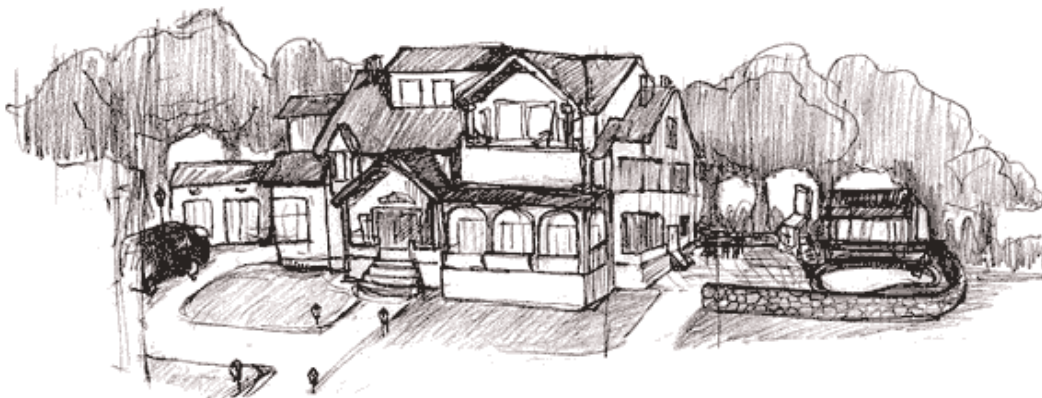
Jared climbs out and walks a little way down the driveway, just to get a better look. "So it's just you, in this... hotel? All by yourself?"

"You may not have noticed this about me, but I actually like to be all by myself."

"Yeah, but. There's living alone, and then there's living alone at The Overlook. All work and no play..."

"Aw, come on. It's not that bad. It's big, but it's not that big. It's not scary-big."

"I got one word for you, Jensen," Jared says. "*Redrum.*"



The floors are hardwood or tile, and the walls are calm neutral colors. The lighting is soft and recessed. It's all very modern and sleek. Jared takes it all in without saying much, a far-away look in his eyes. He's got a little half-smile on his face that makes it hard for Jensen to look at him and keep breathing. Sometimes Jared stops and touches something for no reason, just to see what it feels like. Jensen wishes Jared would do the same to him.

"You like it?"

"Yeah. It's just... it's not really what I expected." He grins, and looks at Jensen, the distance fading out of his eyes. "You're way too much of a dork for this house, is all."



"What did you picture?"

"Definitely someplace less cool," Jared says seriously. "Less likely to have an elevator down to the Bat Cave."

Jensen laughs, and walks Jared through the entryway, through the living room (the designer called it the 'Great room' but even Jensen can't justify that level of preciousness about it), and into kitchen. This is the part he really wants Jared to see, and he's not disappointed.

Jared stands in the doorway and stares. "This is *your* kitchen?"

"Yeah."

"And...you can't cook."

Jensen grins. "Nope."

Jared seems unable to process it. "What...why would you. I mean, what do you *do* in here?"

"Soup and grilled cheese," Jensen says, "like I told you. Ramen noodles when I feel like it. Hotdogs in the microwave. Cereal. Fruit," he adds, pointing at the basket of oranges and apples on the island in the middle of the room. "It's good for you."

Jared swallows, and doesn't look at Jensen. "Ramen noodles," he groans faintly. "In *this kitchen*."

"You know what," Jensen says, "maybe you should make *me* dinner."



The problem is with Jensen's cooking, not his shopping. He shops online and he shops great: healthy whole foods, vegetables, fruit, the whole thing. And he always has the best of intentions regarding the random recipe books his mom sometimes sends him. It's just that after that, he stops at the corner store and picks up Ramen, Cheerios, and mac and cheese in a box.

What Jared can do with what Jensen has in his fridge and pantry is kind of amazing, both because it comes out tasting fantastic, and because it takes him about twenty minutes, tops. Jared explains what he's doing as he does it, just like he did at the bakery. And Jensen watches Jared, just like he did at the bakery — like Jared's doing some kind of off-the-wall performance art instead of just putting ingredients together to make food. It shouldn't be as interesting as it is, but Jensen sits on an empty space on the island counter, hands clasped loosely between his knees so he doesn't reach out by accident, and never takes his eyes off Jared. He doesn't learn a thing about cooking, but he learns that he loves to watch Jared do it, to watch the way it makes Jared seem more himself, more awake and aware and happy.

There's a formal dining room with a formal dining set that seats eight, just off the kitchen. Jensen's been in there maybe twice, the first time just to make sure the furniture didn't get banged up when it was delivered. He takes Jared back to the living room to eat, sets up folding TV trays he picked up at Target (because he's *all* about the class), and points to the book shelves that house his embarrassingly extensive DVD collection. "Your choice," he says, dropping into his chair and picking up the remote to pop open the player.

"Whoa." Jared's eyes widen as he scans the shelves. "You have all the TV there is. And most of the movies."

"I have an illness," Jensen acknowledges. "I come from archivist stock."

It's kind of a test, and when Jared runs his hand over the tops of the DVD cases and stops on *Jaws*, he passes with flying colors. It's not just a classic and the father of the summer blockbuster, and therefore indicative of Jared's extremely good taste; it also runs a little over two hours, which is going to keep Jared in his house for a while. Which means Jared *wants* to stay in Jensen's house for a while. Jensen approves on many, many levels.

Dinner is good, really good; even the salad, with the dressing Jared whipped together in two minutes, is really good. They watch the movie while they eat, so there's not much talking at first, but even when they've pushed their trays to the side, Jared's a pro at watching movies. He stays mostly quiet, and when he does have something to say, he talks around the dialogue instead of over it. He's clearly seen it before and wants to watch it again anyway, which certainly doesn't make Jensen like him any less.

They take a break at the hour mark, to put dishes away and stretch their legs. There's just the one light on, right over the sink, and Jared seems to glow in it. Jensen feels the weight of his attention like a touch. He rolls up his sleeves and works quickly, and when he finishes up, Jared's right there beside him, holding out a dish towel so Jensen can dry his hands.

"Thanks," Jensen says, his voice low and rough, and Jared takes the towel away from him. He stands there, close, too close and not close enough; Jensen can hear every

breath Jared takes, feel the heat of his body. An inch closer and Jensen would know what this was, could make a choice to meet him halfway. But that inch makes this a borderland, and Jensen can't decide what to do, or if he even has to decide.

He clears his throat, hoping his voice will come out even, and says, "So. Chunky Monkey or Chocolate Raspberry Truffle?"

"Both," Jared votes after a moment of intense thought. "I'll get the spoons."



They settle in on the counter, facing each other over the sink on the island, cross-legged. Jensen isn't sure at first that Jared will fit, but he just grins and hops up, swinging his legs over and folding them up like origami. With only the single light on, shadows hide the far corners of the kitchen. It's close and intimate — comfortable, in that first-scene-of-a-horror-movie way.

"So," Jared says, the corners of his eyes crinkling up with amusement. "Ghost stories?"

"We're so not going there. I've been down that road with my brother. I never win that game."

"How is that even possible? You know more scary movies than there *are*."

Jensen acknowledges the point with a nod. "But Josh can do really freaky things with his voice."

Jared slurps at his spoon in an incredibly obscene fashion, his eyes distant with thought. "You guys are close?"

"I guess." A lot of summers working different jobs to help keep things afloat, a few years' difference in age and grade, different crowds in school. But they were always on the same page, looking out for Mackenzie when they could, taking as much of their own weight off their parents as possible. There was a lot they never talked about, but then, there was a lot they'd never had to. "He's a good guy," Jensen says finally. "We're not best buddies or anything, but I'd say we're pretty tight."

Jared nods. He stares into his carton of ice cream like he's reading his fortune in the pretzels and walnuts. "That's cool," he offers, and for the first time since Jensen met him, Jared actually sounds the few years younger that he is.

"Hey." Jensen waves his spoon across Jared's line of vision, making him look up. "Not so much for you, huh?"

"Used to be." Jared shrugs. "We used to be best friends. But people grow up, I guess."

Jensen nods. Jared had looked exhausted when he showed up at the store, and he'd come straight from home. "People, huh?" he says. "More than one?"

Jared laughs softly. "Well, my mom kinda grew up, too."

"Aw, Jay, that sucks."

"It was my own fault. I came out in about the worst way possible."

"Got caught?"

"Worse even than that." Jared pokes his spoon down into his ice cream, and leaves it there. "I wasn't really doing a lot of dating, period. I was working so much, the only person I saw a lot of was Chad, and that was just because we were room mates at the time. He did a few semesters at a local college, graduated with a degree in business, and we started talking about him buying into the store. I hate all the business stuff, you know? I just want to make good food."

"Only when I told my family Chad was going to buy half the shop, they kind of assumed — man, I don't even know how they worked that one out in their heads."

Jared laughs, and it comes out bitter and painful; Jensen reaches across the sink and puts a hand on Jared's knee. "You don't have to tell me," he says. "If it's too weird, or—"

"No, it's fine." Jared takes a deep breath, and looks at Jensen's hand. It's almost enough to make Jensen move back, let go. But not quite. "I guess they already thought I might be gay. They were just hoping I'd grow out of it or something. But when I told them about Chad and the bakery, they put that together with us being room mates, and thought that was my way of coming out to them. Which, granted, would have been a pretty horrible way to go about it —"

"Except you weren't coming out to them."

"Right. I mean, I meant to, at some point?" Jared shakes his head, a wry grin twisting his mouth. "I don't think they had any idea how much time I was putting into the business. I was exhausted all the time. There was absolutely nothing to tell."

"So you didn't get around to it." Jensen gives Jared's knee a little shake, then retreats back to his side of the island. "That doesn't actually sound like it was your fault at all."

"Maybe not." Jared raises his eyes to Jensen's. "Doesn't really matter much, though. Once I got it all sorted out — *Yes* gay, *no* not settling down in domestic bliss with Chad — everybody was pissed at everybody, most especially at me. My dad and my sister came around after a while. With mom, I think it was just that her feelings were hurt that I wouldn't tell her something like that, or didn't. She's okay with it, but we're a lot more...careful, I guess... with each other, now."

"So your brother?"

"He said all the right things. At the time, I thought he meant them." Jared shrugs, and when his shoulders come down, they stay down. "He's never done anything wrong, or said anything bad. It's not like that. He just never had much to say to me, after he found out. And then he proposed to his girlfriend, like a week later. They did the whole big white wedding thing. He and my mom got really close over that."

"No offense, man, but your brother sounds like a dick."

"I just wish he'd come out with something I could fight with, you know? Instead I'm stuck pretending we're still all good."

"It's his loss," Jensen says firmly. "Just means we get to keep you here, right?"

"Yeah." Jared's real smile flashes out, quick and warm. "I don't have any other plans."

"Good," Jensen says, "that's good." He turns his attention back to his ice cream, which is melting, barely touched, in the carton.

"Hey, Jensen?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't really talk about this stuff, but...you're good to talk to. Thanks."

Jensen clears his throat. "Yeah, uh. I'm glad. I mean, thanks. Or, you know, you're welcome." Jared laughs, and Jensen feels a blush climbing in his cheeks; he shakes his head and glares, unable to stop his own smile. "Whatever, dude, I get your point. I'm awesome."

"I didn't say—"

"Might as well have." Jensen takes a deeper breath as the tension breaks, relaxing a little. "Anyway, you don't deserve me, you're totally hogging all the banana ice cream." He leans across the sink again, this time with his spoon on the offensive; Jared tries to yank his carton away but Jensen's older and quicker and *wily*. He digs in, grinning.

Before he can go back to his own side in triumph, Jared clamps a hand around Jensen's wrist. Jensen's expecting him to steal the spoon, laugh and let him go, but Jared holds on. There's a smile on his lips, but his eyes are calm and serious.

"Jared?"

"Victor, spoils," Jared says softly, and pulls Jensen in. He closes his mouth around Jensen's spoon and pulls back, slow, leaving it clean. He watches Jensen's face while he does it.

Jensen can't look away. Jared's mouth is smeared with ice cream, his hand's a hot vise around Jensen's wrist, and his eyes are bright with want. Jensen can't quite catch his breath; can't ignore the thrum of possibility in the air between them or the way his body's reacting to it, hard and reckless.

Every secret Jared has just unfolded for him, every confidence, it just makes it worse. It was easy and safe to just want him at first, but he's getting to *know* Jared now. Jensen wants to put his arms around him, let him feel how much he's cared for. He wants to make sure Jared knows what Jensen knows; knows his own worth.

He closes his eyes, lets out a slow, steady breath. Lets his arm go slack, so Jared can reel him in. Jared's hand slides up Jensen's arm, light and sure over his skin, before he tangles his fingers in the short sleeve of Jensen's shirt. His other hand finds Jensen's face, cups his jaw as carefully as Jensen's ever been touched and then shifts his grip to the back of Jensen's neck. He presses his forehead against Jensen's and holds him there, holds them both there. Jensen's balanced on one hand, the other on Jared's shoulder, awkward and precarious on his knees but completely unwilling to move away.

"Jen." Jared's breath fans across Jensen's skin, sweet and heated. His voice is thick and rough, and Jensen can hear the need in it. It's in him, too.

"It's okay," Jensen says. His fingers slide across Jared's shirt, press into his skin. "I'm okay."

Jared meets him halfway, and Jensen takes the invitation for what it is. He bites at Jared's lower lip, then presses in, the slick heat of Jared's mouth open and ready for him. It's not smooth or careful, not tender; Jensen's about to fall into the sink to get at Jared, so it's certainly not graceful. But it works, it draws a dizzy line of pleasure from Jensen's mouth down to his dick, and he wants more of it, more of Jared, right now.

His hands go to the buttons of Jared's shirt, get it open to his waist, and by some miracle of luck and balance he ends up with his hands on bare skin, smooth and warm and slick with sweat. Jared groans when Jensen slides his fingers up, rubs over a stiff brown nipple; Jensen swallows the sound down, and tries to make Jared do it again. He's stiff and leaking in his jeans, and he pulls Jared's hand down, pushes himself against it like a teenager who's never been touched.

Jared pulls back to breathe, his eyes wide and dark. Jensen doesn't give him more than a second. He leans in and licks a long, wet line up Jared's throat, bites at the soft, warm skin beneath Jared's jaw. Jared's hand tightens over Jensen's dick through his jeans, and Jensen can't help it; he moans into Jared's neck, desperate.

"Jensen," Jared says, barely a breath behind the word. "God, you're—" He squeezes Jensen again, and Jensen pushes hard into his hand. "Feels good?" Jared asks, and he pushes Jensen back from him, looks at him through half-closed eyes. "We can do better."

He climbs off the counter. Jensen turns to face him, swings his legs over the edge, spreads his thighs wide so Jared can get in close. Jared's on him in seconds, strong fingers working at the button of his jeans. The pull of the zipper over the line of his dick is a slow, excruciating tease, and when he looks up Jared's smiling at him, completely aware.

"I've wanted you since the day I first saw you," Jared says. His fingers slide into Jensen's boxers, rough and warm and perfect. Jensen bites his lip and groans, pushing against Jared's hand, and Jared gives a low, sweet laugh. He wraps his hand around Jensen's dick, tugs at him, and Jensen bites out a series of curses that make Jared smile even wider. "I was never so glad to fall off a bike," he says, jerking Jensen slow and steady. He pushes closer, leans in and presses his mouth against Jensen's throat. "Almost went back to thank the cat."

"Crazy fucker." Jensen can barely breathe enough to laugh, can barely get the words out. "Shut up."

Jared grins, and then he opens his mouth and bites at Jensen's throat, sucks at the bite and smoothes over it with his tongue. It hurts just right, and Jensen is over the tease. He wraps one hand around Jared's and speeds him up, grabs at the back of Jared's neck and holds on to keep him close.

Jared looks at him, just looks, intent and focused. He works Jensen fast and hard, and he says, "Come on, let me see it. Let it go." He watches, and watches; looks at Jensen's dick where the head slides in and out of his palm, looks at Jensen's face, his eyes, his mouth. Jensen feels owned by it all, the touch and the way Jared's eyes see every part of him. He loses track of himself in the pleasure and races over the edge, coming hard over their tangled fingers, his teeth clenched to keep in all the crazy, permanent things he wants to say.

Jared just keeps watching, his face aching open, his smile clear and hot and bright.

~

"You could stay." Jensen leans against the counter, cleaned up, buttoned up, arms crossed over his chest. He's got a bottle of water from the fridge, dangling unopened from one hand. A few feet away Jared is buttoning his shirt, looking anywhere but at Jensen. It's not a bad tension, at least Jensen doesn't think so, but it's there between them anyway, making everything awkward and weird.

"I have to be at work at a truly ungodly hour," Jared says. "And I need to get home to the dogs, make sure Chad didn't kill them while I was gone."

"Right, yeah, the dogs." Jensen nods. Can't argue with that. He hunches his shoulders, aware of empty rooms all around him in a way he almost never is, and tries not to think about how much worse it's going to be when Jared's gone.

"Hey." Jensen looks up, and Jared's right there, frowning down at him like Jensen's the one about to bail in the middle of the afterglow. "Jensen?"

"No, it's cool," Jensen says. "I'll see you tomorrow. I mean, I'll drive you back to your car, and after that I'll—"

Jared comes in closer and lays a hand on either side of Jensen's face, fingers splayed wide. "Hey," he says again, "stop it," and Jensen does, because he'd do just about anything to wipe that nervous look off Jared's face.

"Sorry."

"I was just trying to give you some space," Jared says. His thumbs slide up, across Jensen's cheekbones, gentle and warm. "You'd think I'd learn."



"I've got nothing but space."

"Then come with me. There's no space at my place, believe me. I'll probably wake you up getting ready in the morning, and a dog may sleep on your feet, but I kind of like the idea of you in my bed."

Jared smiles, and for a second Jensen can see it: early morning light slanting in through a window across a rumpled bed, Jared sitting on the edge, half-dressed, eyes still half closed. He'd need to bring a toothbrush, and a change of clothes; he'd probably need his shaving kit and maybe his laptop.

But he'd need someone to know where he was, maybe Chris, maybe Danny. But it's too late to call. He could send an email, but nobody would see it till morning. Even if he was ready to go, he's not quite ready to do it without a safety net.

"I'm not against it," Jensen says. He leans in, and Jared makes it easy, meets him in the middle. It's not a bad feeling, knowing he can do this any time he wants now; knowing this could actually be something he could keep. "But I'd rather spend the night with you when nobody has to run out first thing. When we can take some time. Okay?"

"What? No." There's a whine in Jared's voice, but he's smiling. "That's a terrible idea. Man, it's a good thing you're pretty."

"That's what my mama always tells me."

"I'll see you tomorrow, though?"

Jensen laughs. "So much you'll be sick of the sight of me," he says. "I promise."



He's hanging out with Gen for a few minutes on the steps of the library, watching the Wednesday kids pile into their parents' SUVs, when his phone dings for his attention. July heat bakes the stone steps while the sun melts off what's left of the day. It's not supposed to get this hot in Massachusetts, but somebody forgot to inform the weather gods. He lets Gen rattle on about the new volunteer with the cute smile and the Twizzler fetish while he looks at his message screen. Since the email debacle, Jared's gotten very big on texting.

The message reads:

*billion degrees out. bring beer and trunks. feeding u by pond 2nite*

Jensen remembers the pond from his first trip out there, dropping off Jared and his bike. The pond is actually more like a small lake, and "by the pond" means on the dock, a rickety finger of bleached, splintering posts and planks Jensen wouldn't trust to support one of Jared's dogs, let alone a person. Let alone two people. It also means sunscreen by the bucket and a guaranteed burn anyplace he can't quite reach.

On the other hand: Jared, mostly naked. It's a dilemma.

Jensen texts back, *dock have a/c?* and seconds later he gets, *awwww prncess*. It surprises a laugh out of him, and he's grinning when he taps out *freak c u in 20*

"If you're not careful," Gen says, "your face will freeze that way."

"I don't mind. It's a good look for me."

"It really is." She smiles at him; she's been in a good mood since Chad dropped off the cookies for the day. That had been a little worrying, till he realized they were mostly peanut butter — her secret weakness. "Jared, huh?"

Jensen gets up, reaches for her hand and pulls her to her feet. "That's classified. And so what if it was. We're friends. We can text."

"Tell him peanut butter chocolate chip works, too," Gen says. "If you happen to run into him, I mean. On an unplanned occasion at some point in the very near future."

Ignoring her is the only path of dignity. "You need a ride to campus, or what? I can drop you off."

"I'm skipping class tonight. As soon as Misty finishes shelving, I'm taking her out for a Welcome to the Library dinner." Genevieve grins, her cheeks unrepentantly pink. "Just to express my gratitude for her selfless hard work."

"And your appreciation for her hot little—"

She shoves his shoulder, laughing. "Shut up. It's entirely innocent. Wholesome, even. I'm pretty sure she's straight. Doesn't mean I can't spend an evening gazing upon the pretty."

"So wholesome you're ditching out of class for it." He's never known her to cut a class before; maybe he should have listened a little closer when she was explaining the new girl's perfection in epic, graphic detail. "If this is the first step on the road to your ruin, I'm going to feel really bad about this later, but I have to go. I have to call Chris, and I need to pick some stuff up before I meet Jared. Email me later, tell me how things go, okay?"

"I'll be fine, Dad," she says. "Go play with your baker."

~

Jensen calls Chris while he's digging around for swim trunks and something to change into after; he doesn't say much, just where he's going and that he'll keep his cell turned on. Everything feels a little fragile still, a little new, and he's not ready for the flood of friendly mocking and advice sure to follow if he tells Chris how far things have gone.

Between that and the stop for beer, it's more than twenty minutes before Jensen parks in Jared's driveway and heads around to the back of the house, six-pack in hand. The slope down to the pond hasn't been mowed in a few weeks at least; the grass, baked yellow and brown by days of record temperatures, is ankle high. Tall maple trees cast a circle of shade around a couple of picnic tables and the grill, and a cluster of oaks by the water's edge do the same favor for at least the shore-end of the dock.

Jared's already out there. Part of the dock, about ten by ten, floats directly on the water like a raft, tethered to the fixed section by thick rope and rusted chain. That's where Jared sits, legs dangling into the water, the broad, browned expanse of his back gleaming with sweat in the sun. It's the first time Jensen's seen this much of him all at once, and he pauses before stepping out onto the dock, stunned by how inadequate his imagination has been. He clenches his fingers around the cardboard handle of the six-pack, and lets himself stare for a few seconds, just to get it out of his system. His hand feels sweaty and his heart's beating way too fast.

"You're late," Jared observes when the creaking of the old boards gives Jensen away. He doesn't bother to look at Jensen, just turns his face up to the sun, eyes closed, face smooth and flushed.

Jensen shrugs, though Jared can't see him. "I'm here."

"Come on down. It's cooler by the water."

Cooler is a relative term when the heat index is hovering around a million degrees, but Jensen climbs down the short ladder anyway. The dock rocks gently beneath his feet, water seeping up through the narrow cracks between the planks. He toes off his flip flops and pushes them up onto the higher deck, sits down next to Jared, and settles the six-pack between them. His weight makes the dock sink deeper into the water, and little waves break over the boards and lap at the backs of his knees. It is cooler down here with his feet kicking slowly in the water.

"How long have you been out here?"

Jared shrugs. "Twenty minutes? Half an hour?"

"And you haven't been in yet?"

Jared finally turns to look at Jensen, a lazy smile on his face. He leans across the six-pack and kisses Jensen, slow and easy, just saying hello. "I was waiting," Jared says against Jensen's mouth, then pulls back to grin. "It was worth it."

Jensen's face heats up, and his brain is a little fuzzed out, but he can't argue with that assessment. He clears his throat and nods, grateful when Jared breaks the look to pull a beer out of the carton.

He twists the cap off, hands it to Jensen and takes another for himself. "What took you so long?"

"Gossiping with Gen about her new crush."

"The straight girl? She's cute."

Jensen gives him a look. Granted, he hasn't known Jared all that long, but nothing so far has given him the impression that Jared enjoys women on more than an aesthetic level. "Is this new information about your Kinsey score, or more in the way of a movie review?"

Jared laughs. "I can appreciate dimples and a turned-up nose on either sex without having to update my Facebook page."

"She is kind of cute," Jensen allows. "I just hope Gen's not setting her heart on somebody we call 'the straight girl.'"

"You're a good guy. But as far as I can tell, Gen can take care of herself."

Jensen doesn't say anything, just closes his eyes and tilts his head back to catch some light on his face. He keeps his eyes closed when Jared shifts next to him, when

Jared stands up; but he can't keep them closed when Jared pushes off the dock and lands spread-eagled, on his back, in the water.

The splash soaks Jensen to the skin, turning his yellow swim trunks a few shades darker and his white T-shirt transparent. Jensen squawks and flinches back far too late as Jared breaks the surface again, his laughter carrying clear and loud across the surface of the water.

A biting commentary on Jared's grace and coordination dies on Jensen's tongue as Jared flips his hair back out of his face and kicks over to the dock. The sun catches drops of water in his hair, his lashes, trailing down the line of his throat. Jared folds his arms over the edge of the dock next to Jensen, kicking lazily to stay in place, and looks up at him with bright, amused eyes. "Looks like you got a little wet there, Jensen," he says.

Jensen nods. "Wonder how that happened."

"No point in sitting out if you're already soaked."

"I'm overcome by your logic." Jensen sets his beer aside and strips off his T-shirt. Jared's eyes follow the movement and then settle, flatteringly, level with Jensen's abs. "How deep is the water?"

"Right here? Ten, twelve feet."

Jensen rises to his feet, backs up to the ladder, then takes a run at the dock's edge, pushing off into a long, shallow dive. The water closes over him in a cool rush, bubbles racing over his skin. He pulls the momentum into long crawl, stopping only when the water beneath him goes from cool to cold.

When he looks back, Jared's sitting on the dock again, watching him, small against the backdrop of the trees along the shore. Jensen swims back, taking his time, enjoying the silky glide of the water and the certainty of Jared's eyes on him as he draws closer. A few feet shy of the dock he stops and treads water, raising a hand to shade his eyes as he looks up at Jared. "What am I doing in here by myself?"

"Showing me up. You're fast, man. I didn't know you could swim like that."

"I used to lifeguard for extra cash during the summer, back in high school."

"So if I were to swim too far out and get a leg cramp—"

"—it would not be the first leg cramp faked in my immediate vicinity, no." Jensen grins and pushes in closer to the dock. "Are you coming back in?"

"Because I'm smarter than I look," Jared says, "no. You stay out here and look pretty; I'm gonna go bring dinner down from the house."

Jared stands up, shakes water out of his hair; it's a sight that makes Jensen catch and hold his breath. He pulls back an arm and sweeps it over the top of the water, lifting a wide, long sheet that crashes over Jared from the chest down.

"To keep you cool on the way there," Jensen says.



They have dinner at the picnic table closest to the house, watching the sun slide away behind the trees. Five minutes after the food is gone, Jensen couldn't name a single thing he ate. What he does remember, what he thinks he might always remember, is the way the fading daylight catches in Jared's eyes, the way he talks with his hands, even when there's a fork in one and a knife in the other. The way he smiles and says, "Are you even listening?" and then smiles even wider when Jensen laughs and says, "No."

Dessert is Jared straddling Jensen's bench, long legs splayed out to either side with Jensen's hooked over them, hands running slow and heated everywhere they can reach. It leaves Jensen wrecked, his shirt and his eyes half open, his breath a random, hitching stutter. More than just being touched, it's the stunned way Jared looks at him, like he can't believe his luck to be there. Jensen tries to tell Jared how good that feels, somewhere between lazy, comfortable kisses that don't seem to be

going anywhere important, but he can't make a lot of sense with Jared so intent on halting any attempt at coherence.

They stay like that until full dark, when the dogs start circling and begging for attention and the mosquitoes start to mean business. Jared disentangles himself in slow stages, Jensen not helping at all. When all he has left is Jared's hand in his, Jensen looks up at him, just a dark outline against the light pouring out from the screen door behind him.

"Come home with me," he says.

Jared's hand tightens in his. "Sadie and Harley..."

"It's a big place." Jensen squeezes back, and stands up. "Bring 'em along."

~

It is a big place. It's also a new place for them, and the dogs can't settle until they've seen every part of it. They race through the house sniffing at everything, at every part of everything, whining with what Jared assures him is happiness and excitement. Jensen thinks they're just freaked out, and he doesn't really blame them. He was a little freaked the first time he saw the place, too.

Jared kind of hovers near them, trying to make sure they don't smudge anything or knock anything over, no matter how many times Jensen tells him he doesn't care. They're pretty good dogs; Jared raised them up right, and anyway, there's nothing they could break that he can't replace, if it comes to that. It takes a while, and a few loops through the house, but eventually the entire Padalecki family starts to unwind a little.

Jared drops off their bowls in the kitchen, filled up with enough food and water to keep a full kennel of normal-sized dogs alive; their interest in Jensen and his house ends abruptly, face-down in a mountain of kibble. Jensen grabs Jared's hand and hauls him out of the kitchen, toward the stairs.

"Run," he orders, "now, while they're distracted. We can barricade the bedroom door if we make it upstairs."

"We're not locking my kids out. What if they need me?"

Jensen grins. "What if I do?"

"Well," Jared says, staring at Jensen's mouth. "On second thought, I'm sure they'll be just fine."

Upstairs, in Jensen's bedroom, there's just a single light on, the lamp on Jensen's desk by the open window. That's how Jensen leaves it, because the dim yellow glow does something unreal to Jared's skin. He pushes up Jared's t-shirt, slow, and pulls it over his head, and there are miles of him under there, sleek and hot and golden. Jared stands with his arms at his sides, smiling, letting Jensen look, but when Jensen reaches for his belt, Jared grabs his hand and says, "No. My turn, now."

"Who said anything about turns?" Jensen demands, but he lifts his arms, helps Jared strip his shirt off. Whatever gets them both a little closer to naked is fine by him. A shiver runs through him when the air hits his skin, and then again when Jared's fingers sweep down over his shoulder blades, dip into the small of his back. He closes his eyes, leans into the touch; it feels good to have hands on him again, hands he knows and trusts. It takes a second to notice those hands have stopped stroking and started to turn him around.

"Jensen? What happened here?"

Jared's fingers trace over the long, ridged line that cuts down from Jensen's ribs on the right and across his spine before it ends beneath the waist of his jeans on the left. Jensen goes still. He can only feel the edges of it, a strange numb tingle under Jared's hand, but the touch makes him shiver. In his mind it's still angry, swollen and red, stitches slashing across it like railway ties to hold the skin together; in his mind, it's always sizzling with an infection that never actually set in. He jerks away with a hiss, and Jared pulls his hand back like he's been burned.

"Did that hurt? God, that hurt, didn't it, I'm sorry," Jared says, "I'm an idiot. Are you okay?"

Jensen stares at Jared's hand, and for a second there's an overlay, a tracing of red beneath the skin, an unhealthy sheen. But it's just a second, a stupid second, and Jared isn't contaminated, he's just fine; worried, but fine. Jensen takes a breath to calm himself down, and remembers that he's fine, too.

Fucked up, but fine.

"No," he says. "Wait, yes, sorry. I'm okay. I just... Sometimes I forget it's there. It didn't hurt." It doesn't hurt. But that doesn't mean he wants Jared touching it, or thinking about it, or even knowing about it.

"It seemed like..." Jared shakes his head. "I don't know what it seemed like. It didn't seem okay. But it's not new, is it?"

"Jared, it's nothing. Just an old scar." Jensen tries for a smile. "Not very pretty, I know, but if you stay on this side of me, I think I can keep your mind off it."

"I'm not turned off by it, you moron. I'm just a little freaked out. It looks like somebody tried to rip your guts out through your spine. And I like your spine, and I



like your guts where they are, and I like you, and." Jared stops, clears his throat, and starts again. "I don't like thinking of you hurt that bad."

A crazy laugh rises in Jensen's throat, and he barely catches it before it tells Jared way too much, way too fast. He swallows it down, and breathes around the cold ache it leaves in his chest.

"I didn't like it much myself." Jensen reaches for Jared's hand; he's going to need it. Jared winds their fingers together and squeezes, and looks at Jensen, and there's this bright, interested look in his eyes, but there's no pity there like when Chris looks at him, no disappointment like he sees when Danny does. No worry like he gets from Mike.

Jared tugs at Jensen's hand, and Jensen lets himself be pulled closer, his hand held tight against Jared's chest. He leans in, and Jared meets him halfway, their foreheads almost touching. Jensen's eyes are closed, and Jared's breath is a warm push of air against his cheek. "Were you in an accident?"

The *no* is at the tip of Jensen's tongue, reflexive honesty. But it doesn't come. What comes is a rising bubble of panic, a pressure in his chest, and he grabs for the out Jared just gave him. He hitches in a breath, and hears himself say, "I...yeah. Yes. A few years back, I was...there was this guy, he..."

"Somebody *hit* you?" Jared's free arm loops around Jensen's waist and hauls him into a hug. "Jesus," he says into Jensen's shoulder. "Was it — I guess it was pretty bad?"

Jensen laughs weakly. "Yeah, it was bad. I wasn't paying attention," he says, and it's coming faster now, just enough truth to get him through the moment. "He came out of nowhere."

"But you're okay now?" Jared pulls back, puts his hands on Jensen's shoulders and looks at him, a long, careful inspection. He finds the scar Jensen can barely see in the mirror these days, and reaches up to touch. Jensen holds still for it, but maybe Jared sees something in his eyes; he stops, his hand hovering in the air for just a second, then settles for a firm grip around the back of Jensen's neck. "You're okay," he says, and he sounds so certain about it, Jensen almost believes him.

"Took a while." Jensen shakes his head. "Almost two years, by the end of it. Couldn't walk for the first year, and not real well for the second. There was some swelling around my spinal cord, and a busted knee... I spent a lot of time in physical therapy, learning how to work my legs again. My head got banged around pretty good, too."

"That's a lot. That's kind of a big deal, Jensen. How am I just finding out about all this now?"

"I don't like to talk about it." Another true thing; the little ones are easier. "It was a rough road back. Not the best of memories."

"I'm sorry." Jared lands a sweet apology of a kiss just to the left of Jensen's mouth. "We don't have to. I shouldn't have asked."

"I should have warned you. I just sometimes, like I said. I forget it's there."

"You know I think you're amazing, right?" The next kiss falls right on target. "I sometimes worry I'm being too subtle."

Jensen pulls back, his eyebrows climbing — and then he sees Jared's grin, wide and innocent and completely full of shit. He laughs, and pushes everything else away. He tugs Jared in, his arms looped around Jared's shoulders. He holds on tight, because he can, and it's like shining a light in a dark room, all the shadows inside him just fade away.

"Yeah," he tells Jared, his chin hooked over Jared's shoulder. "You should definitely work on that. You're a cypher."



Jared spends a lot of time at Jensen's house after that. There's a place he always parks, and a place he always leaves his keys, and a side of the bed Jensen doesn't sleep on anymore, even when he's alone. He still calls Chris to tell him when Jared is going to be over, but lately he's started to think of that as bragging.

Weekday mornings, Jared sets an alarm on his phone for an hour Jensen doesn't like to think about. The sky isn't even grey yet when he climbs out of bed, turns on the little lamp on Jensen's desk, and fishes clothes out of the bag he still always brings with him. Once or twice he tried to sneak out, get dressed in the bathroom, but it wakes the dogs up, and the dogs wake Jensen up, so after a while Jared gave up on it. Now he gets dressed as quietly as he can in the small pool of light in the corner, and before he leaves, he stops for a minute by Jensen's side of the bed and smiles down at him, maybe slides his fingers through Jensen's hair, across his cheek. He doesn't seem to know Jensen's always awake for all of it, no more able to sleep through another person moving around in his room than he could a hurricane, or an earthquake. When Jared touches him, then Jensen opens his eyes, says something meaningless and blurred with sleep. Jared's smile, when he looks down at Jensen like that, is not to be missed.

Most weekday afternoons, Jared comes to the bookstore with coffee and bags of pastry. He comes around the counter and pulls Jensen off his stool and kisses him. He smells like chocolate and bread, and always wants to know about Jensen's day.

Jensen's days are mostly made up of:

1. Playing with Jared's dogs, so they don't mistake him for prey and try to eat him.
2. Pretending to write.
3. Pining.

Jensen's happy enough to talk about the first two; the third he tries to keep on the down-low. It's bad enough that he loses track of sentence structure when Jared looks at him the way he does; no way Jensen's going to let on how hard it is to let Jared go out and have a life. He'd put himself in Jared's back pocket if he thought he'd fit and could get away with it, but he won't and he can't, so he keeps his mouth shut and pines.

Jared spends anywhere from eight to ten hours a day at the bakery. Jensen spends about four at the bookstore, alone, until he goes back home to play with the dogs again. After that it's even odds he'll go back to the store or show up at Hearthstone, appropriate a table and wait. He doesn't interrupt Jared's work, or even Chad's (though Chad turns out to be a surprisingly interesting person to talk to; he knows every story there is to tell about Jared, and together they're working through them from infancy on). He just finds it relaxing to be in Jared's space, with Jared-like things all around him, when he can't have Jared around himself.

Jensen doesn't give a lot of thought to the lie he told Jared, and he doesn't do anything to correct it. It makes things better. Of everybody he knows, only Jared doesn't look at him like he expects Jensen to shatter any minute, doesn't analyze everything Jensen says for adherence to some undisclosed Recovery Schedule they've got pinned up in their heads. Jensen doesn't have to watch everything he

says to Jared, weigh it up on the scales of mental imbalance, make sure it all comes out self-aware and healthy. With Jared, he's just Jensen: crazy in all the normal ways he was *before*, stupid every once in a while, lazy and weird and relaxed.

Somewhere in the middle of summer, Jensen looks up from his laptop and finds Jared sitting across from him, leaning into an open book with his chin propped up in his hand. The place is dead silent — no Chad, no customers — and past the windows, the sky has gone dark, the street lights have popped on.

Taking his hands off his keyboard, Jensen looks down and sees print filling up his screen. A quick word count puts him just over five thousand, and his head is full of the rest of it, most of the rest, twists and turns and subplots and lines and *what happens next*. He pages up to the top and starts reading, even though he remembers it all, almost every word, and it's... It's not bad. He's done better, back before he stopped doing anything at all, but he thinks maybe this could get there with a little work.

When he closes the lid of the laptop, his hands are shaking. Just a little, not so anyone would notice. Unless they were Jared.

"I've seen a whole lot of sacred writing time since I met you," Jared says thoughtfully. "Not a whole lot of actual writing, though."

Jensen blows out an unsteady breath and nods. "Yeah. I don't know what happened there." A thought hits him, and for a second the bottom drops out of his stomach. "How long have I been ignoring you? I didn't mean to just blow you off—"

"Jensen." It's the tone that stops the babbling, amused and affectionate — there's nothing sharp or annoyed in there, no contempt, and he doesn't even understand why he would expect those things but it knocks Jensen back to get something different. "Don't be a nutbar," Jared says. "Do I get to read it?"

"Not....not yet. Is that okay?"

Jared tilts his head; some of the smile in his eyes changes to concern. "Of course it is. Are *you* okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You seem less than fine."

"I just don't want you to think your opinion doesn't matter. I do want you to read it. Just... It's not ready yet. It's probably not even anything. I haven't written anything in years, if you want the truth."

"Since the accident?"

Jared says it carefully — they don't talk about it, which is how Jensen likes it. It keeps the lies to a minimum and lets him pretend he forgets. But that part's true enough, even if the rest isn't, and Jared deserves whatever truth Jensen can give him.

He makes himself meet Jared's eyes. "I thought I'd lost it."

"You were at it for a couple of hours. You were typing so fast your fingers blurred, man." Jared picks up Jensen's hand, examines the fingers in question, and smiles. His eyes are lit up with pride.

Jensen's fingers hook into Jared's and hold on so tight it hurts. "My secret superpower."

"You can come here and practice it any time," Jared says. "Whatever you lost, I think you just found it again."

~

Jared is right. Jensen thinks at first that the bakery has some sort of latent muse-like power, or maybe that Jared is his muse (though he's never, ever going to say anything that cheesy out loud). But he's just as blanked on quiet days there as he is at the bookstore, and finally it comes down to people. He works better surrounded, with something to build a wall against — noise, conversations, shouted orders over the counter.

Since he started trying to write again, he's done it in the silent, empty bookstore or in the silent empty office at home. Now he gets up with Jared, stumbling around like a zombie with the *still night time* pressing in aggressively against the windows. He sits at his table in the half-lit, pre-opened bakery with his head pillowed on his folded arms while Jared brings him coffee after coffee, and eventually muffins or bagels or croissants with ham and cheese inside, until the light from his laptop screen no longer offends his eyes.

He writes until noon, time that is not at all sacred, and then he goes to Kane's for lunch. The magic is not specifically linked to caffeine and flour; the crowd drawn by wings and fries in baskets is equally annoying, and therefore equally inspirational.

Chris seems to like it. He sets Jensen up in a booth near the windows, reserved just for him, and Danny brings him food and sweet iced tea. Chris comes down from the office a few times every afternoon and asks him things — do they need another pool table in the back? What are Jensen's thoughts on the menu? Jensen tells him they should add real food to the line-up, stuff that won't rot your arteries, and Chris grins like Jensen hasn't seen in years. He makes Jensen sit in on an interview for a new cook by showing up at his booth with the guy in tow. Chris thinks he's too young, or

possibly too short, but Jensen spends five minutes arguing his case and Chris caves, providing Jensen makes the offer.

After dinner one night Jensen says, "I think I need some customers." He's got his head pillowed on Jared's thigh, surfing the net on his iPad while Jared makes fun of *Ace of Cakes*. When Jared doesn't answer right away, Jensen tilts his head back to check out his reaction.

Jared's looking down at him with raised eyebrows and a wicked grin. "That's a terrible idea," he says. "I don't think I could afford you."

"You know my favorite thing about you? You actually think you're funny."

"Are you talking about the bookstore?"

Jensen sits up and turns to face Jared, folding his legs up on the couch. "Well, it's there and all. I bought it so I'd have someplace to go to write, but without anybody to piss me off there, it doesn't work. It's too quiet."

"I could have Chad swing past a few times a day."

"Overkill," Jensen says. "I need something between silence and homicide. Maybe I should put out some ads?"

"You do know there's a Borders half a mile down the street from you, right? And a Barnes & Noble not too far past that? I don't mean to be a downer, but the only reason you're still in business is, you're not really in business. It's a bitch to make an independent anything turn a profit these days; take it from somebody who knows."

"I'm not looking to turn a profit. I just want to generate some foot traffic."

Jared's eyes narrow. He looks at Jensen thoughtfully for a long minute, then pokes him in the chest and says, "Reclusive lottery winner. Hiding out in the 'burbs to avoid the inevitable taint of celebrity. Most people would join the jet set and succumb to worldly temptations, but you, you just want to live a quiet, solitary life."

Jensen's been leaning in, like he always does, because closer to Jared is always better; now he rocks back and straightens up, too surprised to say anything. The money is wrapped up with Aaron, and Aaron has no place in his relationship with Jared. He can't untangle the mess of it all in his head, not fast enough to deny it convincingly, and while he's trying to find something to say, Jared catches on.

"Holy shit, Jensen. Seriously?"

The look on Jared's face changes rapidly from shock to confusion, and that's when Jensen knows he's screwed up. This is big — This is something else Jared probably had a right to know about long before now. He's not sure why he didn't just come

clean up front; it's not like Jared hasn't known Jensen has money to burn. But now it's a thing.

"I should have told you sooner, I guess." Jensen looks anywhere but Jared's eyes. "It's not like it's a big secret. All you had to do was Google."

"I was having too much fun guessing." Jared shakes his head, like he's trying to settle the new information in it. "Seriously?"

"Well, I wasn't really all that concerned about the taint of celebrity," Jensen says. "But you're not actually wrong about the rest."

"When?"

"A few years back."

"That's... that's when you said you had your accident."

"Yeah, well." Jensen shrugs uncomfortably. "It was a crazy year. I don't really like to—"

"—talk about it much," Jared finishes. He twists around to look at Jensen head-on, and there's a shadow in his eyes that makes Jensen's chest tightens up.

"I know you don't understand."

"I understand you're kind of messed up about the accident, and I get not wanting to talk about it. If this is another thing you don't want to talk about, I'm okay with that, too. But I won't lie — its starting to bug me a little that you don't seem to trust me with the big things in your life."

Jensen reaches for Jared's hand, and Jared's already palm up and waiting for him; Jared's always giving Jensen exactly what he needs. "Jared, no. It's not like that, I promise you. It's not a trust thing. I can't tell you how wrong you are."

His voice not entirely steady, Jared says, "Could you try?"

"I don't let people into this house." Jensen rakes a hand through his hair, frustrated; he can't explain how true it is without the truth it comes from, and he can't make himself let go of the lie. "I don't let people into my life. I can count on one hand the number of people I talk to in a month who aren't blood relations. You're the only person I've met in years that I wanted to hold on to."

"I don't think that's the same thing," Jared says. He holds onto Jensen's hand even tighter, though, like maybe he can pull out the truth he wants to hear.

"It is." Jensen rasps out a dry, shaky laugh. "I don't avoid talking to you about those things because I don't trust you, Jared. I avoid it because you're the only person I know who lets me forget about it." This much is true, and Jensen needs to tell Jared as much of the truth as he can. "It was a really fucked up time. I just... I'm a better person when I'm not dwelling on it. I trust you, Jared, please don't think I don't. I just need to keep it behind me."

"Hey." Jared tugs Jensen in; it doesn't take much of a pull. He wraps his arms around Jensen and it's all Jensen can do not to shake apart right there. He holds on, his face pressed to Jared's neck, and wills Jared to understand.

"I do trust you," Jensen says into Jared's skin.

Jared pulls back, frames Jensen's face in his hands. "Okay. I'm sorry I—"

"Don't you dare be sorry for anything." Jensen fists his hands in the collar of Jared's shirt, breathing hard and fast, his heart overclocked with relief. "I'm a jerk for letting you think any different. I guess I haven't made it clear enough, Jared — I'm a little nuts about you. Like, actually not right in the head where you're concerned."

"I did notice you were a little unbalanced." Jared smiles, and it clears the worry from his eyes, brightens up the whole freaking house. "Let's not get you any help for that, okay?"

~

Jensen's innate business sense tells him that cheaper is better, and his taste tells him to stock the store like he stocks his Kindle. He's convinced it's these choices that bring people in on the day of his grand opening, and *not* the impromptu coffee stand and bake sale Chad sets up out on the sidewalk.

Jensen spends the day arguing about Neil Gaiman and H. P. Lovecraft, about the sad state of modern urban fantasy, about the difference between kinky vampire sex and actual horror. He sells bags and bags of books, which is nice, and meets lots and lots of people, which isn't.

"Hollywood can kill a kid on-screen," he tells Genevieve when she stops by to see how things are going. "But they can't kill a kitten. You know why?"

"Why?"

"*America.*"

"I like kittens," she tells him with a shrug. "Kids, I can take or leave." She's got one of Chad's cupcakes in one hand and a copy of a Charlaine Harris novel in the other.



"Trash," he pronounces. "Seriously? Do I really sell that crap?"

"No, because you suck." She hops into the chair behind the counter — *Jensen's* chair — and props her elbows on the counter. "I brought it in myself, so I could have something to read while I'm minding your snobby geek bookstore. Chad says it's lunchtime."

"Chad is not in charge of my care and feeding schedule."

"Nobody is," she says. "That's the problem. Now, get out."

He packs up his laptop and goes.

"My customers don't make me write," he tells Jared between orders at the bakery. "Only yours and Chris's do. What is up with that?"

"Dude." Jared stares down at him, hands on his hips, flour smeared across his chin. There's a line from the counter all the way back to the door, and they don't look happy. Jared doesn't look happy either, come to think of it. "Can I have Chad back now? I can't *sell* things. My customers hate me. I'm drowning in their contempt."

"You love people." Jensen frowns, and looks at the line again. The guy at the front of it looks particularly angry, and he's giving a muffin back instead of taking one away. Jared counts out the guy's money, apologizes, and cringes at the glare he gets in response.

"These aren't people," Jared hisses through a bright, warm smile at the next person in line. "They're *regulars*. They don't respond to charm anymore, Chad's got them trained to crave abuse. Please? I need him."

Fifteen minutes later, Chad's back in place. The air of desperation and anger dims down to mere hunger and impatience, and Jared backs away from the register with a sigh of relief. Jensen grins and follows him into the back, where he finds Jared collapsed against the sink, practically boneless.

"Was it really all that bad?"

"I sold a guy with a peanut allergy one of my Reese's cupcakes, and apparently I charged him sixteen dollars for it."

Jensen's eyebrows go up. "Did he eat it?" Mentally he starts adding up attorney fees and court costs; it's not a pretty picture.

"No, he was too pissed about the incorrect change. He just wanted his money back, I'm not even sure he noticed."

"I guess there's a reason Chad's the business guy," Jensen says, turning that thought over for a closer look. A spark of an idea is forming in his head.

"And the sales guy," Jared confirms, shoulders slumping. "I suck."

"You're amazing, within your admittedly limited skill set," Jensen says; the hug he gets pulled into is worth the glare he has to endure first. He scratches idly at the back of Jared's neck, grabs a kiss for the road, and pulls back. "I need to go."

"Back to the book mines?" Jared asks.

Jensen grins. "Not if I can help it."

~

Gen's only shot at a promotion at the library involves the death of the current librarian. He's an elderly gentleman of 45, and he's in better shape than she is. Also, she'd probably need a degree. She asks Jensen for a fifty-fifty partnership and equal say in the kinds of books they'll stock, and she doesn't want to open before 10 am. She wants to hire a couple of kids to work nights and weekends, she hates the decor (there isn't any), and she insists on upgrading the register.

Jensen just wants a comfortable chair and a table to work on in the corner, out where the people are. Gen can sell whatever she wants, as long as he doesn't have to talk to anybody.

She switches to part time at the library, and within two weeks, Jensen's working through lunch every day in his own establishment. He misses his morning coffee and pastry deliveries, but he likes having something to talk about over dinner, when Jared asks about his day.

"Ten pages," he says, and holds his fingers up to show how battered and abused they are.

"Wow. I think I see smoke."

"Damn straight you do." Jensen leans back in his chair, stuffed with good food and generally content with his lot in life. "It may suck, but there's more of it every day. That's better than I can say for the last few years of my literary career."

Jared rolls his eyes, utterly dismissing Jensen's crap. "I cooked," he says instead of telling Jensen how great he is.

"I know. I can tell by the way every single pot and pan I own, and several I'm pretty sure I don't, are scattered all over my filthy kitchen."

"Art is messy." Jared grins, and pushes back from the table. "It's the price we pay for greatness."

Jensen doesn't really mind the clean-up. Not when Jared is sitting on the counter next to him, yammering on about Chad or the dogs or the super hot guy who came in to buy forty bumblebee cupcakes and a cup of coffee the other day. Jensen makes a face at that one, and gets another eyeroll for his trouble, but he kind of likes that Jared can just pop out with stuff like that. It's like he's never even considers Jensen might get worried — which makes any actual worrying seem kind of pointless. He's thinking about telling Jared all of that when he looks up and catches a sweet, ridiculous smile on Jared's face.

Jensen rinses his hands off slowly, dries them, and slides them up Jared's thighs, wedging himself in between. "You've got that look again," he says. "That one you get right before you embarrass us both."

"Yeah." Jared leans down and puts his hands on Jensen's shoulders, pulling him closer. His voice is soft, just like the marshmallow he keeps in his chest in place of a heart, and Jensen would make fun of him for it except for how much he loves it.

"Might as well just come out with it."

Jared huffs out a laugh, and rubs his face against the side of Jensen's head like an overgrown puppy. "We should have a party. An end of the summer thing, maybe a barbecue, before it starts to get cold. Invite the whole crew."

Jensen likes the idea: his house all lit up and noisy, inside and out. The grill going nonstop — Chris makes a great burger, and he's not too bad with steaks — and a cooler full of beer close by on the deck. He hasn't thought about opening the place up in ages, but it's a different house now, with Jared and the dogs underfoot all the time, Jared's cooking crap all over his counters, Jared's clothes all over his bedroom. Not that anybody but Jared is getting anywhere near his bedroom, but still.

"I could go for that," Jensen says. "Let's have a party. Are we done?"

"Oh, that wasn't the thing." Jared scratches idly at the back of Jensen's scalp, and Jensen tilts his head back into it; Jared can say whatever the hell he wants, as long as he keeps doing that.

"What's the thing?"

"When I first met you, I thought, wow, this guy is freaking hot, and possibly also a hermit. Which didn't put me off, by the way; I would have worked around it." Jared gives Jensen's shoulders a little shake and beams at him, all sappy and open and not even minding it at all. "But lately, I see you hammering at your keyboard like it's done you personal harm, or bitching at Gen about her taste in books at the store, or

letting Chad lecture you about marketing, and it's like. I don't know, man, it's like a light has come on in you. I like that. I really love seeing you like that."

When Jared's done, Jensen is breathing hard and fast, his heart quick and loud in his ears; his face is hot, and he doesn't trust his voice. He says, "Wow," and grabs at Jared's hands, and holds on so tight his fingers ache. "Okay, that's. Yeah, that's pretty embarrassing."

"No, that's not the thing either." Jared bites at his lip, and Jensen focuses on that, because he's not going to be able to meet Jared's eyes without making a fool of himself.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"I think — I mean, I'm. I love you." It comes out cracked and ragged, and Jared clears his throat. "A lot. I hope that's okay. I know it's fast."

"It's okay." Jensen says it fast, so Jared can't take it back, and pushes himself closer, wrapping as much of himself around Jared as he can. "It's so okay. God, come down here already." He yanks at Jared's belt, pulls him down off the counter and plasters himself against Jared's chest, arms wound tight around him.

"Not too fast, huh?" Jared laughs, a relieved rumble bubbling up where Jensen's face presses into his throat.

"I think we should go to bed. Right now." Jensen hooks his fingers into the back of Jared's shirt; the urge to rip it right off him is not inconsiderable.

"That's maybe a little fast." Jared tilts his head and bites at Jensen's throat; he clearly doesn't mean it. "We're not even done with the dishes."

Jensen's already working Jared's jeans open; he's hard as a rock, and Jared's not much better off. "Fuck the dishes," Jensen tells him, reaching in to get his hands on Jared's cock. It's thick and hot, damp with sweat, and all for him. Jared *loves* him. "Fuck the bed, too," Jensen says. "I'm gonna suck you right here."

Jared's eyes go wide, and he braces himself against the counter; good, Jensen thinks, no more protests from that corner.

It's not a thing they've done yet. Jensen used to love it, back in high school, when it was one of about a dozen things a couple of stupid, horny kids could do to each other that didn't involve a drug store purchase. It was hot as hell, and he was *good* at it, before it turned into the only thing Aaron wanted from him. Suck him off, and maybe Jensen would get a hand job out of it, or maybe he'd just end up rubbing off into the mattress; after a while, he wasn't turned on enough to care. It was just a thing he had to do to keep the peace, like keeping his crap off Aaron's coffee table or taking the trash out when Aaron forgot it was his turn.

But Jared. He puts his hands in Jensen's hair, and looks down at him, eyes wide and happy, his mouth curved up in want and gratitude; like he knows it means something, that Jensen folds down for him like this. He rocks into Jensen's mouth slow and careful, says soft, sweet things Jensen can't quite make out. He holds Jensen close, and he's not shy about showing what he likes; he hisses out Jensen's name when it's good, nudges so Jensen knows just how he wants to be sucked. He runs his hands over Jensen's cheeks, traces the wet circle of Jensen's mouth around him, and he comes apart from it all so easy, shaking; he feels so good pulsing out against Jensen's tongue.

He braces himself against Jensen's shoulders, his knees trembling while Jensen eases him through the last of it; then he hauls Jensen up and latches onto his mouth like he's drowning for it. Jensen can still feel the burn of him at the back of his throat, the heat of Jared's hands against his face, and he sucks Jared's tongue into his mouth, pulls back and bites at Jared's lips. He's still so hard it's almost painful, throbbing against the too-tight crotch of his jeans, wants Jared so much he can barely breathe around it, and together they slide down the cabinet into a heap on the hard wood floor. Jensen nearly pulls a muscle trying to get himself against some part of Jared that will hold still long enough to get him off, and Jared laughs, untangles himself, slides a hard, steady thigh between Jensen's legs. Jensen hisses and lets his head fall back, rocking against Jared with no rhythm at all, just quick, ragged thrusts that Jared meets as best he can while he mutters filthy encouragement against Jensen's throat.

When Jensen comes, he bites down on Jared's shoulder hard enough to make him squawk, and gets batted on the side of the head for it. He comes down laughing, still twitching in his jeans, not even unbuttoned yet, barely even touched. He hauls himself up to kiss the spot he offended, says, "Sorry, geez, did I break the skin?" and gives himself another sweet rub against Jared's hip.

Jared lets his head drop to the floor, rucks his hands up under the back of Jensen's shirt, and laughs. "You're right," he tells Jensen, "that was totally embarrassing."

"Told you I knew that look."

"Let me catch my breath," Jared says. "I'll show it to you again."

~

The next day is Jared's day off, and he wakes up full of plans, shouting about sheet cakes and kolaches from the shower. Jensen has no idea what a kolache is, but when Jared explains in excruciatingly delectable detail, he gets on board fast. It's not until somewhere in the middle of breakfast that he catches up to the fact that Jared's planning to host the party at *his* place.

"You don't want to have it here?" Jensen sits back in his chair, his fork hanging lamely in the air halfway to his mouth.

"No offense, it's a great house," Jared says earnestly. "But your outdoor living space leaves a little to be desired."

"I have a grill, and a deck, and a pool, and a table—"

"And I have three picnic tables, a dock, and a waterfront, not to mention ninety percent of my cooking supplies."

"What kind of supplies do you think we need? Meat, Jared. I know these people. You start throwing fancy food at them, it'll just make them nervous."

"You think pastry and pie is beyond their lofty suburban palates? Come on." Jared's forehead wrinkles up. "What do you have against my house?"

"Nothing!" Jensen puts his fork down and pushes away from the table, takes his plate over to the sink. He likes Jared's place; he likes the water, he definitely likes making out with Jared at the picnic tables. He's just gotten used to the idea of everybody here, that's all. "It's fine, we can do it there. You have a great place." He dumps half the pancakes into the disposal and scrubs at the maple syrup clinging to his plate with a little more force than necessary.

"Okay," Jared says after a minute. Jensen can feel Jared's eyes on him, and he almost turns around, but he feels weird about making such a big deal about it now. It just caught him off guard.

"Okay," Jensen says to the sink, "Great."

Behind him, Jared is quiet until Jensen shuts the faucet off and turns around. "Really?" Jared says. "Because I'd really like to do something for everybody that comes from me. I want to be a part of your life, and I want to get to know your friends, but I kind of want to do it as a distinct person, you know? Not just your plus one."

"I get that." Jensen finishes drying off his hands, and tries for a reassuring smile. "I just get attached to my own space, I guess. We'll do it your way, and it will be awesome. My friends already like you way better than they like me, though. You don't have anything to worry about on that score."

"Okay." Jared's still watching him like he might go off the rails at any second; it's not unlike how Chris and Mike look at him when they think he's not paying attention, and Jensen doesn't care for it. "So, I was thinking maybe this Saturday? I'll spend the night there, because there's some stuff I can start on the day before. You could come with, if you wanted. I could use the help."

Jensen nods slowly. "Okay."

Jared bounces out of his chair and hooks an arm around Jensen's neck, pulling him in for a disgusting, wet smack on the side of his face. "This is going to be great. You're going to have so much fun, man. My place is *fun city*!"

"I can't wait," Jensen says, and with a herculean effort, he actually manages to sound like he means it.

~

The invitation comes to Jensen's personal email, copied to Chris, Mike, Tom, Gen and Danneel. It includes directions to Jared's house from the bar, which are unnecessary because the newest of them moved to the Landing in 1998 and the town just isn't that big. It also includes instructions to BYOB and also bring anybody else they want. They're promised barbecue and baked goods, so there's no doubt everybody's gonna show.

Jensen forwards a copy to Misha and one to Aldis, the only two people both in town and not on the list that Jensen even knows. Misha says he has three invites already so stop spamming him, and Aldis comes back a few minutes later asking for a ride. It's officially a party.

On Friday, Jensen sits in the bookstore with his back to the wall and plays *Plants vs. Zombies* with the sound turned all the way down. He packs up after lunch, just to get out from under his own ceiling, and goes home to get some stuff together.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, his shaving kit open beside him and five different t-shirts laid out on the bed, he calls Chris.

"I'm staying at Jared's place tonight," he says, all in a rush, and blows out all the air in his lungs after. The breath he pulls back in is more of a gasp, not exactly subtle or stable-sounding, and Chris knows him far too well to let it slide.

"You don't have to," he says instantly. "Jen, man, you really do not have to do anything you're not up for."

"I'm up for it." Jensen's hand curls tightly around the phone; the plastic creaks under his fingers.

"Yeah, you sound like it."

"I'm ready to be up for it, and if I just let things slide... it's not fair to him. It's like you said. I need to go all in."

There's a couple seconds of quiet at the other end of the line, and then Chris says, "Seriously?"

"Chris, you don't even know. I'm crazy about this guy. I need to do right by him."

"I just want to make sure you're doing right by you. You need anything, anything at all — you get nervous, you just need a break, whatever — you *will* call me. Right?"

"You know why I want to do this?" Jensen says. "If I need anything, I think I can just tell Jared."



He's been to Jared's place before. He hasn't been inside, but he's been there, and he's been there alone. And it's *Jared's place* — there's nothing in the slightest bit worrying about Jared. None of that settles the ache in the pit of his stomach, but he's keeping it at the forefront of his mind. So what if it's not his; it's just a place, and it has Jared in it, and the dogs, and something in the oven that smells amazing, even as he's coming up the walk.



"It's not for tonight," Jared informs him through the screen door, hands on his hips like he's about to unleash awesome food-defensive powers. "Tonight we're ordering pizza. My treat."

"You're a rotten host," Jensen tells him. "Why are we having this shindig here, again?"

Jared grins and pushes the door open, lets Jensen into his house. The first step is easy, but when the screen bangs shut behind him, it's all he can do not to jump right out of his skin.

"Uh, sorry about that." Jared shoves his hands into his pockets and ducks his head a little. "Guess I should get that fixed."

"Don't worry about it," Jensen says. "Now I won't need any coffee for the rest of the week."

The kitchen is a lot like the living room — a little cluttered, a little worn around the edges, but well-lit and kind of nice. Scruffy, Jensen thinks, in the good way. Like there's an unbreakable bubble of warmth at the heart of it, expanding to encompass anybody who enters.

There are dishes in the sink, and Jared immediately goes over and turns the tap on. "You can camp out at the table while I clean up," he says, his back to Jensen. "Just push the papers aside."

"Jared. You wreck my kitchen on a nightly basis, and then make me clean up after you. Are you... am I freaking you out?"

"No!" Jared turns, his hands still wet and soapy, clutching at a plain white plate. "No, it's not that."

"Then why so jumpy?"

"I don't know." Jared puts the plate back into the water and dries his hands, clearly working through it in his head. "It's just — I got here and started looking at it, and — I just moved in here a few months ago. I haven't really done much with the place, and I know it's a little rough around the edges." Jared finally looks Jensen in the eye. "You didn't really want to have this thing here. I know it's not exactly what you're used to."

Jensen blinks. "What I'm — what? Wait." Jensen takes a step closer, gets up into Jared's face. "Dude, are you suggesting I think this place isn't good enough for me?"

Jared makes a strangled sound. "No?"

"You are!"

"Not, like, in a bad way! Not like you're a snob or anything. I know you're not a snob, I mean, you hang out with Chris and he's clearly not a—" Jared stops, and his eyes widen. "Oh, crap, I just insulted your best friend." He drops his face into his hands. "I'm just going to stop talking now," he says, muffled and forlorn.

Jensen bites his lip, grinning. "You are such a freak, Jared," he says, and his own tension lifts up and drifts away like smoke. He doesn't even try keeping the laughter out of his voice, because honestly. This *guy*.

Jared lifts his head hopefully. "So I didn't just make a complete idiot of myself?"

"Oh, no. You totally did." Jensen laughs. "And I'm telling Chris as soon as humanly possible that hanging out with him is proof I'm not a snob. But I didn't want to do this here because I'm addicted to my own walls, okay? Not because I don't like yours."

It's a little easier after that. Jared asks him to keep an eye on the pies in the oven while he heads upstairs to take a shower, and that gives Jensen time to poke around, get used to things. He sits on the sofa, flipping through channels on Jared's admittedly inferior television, and reminds himself that he'll be back tomorrow night. He pulls the pies out when the oven dings — cherry, both of them, and Jensen does not disapprove — and sits, practically drooling, at the table until the shower cuts off. The sound of Jared padding around overhead is actually kind of nice, and by the time the lights of the delivery guy's truck swing up the driveway, Jensen's starting to think he might be okay.

They have dinner wound up together on the couch, the box fan in the window cooling things off while the heat bleeds out of the twilight. Jensen's tucked in against the arm, Jared sprawled back against his chest, and it's good. Jared's hair keeps getting into his mouth when he tries to eat, and he has to reach around shoulders wide as a barn door to get at the pizza — and Jensen does complain volubly about both of those issues — but he's suffered worse on his own sofa at home, and he honestly doesn't mind it.

Later, upstairs, things are a little different.

"I set the alarm for early," Jared tells him, stripping off his shirt. "But you don't have to get up. I just need to get some stuff into the oven."

"Exactly how many people do you expect to show up at this thing?"

"Trust me. If I make it, they'll eat it."

"If it doesn't skitter toward them spitting acid, they'll eat it. It's the quantity I question, not the quality." Jensen sits on the edge of the bed. He's still fully dressed;

hell, he still has his shoes on. He swallows past a knot in his throat as Jared gets closer to naked. "You know, there's air conditioning at my place."

Jared rolls his eyes. "Yes, I know. You're very rich and decadent."

"And sticky."

"There's a shower at the end of the hallway."

Jensen nods, and doesn't move. His eyes drift toward the door, but it's not the shower he's thinking of. He's weighing the odds that he can come up with a decent excuse to leave. Maybe he left the stove on, or forgot to bring his cell phone, or maybe he can fake a call from his alarm service.

One look at the narrow line of Jared's mouth is enough to make Jensen keep his own shut. "I'll take you up on that shower," he says instead, and grabs a clean t-shirt and boxers from his bag. "Back in a few?"

"Don't take too long. I've been up since five." Jared pops his eyebrows up, and if the smile he sends at Jensen is a little half-hearted, it's certainly better than nothing.

~

Jensen takes too long; it's a cop-out, and he knows it, but he's getting through this any way he can. By ten on a work day Jared's usually yawning, and if he's still up at eleven it's a caffeinated miracle. Jensen crawls in beside him just after midnight — showered, shaved, flossed, brushed, whatever he could think of to eat up time.

Jared's already snoring. Jensen lies there under the spin of the overhead fan, not quite touching, not quite wanting to be touched. He watches the shadows on the wall, listens to the wind in the trees outside. The breeze pushing in through the window is light and cool, but it doesn't stop him sweating through the sheets.

He drifts in and out in a nervous haze, jerking awake every time Jared twitches or makes a sound, his hands fisted tight in the pillow under his head. When the alarm goes off he stays still, eyes closed, breathing deep and steady while Jared brushes a hand over his hair.

When Jared takes his clothes down the hall to get dressed — that's when Jensen finally sleeps.



"Thanks, man," Aldis says when he gets in the truck and buckles himself in. "I know it's not on the way."

"No problem," Jensen says, heading back out on to Main, which will wind between two downtowns before their next turn. It gets him out of Jared's house for a while, and at the moment, that's the only thing that matters.

Aldis settles a twelve-pack on the floor by his feet, and turns in his seat as far as his belt will let him. With his back in the corner between the seatback and the door, he gives Jensen a once-over that ends in a smirk. "You're about to climb out of your own skin," he says. "I thought Chris was making this shit up, but you're all the way gone on this guy, aren't you. Good for you, man, seriously. It's about time."

Jensen keeps his eyes on the road and his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He loves his friends, he reminds himself. He loves them. He doesn't make them walk six miles to cookouts, even when they're privacy-invading dicks. "Is there any one of you people with a life more interesting than mine? Because I'm starting to feel like I signed on for a season of *The Real World*."

"Short answer? No." Aldis taps his fingers against his knee, a rapid stuttered pattern like he's typing on a keyboard. "Have you met your friends?"

Jensen cuts his eyes over to Aldis for just a second and grins. "Point."

"Anyway, it's mostly just about the new guy. He's a *new guy*. He's way more interesting than you. Even Ed's coming out to take in the sights."

"And you're in my truck why?"

"Because I'm not showing up to a grown-up party in the care of my big brother. I got scars, man, same as you. High school was unkind to us all."



There's a picnic table in the back on a wide stone patio. Chris and Steve are chatting at one end while Chris pretends he's not keeping an eye on Jared's every move, and Mike's sitting on the other side of the tabletop rubbing Tom's shoulders. Jensen can't see Tom's face, but from the sounds he's making, Mike seems to be doing a decent job. Aldis's brother Ed is already there, in the process of thieving half of Danneel's chips. She's a little distracted with macking on her tattoo artist, who has two full sleeves of ink and a head like a cue ball. Misha's sitting on a small cooler at the foot of the table, reading a book.

Aldis slaps Jensen on the shoulder, then heads off to join the group. Jensen's wondering where he thinks he's gonna fit — there's a whole other table set up on the grass, with chairs and everything, but nobody's bothering to use it — when Jared sees him standing there like an idiot. A delighted smile spreads across Jared's face and he says, "Jensen, hey! Come over here, I've got burgers and hot dogs on, take your pick. Misha, grab Jen a beer, will you?"

Jensen ignores the measuring look Chris is aiming at him, and grabs a beer and a plastic plate from Misha on his way to Jared. "Hey. Sorry I took so long. Looks like the gang's all here."

The dogs come back to life at the smell of dinner and rush to join the festivities. Jared alternately orders them away from the table and gives in to their big, wet, pleading eyes and heartbroken whines. Jared is a pushover, caves in immediately and completely, and alternates between feeding guests and feeding beasts until everyone concerned is stuffed.

"I like the tattoos better than the tattoo guy," Aldis says a while later, when Danneel and her date have peeled off from the group and wandered down toward the water.

"He doesn't talk much." From the expression on Steve's face, it's hard to tell if that's meant to be a pro or a con.

"You don't talk much," Chris says, leaning into Steve's arm. "It's restful."

Mike says, "I give them two more weeks," and Tom, sitting next to him and looking like he wishes he wasn't, rolls his eyes.

It's easier to relax like this, surrounded by friends with the sun sinking lower in the sky, the shadows lying long across the yard. Jensen loses track of the conversation, loses track of time, sitting next to Jared with their thighs pressed together. He drinks his beer, makes inroads on his burger, spends a lot of time watching Jared's hands while his friends' voices rise and fall around him.

"There's more beer in the fridge," Jared says to him after a while, leaning in and pitching his voice low. "You want to bring some out before the natives get restless?"

It pulls the soft filter off the world. Looking around the table, most bottles are low or past it, but nobody seems to mind. Jensen raises his eyebrows, but Jared just pokes him in the shoulder, so he rounds up a few of the empties and heads for the kitchen.

Inside the shadows are deeper. Jensen fumbles for a switch by the door, but doesn't find one. The light from the windows is weak, but workable, and Jensen's poking around in the fridge for bottles when arms close around him from behind, pulling him off balance.

His stomach drops. Panic punches the air out of his lungs, spikes through his blood like an electric shock. He tries to jerk free, but the hold gets tighter; he drives an elbow back, hard, breath shaking out of him in loud, painful heaves. A flash of pain rakes across his back, *not real, not real*, but it's like a line of fire ripping through his skin. He tries to turn, and the vise around him is gone, nothing to fight against, nothing to hold him up. He sags back against the open door of the fridge and nearly falls again when it creaks under the strain of his weight.

Jared stands above him, his face almost grey in the half-light, eyes wide and horrified, hand stuck between them halfway between recoiling and reaching out. It's Jared, *Jared*, and his hand is *empty*, but Jensen can't breathe, can't choke out a

single word around the fist-sized lump in his throat, can't make his heart slow down. He can't move, just hangs there white-knuckling the door while Jared stares at him.

"Jen?"

Jensen can't answer. And when he doesn't, Jared tries to come closer.

"Don't." He scrapes the word out of the back of his throat, raw and twisted. "Don't... touch me."

"Jensen?"

"Please, just. Just go, okay, just... I need a minute, I need you to go."

"What the hell?" Jared says, his voice sharp and hurt, and Jensen hates that as much as he hates the terrified sound of his own voice. He wants to reach out and hold Jared, wants Jared's arms around him as soon as he knows they're *Jared's*, but he can't peel himself off the only thing holding him up and anyway, it's already way too late.

"You heard him," Chris snarls, "Get the fuck out!" and it doesn't matter that it's actually Jared's kitchen, not to Chris. He grabs at Jared's shoulder and drags him back, away from Jensen.

Jared says, "Get *off* me, man!" and tries to turn to Jensen again, and that's when Chris hits him.

That's when Chris *hits* him.

Jared's big. But he's off-balance, he's not violent, and he's not expecting it. He goes down, crashing into his own cabinets and landing with his wrist under him. Jensen hears a crack as Jared hits the floor and he launches himself at Chris, stepping over Jared and planting both hands in the middle of Chris's chest. He shoves, hard, and Chris hits the floor, eyes wide and furious. Jensen doesn't see what happens to him after that.

He goes to his knees on the floor next to Jared, his hand on Jared's face where Chris's fist connected. There's a trickle of blood at the corner of Jared's mouth, and his eyes are completely blank, like the blow has knocked all the heart out of him.

"Jared," Jensen whispers into the quiet. There's a new flavor of panic rising in him at the emptiness in Jared's face, the complete absence of anything in there but shock. "Jesus, Jared, I'm so sorry. Come on, man, ease up, I need to get a look at your arm."

Jared holds it up between them, already starting to swell. He doesn't say anything when Jensen touches it, just hisses out a pained breath and draws it in close to his chest. He stares at Jensen like Jensen's the one who hit him, and maybe Jensen did

— he might as well have. Disgust at himself settles into the pit of his stomach, and it's all he can do to keep his gorge down. He swallows, staring at the floor, anywhere but into Jared's face, and lets himself collapse against the opposite row of cabinets. His legs stretch out next to Jared's, and he sits there, quiet, breaking apart inside.

Neither of them moves until Aldis comes to the screen door, looks inside and says, "Oh, shit. This is bad."

Jensen looks up at Aldis, trying to think of a way to fix it, a way to explain. Jared's still looking at the wall, cradling his arm against his chest.

If he has any questions, he's not asking Jensen, and Jensen doesn't blame him.

~

Aldis and Tom get Jensen out to the tables, park him on a bench and let him sit there, trying to sort things out. In the cool, open air, his lungs open up again, and he breathes so deep it hurts, over and over.

Gen and Mike go in to see to Jared. They don't come out for a while.

"Where is everybody?"

Aldis looks at Tom, then at Jensen. "It's just us, man. Danny and her guy left a while ago. Misha gave them a lift. You didn't notice?"

"No."

"You said good night to them."

He nods. He's not surprised. A lot of the afternoon is a long, numb blur in his head. "I need to talk to Jared."

"Whoa, there." Tom puts a hand on his shoulder, and he's strong enough to keep Jensen right where he is. "Give it a minute."

Jensen nods again, and looks out toward the water. The last of the sun is gone, and the trees paint flat black shadows on the still surface. He just looks, lets the quiet sink in, and Aldis and Tom stay there watching with him, waiting him out. When he thinks he can handle himself a little better, he says, "Chris?"

They exchange another look. "Maybe give that more than a minute," Tom says.

"I lied to Jared, I let him think I was in an accident." He rubs at his eyes, and takes a long, unsteady breath. "I never told him about Aaron. Not a word."



"Jensen," Aldis says. He shakes his head, and it looks like there might be more, but it doesn't come. It doesn't need to; there's nothing his friends could say about it that he doesn't already know.

"I need to talk to Jared." He stands up; his head is pounding, adrenaline overload, and his legs almost go out from under him before he understands how wrecked he still is. It doesn't matter, he has to go now, and thankfully Tom and Aldis don't seem inclined to stop him this time.

Mike meets him at the front door. "He's in the living room. Gen's icing his wrist. It's not broken, at least we don't think so. He doesn't want to go to the ER."

Jensen nods. "Yeah. He wouldn't."

"Jensen, man. What the fuck were you thinking? This is some seriously deranged shit, even for you. That guy in there has no idea what just hit him. Or why, for that matter. What happened to your freakin' hiatus?"

"Chris said I should go all in."

Mike stares at him. "Well, it seems like you didn't."

"No," Jensen says, fighting to keep his voice from cracking. "Not really. Can I come in?"

Mike steps back from the door, and gives Jensen's shoulder a squeeze as he passes. In the living room, Genevieve is saying something quiet to Jared, holding a bag of frozen peas against his wrist.

When she sees Jensen, she stands up and comes to him, puts her arms around him and holds on tight. She whispers, "Ah, honey," and it's the worst thing ever, the way she looks at him when she pulls back, her huge brown eyes so sad. Because he has fucked it up with Jared, completely fucked it up, permanently fucked it up, and she knows it. They all know it.

"I'm sorry," Jensen says when she leaves them alone. He sits on the coffee table across from Jared, not entirely sure of his welcome, but he can't do this from across the room. Jared looks lost, quiet and shaken, and Jensen did that; he put that look on Jared's face. He's not even sure Jared understands what he's sorry for.

"They said to ask you," Jared says finally. "So I'm asking, Jen. Please tell me what's going on. Minus the bullshit this time, if you don't mind. I think I've earned it."

Jensen props his elbows on his knees and takes a deep breath. "A few years back," he says to Jared, finally. "There was this guy."

~

There are some things Jensen's never going to tell him. Some things he's never telling anybody, details nobody else ever needs to know. But he tells the rest, the bones of it, and Jared listens. He's still got blood on his mouth, and it sends a shiver down Jensen's spine, seeing even that small hurt.

"I keep thinking I should have noticed something off right at the start." Jensen bites his lip, looks at a space full of nothing on the wall behind Jared. "I don't know. He was a jerk, but kind of a garden-variety jerk, and by the time I figured that out, I was used to it. Chris never liked him, but Chris has never liked anybody I went out with, so I blew it off."

"There wasn't any accident," Jared says. He's got that same stunned look from before, from when Jensen blindsided him in the kitchen. With his good hand, he reaches out and clutches at Jensen's fingers, a desperate grip, like he's trying to save them both. "What really happened?"

"I won a boatload of money," he says. "And Aaron didn't like it. Not enough control over me after that, I guess. He always did like being the guy with the biggest bank account. He hated my friends, my classes, my job, my writing — anything that I paid any kind of attention — and when I struck it rich, he started to hate that, too. We stuck it out fighting for a couple of months, and then I gave up on it and moved out. He wanted some of his stuff back, so I showed up at his place a few days later with a few of his old t-shirts, some DVDs. He met me at the door with a crowbar."

"No... oh, God. Jensen. Are you—" Jared stops, shaking his head. Jensen gets it; he's the reigning king of vengeful time-travel fantasies, and looks like Jared is having one right now. "You were okay, though. You're okay." Jared takes a deep, shaky breath. "I mean, I can see you're okay, I just."

"I know, Jay." Jensen holds Jared's hand in both of his. "Believe me, I know."

It's hard to know what else to tell him, what else is important. It's all jumbled up in him: the sour smell of Aaron's clothes, his arms so slick with sweat Jensen couldn't get hold long enough to pry him loose; the vicious, hateful twist of Aaron's mouth when the crowbar slammed into Jensen's side, ripped into his back.

More things Jared doesn't need to hear.

"He left me there," Jensen says, when he thinks both of them are ready for it. "He probably thought he'd killed me. If Chris hadn't come looking for me, I would have bled out on the floor — that scar on my back, you know?"

"Thank God for Chris, then," Jared says softly, and even with the bruise blossoming on his jaw, the fucked up wrist, blood trickling down from his mouth, it's clear he means it with all his heart.

"Aaron took off. There was enough physical evidence to arrest him and put him away for years, and I guess he knew that. He was gone for three months, and he could've been on the moon for all I knew, or he could have been right behind me. I had security — Loretta sent them up, so we knew they were good. But Mike and Chris, Danny, Gen — even Aldis and Steve — they wouldn't let me go anywhere alone. They took shifts at the hospital until I got out, then Chris camped out in my parents' den with me until I was able to walk on my own."

"But they caught him? Tell me they fucking caught the bastard, Jensen."

Jensen nods. He stands up and walks away, just for a second of breathing room, a second to pull himself together. He watches his friends through the window, scattered around the closest picnic table in the light that spills out through the kitchen door. Without them he wouldn't be here, would have given up on himself a hundred different times. But Danny's right; at some point, he has to start living his own life.

He turns back to Jared, and for a second it's like having double vision, the version of Jared who showed up in his store like a ghost beside the one he's messed up with so badly. He should have kept his distance from that first day, he should have known he wasn't ready. But he wanted Jared — still wants him, so fucking much.

He slides his hands into his pockets to keep them from shaking, and meets the question in Jared's eyes head-on. "They caught him," Jensen confirms. "They caught him, and they killed him."

~

Aaron never got to him, never even made it to the house. Jensen never even saw him. He came up straight up the front walk with a gun, and by the time Jensen heard the guard's first shot, the whole thing was over.

When he's told Jared everything, he can't figure out what to do with his hands, can't decide where to rest his eyes. He never wanted to put any of this on Jared, never wanted any of it to touch him. But this feels better. Cleaner, even if Jared never looks at him the same way again.

"I know it's a lot to process," Jensen offers, when it doesn't look like Jared can find anything to say. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Back there in the kitchen," Jared says. He's holding onto his bad wrist with the good one; both hands are knotted into fists. "I scared you to death in there, coming up behind you like that. Jensen, I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry if — if anything else I've done has upset you, or made you think I could ever—"

"God, no," Jensen breathes. He goes to Jared, grabs him by the shoulders and gives him a shake. "Don't say that. Don't you ever even think that. It's not like that, it hasn't *been* like that."

"You didn't want to come here. Last night, and today... I *made* you come. I could tell you didn't want to, I just—"

"Please," Jensen says. "Please, just listen to me." He pulls Jared in, wraps his arms around him and holds on, breathes in the warm, comfortable smell of him. "I know you," he says into Jared's shirt, his hands fisted behind Jared's back. "I'm not afraid of you, I've never been afraid of you."

For a second, Jensen almost thinks he's getting it right. Jared's arms come up around him. But then Jared's good hand is on his shoulder, pushing him back; holding him at arm's length.

"But you didn't tell me," Jared says finally. It's like that part's just now hitting him. He looks at Jensen, his eyes wide and red, his face a pale wash of confusion. "You said you were in an accident. I asked you, and you said —" He shakes his head, like he thinks he can make it settle down into sense. "I don't understand."

"I couldn't tell you any of that, not at first. I didn't want you to think of me as — as that person, the guy who got beat down by his crazy boyfriend and couldn't do a thing to stop it. It's just so stupid, and ugly, and — I was just so tired of everybody looking at me like I'm gonna flip out any second, like I'm somebody they have to coddle and take care of. I couldn't have you looking at me like that, Jared, I just. I couldn't."

Jared nods. After a minute he says, "I guess that makes sense."

That should sound like a good thing, but Jensen knows Jared, and it doesn't. He tries to get closer, but Jared holds him off; and then he takes a step back.

"Jared." A cold wash of fear slides down Jensen's spine. "Jared, please."

"It's just. I wouldn't have." Jared shakes his head, biting his lip; there's a sheen of water standing in his eyes, ready to fall. "I wouldn't have thought of you that way. I would have been so, so proud of you, for surviving that, for somehow getting to be this — this amazing person, after all of that, and I would have told you." He hitches in a breath. "I would have told you every day that you're the strongest, most badass guy I know, because you are, and anybody who can't see that after everything you've gotten through is a fucking idiot."

Jensen takes a step toward Jared; he can't help it, he just needs to touch him. But Jared won't let him, holds up his only working hand between them, and Jensen stops, trying to find a way to make it better. Make it right.

"I didn't know," Jensen says finally. "I just thought — I don't know what I thought. I just didn't *know*."

"You didn't give me a chance." Jared opens his mouth to say something else, but stops himself and turns away. "I'm such an idiot."

"Don't," Jensen says. "Come on, please. Don't."

"No. You know what?" Jared swings back, and there's a flat, dark wall of anger in his eyes. "I'm not wrong about you. You've been through some full-out horrible shit, and I'm sorry any of it happened to you, but you came out the other side. You're not broken, you're not fragile, and I'm not an asshole for being so pissed at you I can't even think straight. You've been hiding from me from day one — about owning the bookstore, about where your money came from —"

"You said you wanted to guess—"

"You told me you were in a fucking *car accident*, just to shut me up. You let me make you come here, when you clearly weren't ready for it —"

"I'm sorry," Jensen interrupts. "Jared, I know, I know it was stupid. I should've trusted you, I should've—"

"Yeah," Jared says quietly. "Yeah, you should have." His shoulders rise and fall, and his voice is strained, but he doesn't reach out, doesn't give any indication that Jensen can, either. "I know you've been through a lot, I know today has been tough. I don't want to make things any worse for you. But I think... I think I need some time."

Jensen bites his lip and looks away. He gets it. He took a chance, a dumb, desperate chance, and he screwed up. He hurt Jared, he *got* Jared hurt. His heart feels like lead in his chest, and his eyes feel gritty and raw, but he gets it.

"I *am* sorry," he says quietly, and Jared gives a quick jerk of a nod. At the door, Jensen turns; the long, wide line of Jared's back is like a wall between them, unassailable. "For what it's worth, Jay. Whatever else I fucked up. I never felt safer with anybody in my life than I have with you."

Jared nods, but he doesn't turn around.

Jensen doesn't really expect him to.

~

He can hear his friends talking outside, but when he pushes the door open, everybody stops. It's like a scene from a TV show, everybody pausing for the big dramatic moment, watching him like he's about to keel over, or flip out, whatever. He says, "Think I'll skip the pie and head home," feeling like he's hit level two of a really unpleasant video game, the kind that triggers migraines and vertigo. He's cleared the awkward conversation with Jared and now he's got to run the gauntlet of his friends to get to his car.

"I am so sorry," Chris says. He's got his hands shoved deep in his pockets, and he's not meeting Jensen's eye. "I'm a jackass. Steve tried to stop me from going in."

"I did." Steve's standing next to Chris, both of them looking nervous. Jensen's never seen Steve look nervous in his life, and he's known him since third grade. "Should've tried with rope. I'm sorry too, Jensen."

"I screwed things up righteously before Chris ever showed up," Jensen says. "All by myself, like a grown-up."

"I'll get Aldis home," Tom says, and Aldis tosses him a nod of thanks. Tom's eyes are steady on Jensen, and it makes Jensen feel a little steadier himself, like sympathetic magic. "You need somebody to drive you?"

"Nah," Jensen says. "I know the way."

He suffers another pat from Aldis, another squirrely, apologetic look from Chris, and a kiss on the cheek from Gen. "You guys tell him whatever you want to, okay? He's earned it."

~

Jensen holes up in his house, spends a couple of weeks watching Top Chef reruns off a season pass Jared set up for him. He eats crap out of his pantry Jared would cringe at, and reads foodie blogs on the internet. He misses Jared, and he misses the dogs, and he misses waking up not knowing how his day will turn out.

At first, he tells himself he's not going to push. He's going to give Jared time to cool off. He skips going in to the bookstore, lets Gen do whatever she wants with it. Doesn't show his face at Kane's. Jared's stuff is still scattered all over his kitchen, his bedroom, his life, and he doesn't ask for any of it back, or offer to give back anything of Jensen's, either. Jensen hopes Jared's trying to be sensitive, avoid any reminders of previous nasty scenes, but he's trying to be honest with himself these days. It's possible Jared just doesn't care.

In September, he makes himself start going to the library on Wednesdays again. Chad's the one who brings the food now, and Jensen always manages to show up after he's gone, even if he has to wait for a few minutes around the corner. He picks up where Gen leaves off, in the middle of *The Hobbit*, and it's not as bad as he thought, being out around people again. He brings his guitar every week, picking out the chords of the songs from memory; he may have seen the animated movie, once or twice. The kids love it, and making people happy turns out to be something he didn't know he missed. It feels good.

By Halloween, he's going back to the bookstore again. The bell rings a lot these days, but he never looks up for it; he just keeps writing. It's not as much fun as it used to be, when he could think about showing it off to Jared when he was done, when he had somebody to be proud of him for it at the end of every day. But the what-ifs are still there, sometimes more of them than ever, and getting them down on the page helps fill up his time.

He goes back to his therapist, which he hates so much he figures he probably still needs it. He takes up running, and hates that, too. One gives him time to talk, and one gives him time to think, and he's never been a big fan of either of those things. But he's starting to see the start of a way back to himself, even if he can't find a way back to Jared. Somehow he's going to have to let that be enough.

It would be easier, way easier, to just let it go. Let Jared wander off into his own life and just be this guy Jensen knew for a while. There's already too much space between them, a gap that's getting wider every day; Jensen can see a time when they won't be able to cross it. His gut clenches whenever he thinks about it, a cold, sick ache in the pit of his stomach, and he has to knot his hands into fists to keep them steady. It feels like an honest to God physical event, and he doesn't want it, doesn't want any of the things that would lead up to that point or come after. He wonders how much time, exactly, Jared thinks he'll need.

It seems like he might need all of it.

Jensen's thinking about that while he's tuning up for the kids on a Wednesday in November. There's a light dust of snow on the ground, nothing that will stick, but it's cold enough to turn his breath white, and he hasn't talked to Jared since late summer. He edges out of the warm up into a song about a dragon and its girlfriend, to take his mind off of things, and behind him, somebody clears his throat.

Jared's got a pink box clutched in both hands. He's dressed for the weather, a black hat pushed down over his hair and a black scarf wound around his throat. His eyes are wide and his mouth open, but he doesn't say anything. He just stares at Jensen like a deer in headlights, and for a long moment, neither of them move.

Jensen recovers first, remembers where he is. He sets the guitar behind his chair, slides his pick into his back pocket, and stands up to do this thing like an adult.

"Sugar rush for the kids?" he says, nodding at the box, and after a beat, Jared nods back.

"Sorry these are late," he says, handing over the cookies. "Chad's got a cold."

"So does Gen. When she called me this morning, she sounded like a water buffalo."

Jared's mouth quirks up at one corner. "What does that even mean?"

"I don't know. Kind of moany, with a lot of sniffing?"

"Okay," Jared says. "That sounds pretty bad." His smile gets wider, a little more real, and Jensen can't take his eyes off it, can't help but match it. He can't believe Jared is standing right there in front of him, that they're having an honest to God conversation. He feels like somebody just turned the sun back on, and pointed it right at him.

It doesn't really click that he's just staring until Jared looks away. "I should go," he says, "it's just me behind the counter, and you know how that usually goes."

Jensen nods quickly. "Right. Yeah, the kids will start showing up soon. I should get everything set up."

"Tell Gen I said hi, okay?"

"She'll be back at the store tomorrow, I think. If you wanted to come by, you could tell her yourself."

It's a leap, and Jensen can feel himself falling even as he says it. Jared's shaking his head before the last words are out, taking a step back and fidgeting with the end of his scarf. "I don't know if Chad will be back. I'll just see her around, I guess."

"I'll tell her."

Jared nods. And then he just stands there, halfway between Jensen and the door. Two high spots of pink color his cheeks and when he looks at Jensen again, finally, his eyes are warmer than Jensen expected.

"Are you okay?" Jared says it all in a rush, like maybe it doesn't count if he breaks the sound barrier with it. "You look good."

What Jensen means to say, once he's processed the question, is that he's fine, he's working through some things, but he's getting a little better every day. What he actually says is, "I'm building a fence."

Jared raises his eyebrows. "You're what?"



"For the dogs. I mean — not your dogs, not unless — I was just thinking lately, the house is really quiet. I'm thinking of getting some dogs."

"That's great." The smile Jared comes up with is a very close cousin to plastic; it doesn't come anywhere near his eyes. "I hope that works out."

"I'm not building it like, with my own hands. I haven't got the faintest idea how to build a fence. I've got some guys coming out."

"What kind of fence?"

Jensen shakes his head. He doesn't have a clue. "I guess that's something I should ask them."

"I should go," Jared says again. "It was good to see you."

"Yeah."

"Have a good day."

"Yeah," Jensen says, "You, too," and then Jared's gone.



A week later, the bell over the door rings and Jensen doesn't think anything of it. But there's a shadow looming over him, tall and spindly, and when Jensen looks up he sees Chad, all spike-haired and solemn-faced. A paper bag that doesn't smell like anything thunks down on the table next to Jensen's computer, and then next to it, a cold can of coke. Chad sits down across from him and doesn't say a word.

Jensen stares at him. Chad just stares back. It's like looking into the eyes of a cat — or maybe a shark. Nothing but a very deep calm, supported by a very deep malevolence. There's no way Jensen's winning this, so he gives in to curiosity and pulls the bag closer, looks inside.

There's a pack of Juicy Fruit chewing gum, a little box of Tic-Tacs, and a Snickers bar. Plus a receipt.

"I'm told this is how it works," Chad says finally. "I show up with food and beverages, and you tell me what the fuck is wrong with you."

Jensen nods slowly. That's not actually how it works, but he's willing to go with it; sitting across from Chad is as close as he's been to Jared in days. "First, and for the record," he says, holding up the pack of gum, "this isn't food." He pulls the coke closer and pops open the tab. "For the rest...do you have that kind of time?"

"You're screwing with Jared's head. It's not attached all that well to start with, so I need you to stop it. I know he told you about his family."

"Yeah."

"So you know, then."

Jensen tilts his head. "Know what?"

"God, you really are as stupid as you look, aren't you."

"I know coming out was rough. I know he's not on the best of terms with his mom and his brother. I don't know what that has to do with—"

"You don't know." Chad shakes his head. "His family thinks he's such an asshole he'd fucking *marry me* without ever coming out to them. You think he's such an asshole he'd treat you like an infant just because you got knocked around by some douchebag once. And you don't know how that could possibly start to give a guy a complex?"

It's like an electric shock. His skin goes ice cold, then way too hot, and his hands clench around his soda can. A bitter taste of adrenaline floods the back of his mouth and he can't think of anything to say. Those two stories don't belong together. Jared can't possibly think they're the same, can he? Jensen blinks, frowns, and lays his hands flat against the counter.

"That's not," he says, and then can't make it any further. Because it is, it clearly and obviously is exactly that. "Ah, hell. Seriously?"

"You're starting to see the parallels. Awesome."

"That's not what happened," Jensen says. "I mean — okay, that's what happened, but it's not like that. I'm the one who screwed up, he's just the one who got caught in it. There's nothing for him to have a complex *about*." He tries to remember Jared's face the day of the picnic, the things he said, but it's all running together. The idea that Jared could somehow feel responsible for Jensen's screw-ups, that he's felt like that all this time — it's enough to turn Jensen's stomach. "Jesus," he says, staring across the table at Chad. "Really?"

"Hell, yes," Chad says. "You think you own the patent on stupid?"

"Chris is right." Jensen closes his eyes. "Christ, I'm such an asshole."

"Yeah, you are. And you need to fix it." Chad retrieves the bag, pulls out the receipt, and slaps it on the counter between them. "Also, you owe me three dollars and twenty-two cents."

"Okay," Jensen says. He braces himself against the table and looks Chad in the eye. "You know him better than anybody. Tell me what to do."



When Chad leaves, there's a tentative plan in place. There are two places Jared can be counted on to be every day - work, and home. Home won't cut it, because Jared could always just order Jensen out, and if Jensen refused to go, Jared could call the cops. Granted, Jensen knows most of the cops, and they probably wouldn't actually arrest him. But they wouldn't let him stay, either.

Work is a far better ambush site. Jared can't really throw Jensen out of the bakery if he's not causing any trouble. Especially not if his co-owner backs Jensen up. And Jensen's not planning to cause any trouble; he just wants to talk to Jared. Straighten him out a little. He's not expecting Jared to cave and suddenly want to go pick out promise rings or anything, he knows he's got serious repair work to do. But Jensen's not like Jared's family; he's worlds smarter than that. He's not going to let

Jared keep beating himself up, and he's not going to let Jared just vanish from his life.

So that's the plan: ambush, immobilize, explain. He's got a check ready to cover their usual take for the day, so Jared won't be able to say Jensen's costing him money. He's got Chad's solemn promise to let him into the back and not let Jared out until they've come to some kind of an understanding. He doesn't actually know what he's going to say, not yet, but if he's got the time, he's sure he'll come up with something.

He drives to Hearthstone early the next morning, mentally poking at the plan so he can shore up any weak points ahead of time. He's got a lurking suspicion that the entire plan is a weak point, that Chad's unexpected brilliance at getting to the heart of the problem far exceeds his plotting skills. But he doesn't know what else to try, and if it all goes to hell, he figures he can always say it's all Chad's fault.

He pulls up in the parking lot, and Jared's car is there just like it's supposed to be, but Jared's leaning up against it, feet crossed at the ankle and arms crossed over his chest. Waiting.

Gravel crunching under his tires, Jensen brings his truck to a stop a few feet away. He shuts the engine off and pulls the keys out of the ignition and sits there for a second, not looking at Jared, just breathing. Gathering his wits, such as they are.

Then he gets out, and goes around to lean against his passenger door, just across from Jared. He tries to look relaxed, just as calm as Jared seems to be, but he's got about a million words circling in his head, trying to get out. It's all he can do not to vibrate visibly.

"I figured I'd wait for you out here," Jared says eventually, "because Chad says you've got some idiotic plan to buy out the store for the day and ambush me in my own kitchen."

Jensen clenches his teeth around the many, many things he wants to say to and about Chad and tries to breathe deep through his nose. It's supposed to be relaxing. It really, really isn't.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," Jared says. "That's all I came to say."

"You should come back home," Jensen says.

Jared's eyebrows go up. "Excuse me?"

It's not the eloquent speech Jensen had been hoping would trip off his tongue at the last minute, without his conscious participation. But it's the thing Jensen wants most in the world, so he says it again: "Come home with me." And because he wasn't raised completely wrong, he adds, "Please."

"Why?" Jared's eyes aren't giving anything away.

"Because I miss you," Jensen says. "Mostly just that. But I want to try to explain things, too."

Jared looks away. "I don't get to tell you how to run your life, Jensen. Who you trust and who you don't, that's your choice."

"Come again?"

"You've got a lot more experience being you than anybody else. I figure, you know what's right for you by now." Jared shrugs, and pushes a hand through his hair. "I'm not — I'm trying not to be the kind of guy who keeps banging his head against a locked door."

Jensen's not really good with people. He never has been. He's not particularly insightful, though he can sometimes fake it if he has enough time to think about things beforehand. But there's something off here, something really weird about the way Jared's holding himself, and Jensen doesn't trust it. He doesn't get the sense that Jared's not sincere; it's just that the sincerity feels fragile.

Tilting his head, Jensen takes a step closer to Jared and searches his face, trying to get Jared to look at him, too — really, actually look at him. "You really do think I'm as stupid as your family is, don't you."

Jared's eyes come up, startled, and for a second Jensen can see right through him. It's a direct hit, and it takes Jared a second to cover.

"This doesn't have anything to do with them," Jared says, "and no," and he's such a rotten liar, Jensen wants to pat him on the head, give him a hug or something. He can't even look Jensen in the eye when he says it. "I've just been making all your problems about me, and that's not right. We were friends before anything else, and I've been a shitty friend. I'd like to do better. I would've said it sooner, if I'd known you were planning an assault on my place of business."

"I wasn't. Chad was."

"Chad doesn't have to plan an assault on the bakery," Jared says, frowning. "He's got a key."

"Listen." Jensen moves closer, right into Jared's space; it forces Jared to look at him, and when he does, Jensen puts his hands on Jared's shoulders. "I'm not good at saying the right thing. I'm actually really good at saying the exact wrong thing. Lately though, the main problem is I haven't been saying anything at all."

"I..." Jared tilts his head. "What?"

Jensen gives his shoulders a shake. "There are about a million reasons for you to keep your distance from me. I've spent most of the past couple of months making a running list of good reasons for you to move on. But before you go, I need you to hear me on something, okay?"

Jensen takes a deep breath; he lets his hands fall from Jared's shoulders, but doesn't move away; he doesn't want to, and he doesn't want Jared to get the wrong idea. "I lied to you about Aaron because when I was with you, I felt like a guy that never happened to. You made me feel like I had my life back, and I missed it, man. I missed just being some normal random guy so much. I should have known I couldn't lie my way into it, but honest to God, I was so fucked up, I thought it was almost like therapy. Like I could fake it till I made it, you know?"

"Jesus, listen to you." Jared pushes a hand through his hair and stares down at the gravel underfoot. "It's like you think I've got a sanity scale in my head and you can change my mind by getting back in the black again."

"I know you don't think of it that way. You getting pissed at me like that, when I had fucked up so bad?" Jensen laughs, shaking his head. "Jared, that's the more respect than I've had from Chris in years. More than I've given myself. I hate this whole thing — I hate going to bed by myself every night, I hate how much I miss your fucking dogs, I hate waking up every morning knowing I can't look at your stupid face whenever I feel like it. But I love that you believed in me enough to call me on my bullshit, I'm not gonna lie." He looks at Jared, just looks at him, because he may not get another chance for a while and he needs this like he needs food and air and water. "I just hope... I really hope at some point you'll get around to forgiving me for it. Because I'm still sorry as hell for all of it, and this really sucks."

For a long, long minute, Jared doesn't say anything at all. The air around them gets colder while Jensen waits for something, anything, that might look like a chink in Jared's armor. When it doesn't come, he presses his lips together and nods.

"Well, okay then," he says. "I'm blocking people in. I'll get out of the way."

"Jensen... Hey, hold up." Jared reaches for his arm, stops him mid-turn. "I'm not saying no. I just can't shift gears this fast. I thought — I'd written this off. I've spent the last few months trying to get myself past it so I could maybe show my face at Kane's again someday and not look like I got my heart stomped on."

"That's pretty fast work," Jensen says numbly. "It's going to take me a little longer."

Even as he says it, he knows it's not fair; he's not surprised when Jared pulls back. "Okay," Jared says, his voice steady and even. "We're going to file that under you being really good at saying the wrong thing. And I'm going to go back to work." He shakes his head, an odd look on his face. "You can come by later, if you want."

"I'm sorry." Jensen sighs. "I'm a jerk. I think I mentioned that once or twice."

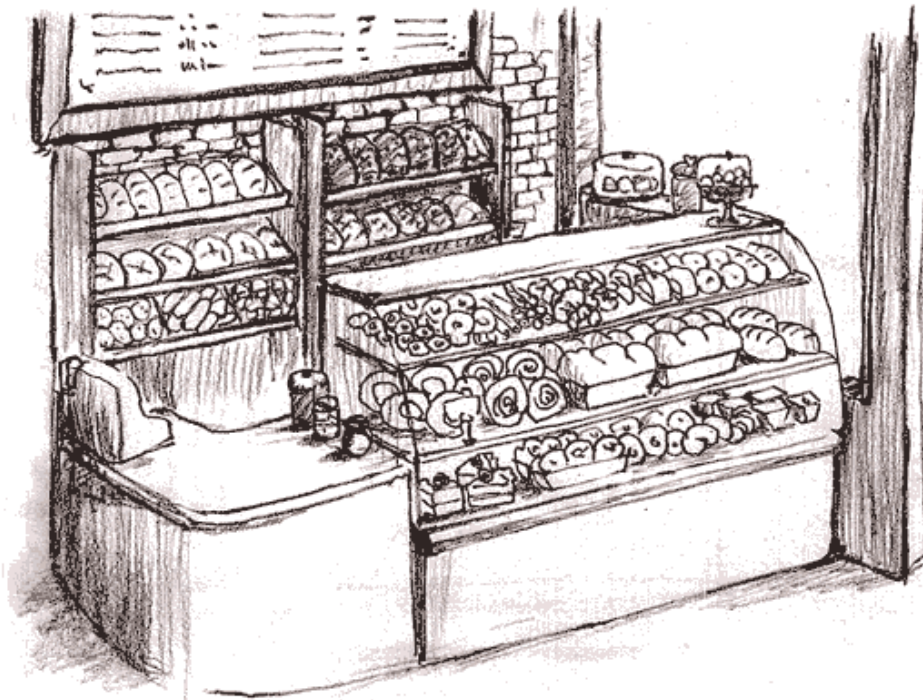
"It's okay." Jared bites his lip, then reaches out and pulls Jensen in closer, wraps his arms around Jensen's shoulders in a loose, careful hug. "We're good," he says into Jensen's hair. And then he lets go.

It takes Jensen a minute to process it: Jared turning his back, walking away. Jensen climbs back into his truck and waits, thinking Jared might change his mind; might come back; might feel wrong just leaving Jensen there without him.

The temptation to give Aldis a call is really strong. Aldis is on his side. Danny too, but Danny's got a blunt way of saying things that Jensen doesn't think he can take right now. Anything else, he'd call Chris, but Chris isn't going to work for Jared-related advice right now; for this, Chris is the last person he needs.

Jensen straightens up, his grip tightening around the steering wheel. He's not calling anybody, not this time. They're all the last person he needs. They didn't screw things up with Jared; he did. He's the only one who can put things right. He needs himself, and what he knows about Jared because Jared let him in. What he loves about Jared, because *Jared let him in*.

He's the world's foremost expert on how to fix this. After all, he's the one who broke it.



Jensen follows Jared into the bakery. When he opens the door, Chad's there, glaring hard enough to peel back skin. The customer Chad's helping looks terrified, and Jensen can't blame him. There are only two others in line, and they're more than happy to take off like rockets when Chad leads them to the door. He flips the 'Open' sign to 'Closed' and turns back to Jensen with his hands on his hips.

"What did you do?" he whispers, loud enough to be heard from space. "He came in here like a zombie and went straight for the muffin tins. We don't need muffins, man, we are totally full up on muffins. These muffins are clearly therapeutic."

"I ran into a little problem outside, thanks to you," Jensen hisses back, and Chad's eyes go wide. He takes a step back.

"Yeah," he says. "About that."

"Go home." Jensen lightens up on the death glare a little, because fucked up as his tactics may be, Chad's heart is in the right place. "He'll be fine."

"He was supposed to be fine already."

"I know." Jensen slaps Chad on the back, and pushes him toward the door. "Go home. It's okay." He smiles a reassurance he only halfway believes. "I've got this."

When Chad's gone and the door is locked, Jensen moves behind the counter and stops at the door to the kitchen. Not because he doesn't know what happens next — finally, he does. But Jared's standing in front of a countertop filled with muffin tins and stirring something in a stainless steel bowl with a lot more force than it probably requires. He's concentrating so hard he doesn't see Jensen at first. His hair is in his eyes, and he's biting at the inside of his lip, and there's a streak of flour that crosses down from his neck and onto the black T-shirt he's wearing so incredibly well. His arms bunch and relax as he moves, and Jensen's never thought of stirring a muffin mix as a particularly athletic activity but at the moment, Jared could take an Olympic gold medal in it.

For a second, Jensen's ready to ditch the plan. It's a stupid plan that calls for talking instead of touching, and touching is so clearly what's called for in this situation. Jared's fewer than ten steps away and crossing those steps, putting his hands on Jared's arms, turning him around, it all seems like a really good idea. His face heats up at the thought of being that close, touching Jared again like he's been missing for so, so long. At the thought of Jared *letting* him.

But that's key. And not at all likely, not unless Jensen gets everything else right first.

He takes a deep breath, takes a step forward, and clears his throat.

Jared turns, eyes going wide. He stops stirring in favor of frowning. "Jensen?"



"Yeah. Hi."

Jared's face undergoes a transformative series of expressions — surprise, confusion, what Jensen sincerely hopes is welcome — before he settles on resignation and sticks with it. He groans, and drops the bowl with the spoon still in it onto the counter, where it rocks back and forth precariously before it settles. "I thought we talked about this!"

"Hey, I didn't clear the place out, that was Chad," Jensen says quickly. "I didn't even ask him to. And there were only two customers anyway." Well, possibly three; Jensen wasn't sure if that first guy had paid before Chad gave him the bum's rush out.

"But I told you we were good."

"I know." He ducks his head a little, hunches his shoulders. "I know, I'm sorry. It's just—" Jensen shakes his head. "No, I'm actually not sorry. I've cracked your code. I know 'we're good' is your super-polite way of saying 'excuse me while I go somewhere and wig out in private.'"

"It is not!"

Jensen raises his eyebrows. "So these are perfectly rational, necessary muffins you're making," he says. "Not the muffins of despair?"

Jared shoves his hair out of his face and looks away. "I don't need my muffins psychoanalyzed," he says. "But thanks."

"Look." Jensen takes a step closer — slow, like Jared's a six-foot-plus kitten he's afraid of scaring off. "This isn't really my genre. But the forty million Sandra Bullock movies Gen and Danny have made me watch over the years tell me this is the part where I make a grand gesture."

"Jen—"

"Keys." Jensen holds up his key chain. He counts them off, one by one. "House. Store. Truck. Kane's. I think this one is for a filing cabinet? I don't know." He puts them into Jared's hand and folds his fingers closed over them. His eyes never leave Jared's face, so he gets to see it all: the first slow blink, the frown, the sudden wide-eyed comprehension. "I don't need to know when you come or go," Jensen tells him. "I trust you behind every closed door I have, Jared."

Jared just stares at him, gears turning so fast his head should be smoking. "This is — this is a lot," he says. "You don't have to—"

"I see my therapist twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at seven p.m. in Malden. You can come with me. I mean, if you want. *You* don't have to." Jensen ducks his

head and scratches at the back of his neck. "I, uh. I know that's weird. But I mean it. Whatever you need me to do, so you can believe me, I'll do it."

Jared leans back against the counter, his legs crossed at the ankle, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. It's perfectly relaxed, except for how he's as tense and still as a statue of himself. "You know what's weird?" He laughs, low and rough. "I don't need you to do a damn thing, Jensen. I've missed you every single day, and I have hit the very end of my pride. Whatever you want to give me, I'll take it. Just — don't get any new dogs, okay? You *have* dogs. And they need a good fence."

"I won't," Jensen promises. "I swear, no new dogs for me. No lying, no new dogs, no—"

"Okay, shut up now." Jared levers himself up onto the counter, knees spread invitingly wide, hands braced on either side of them. He looks sinfully touchable, and Jensen's heart kicks into a higher gear. Jared watches him, and his smile's still a bit brittle around the edges, but there's a warmth in his eyes Jensen knows, that catches hard at his heart. "Come here."

"Oh, God." Jensen crosses the distance between them at a physics-defying speed, and stops just short of close enough to touch. He stares, because it's okay now, he can do this; he gets to do this.

"Problem?" Jared asks; he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Seems like you've got that look again."

Jared nods, his eyes never leaving Jensen's. "Yeah, I imagine I do."

"I don't know where to start."

"We have done this before, remember?"

Looking up into Jared's face, that smile, those crazy gorgeous eyes all squinted up to make fun of him, Jensen laughs and says, "Not really. Not like this."

The smile drops off Jared's face instantly, replaced by a look that's both hot and hungry. "Please," he says, and it's a tone Jensen has no hope of ignoring, and no desire to anyway.

He steps in, slides his hands onto Jared's thighs. The denim is soft and worn under his palms. Jared's eyes close, and he swallows, throat working soundlessly. Jensen shifts in closer, till his hands curve around Jared's hips, and Jared lets out a long, shaky breath.

"I missed this." Jensen can't take his eyes off Jared's face, the sweep of his lashes against his cheek, the curve of his mouth. He's leaning in, up, and he moves one

hand to the back of Jared's neck to anchor himself. Jared's tall, and the counter doesn't help, but it's gonna be worth the climb. "Missed it every day."

"Then get on with it," Jared advises, leaning down to get closer.

"You've been a pushy son of a bitch since the day I met you." Jensen reaches up, brushes his thumb slow and easy over Jared's lower lip, because it's there and he can reach it and he wants it; and when Jared starts to tremble under his hands, he does it again because Jared wants it, too.

"Jensen." Jared draws out the word, a low, rough whisper. "Come on..."

"Yeah," Jensen says. "Yeah, Jay. Okay."

He eases all the way in, Jared's thighs hard and tight around his hips, Jared's chest a broad, warm wall to brace himself against as he pushes a hand into Jared's hair. He pulls Jared in, slow, and one second Jared's breath is hot against Jensen's mouth, and the next Jensen's mouth is against Jared's, finally. Jared's lips are soft, slack, warm, and then Jared makes a sound deep in his chest and his hands come up to Jensen's shoulders, his fingers tight enough to leave bruises, and he just opens up, like he always has, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Jensen says, "Jared," against his mouth, and bites at Jared's lower lip, shaking with want and gratitude and joy just to be here, to have this. He licks inside, where Jared's wet and hot. It burns through him, and he was already hard but he could cut glass now, aching to be touched, to feel Jared against him. He breaks the kiss for a breath and Jared follows after him, hands coming up to his face to hold him steady and still, and it starts over again, sweet and shattering and right like nothing Jensen's ever done before.

When they pull back again, Jensen doesn't let Jared go far. He's got his fingers laced together behind Jared's neck and his forehead against Jared's, sharing air with him in the inch or two that separates them. Jensen's breath stutters, ragged and rushed. "Jesus, Jared," he says, his voice shaky.

Jared pulls Jensen closer, closes that space, takes Jensen's mouth like they haven't even started yet, like Jensen's been making him wait. It's crazy-good, desperation and need making it fast, hard, wet; Jared's hands ease down Jensen's back, and he comes down off the counter, his body shifting against Jensen's in a dizzy, sinful slide.

It's more than Jensen can take. He pulls back to catch his breath again, to open his eyes and look at Jared, just look. Jared's eyes are slitted and dazed, his mouth wet. The streak of flour Jensen noticed when he came in is damp and smeared over Jared's skin. Jensen reaches up to trace his fingers over it, heart thudding way too fast, loud as a drum in his head.

Jared's mouth curves, distracting Jensen for a second. "Hey," he murmurs. "You've totally got some kinda 'hot baker' thing going on here, don't you."

Jensen nods absently. He shifts forward, forcing Jared back a step, trapping him against the counter. "Uh-huh," he says, hooking his fingers into the belt loops of Jared's jeans. He tilts his head up, reaching, and Jared's an amazing person, a wonderful perfect person, because he shifts closer and lets Jensen at his throat. He presses his tongue against Jared's skin, grit and sweat and heat, and Jared groans and tugs at Jensen's hips, hard and ready and hot just where Jensen needs it most. Jensen hisses, and opens his mouth, bites at the curve of Jared's jaw, the soft skin underneath; it makes Jared shudder against him and say his name, rough and unsteady, the best sound Jensen's heard in months.

"Christ," Jared says, and his head goes back, his mouth wide; Jensen's got a hand between them, and he cups the heavy, hot length of Jared's dick through his jeans, squeezes just to watch Jared melt against him and when he does, so sweet and so completely lost to it, Jensen does it again, and again, and it's the hottest thing he's ever seen in his life, and he still has all his clothes on.

"So good," Jensen says; Jared feels so good under Jensen's hand. "Look at you."

Jared shudders, and opens his eyes; he looks at Jensen like nobody has ever looked at him, like Jensen's the most amazing thing he's ever seen, like Jensen belongs to him. And he does, Jensen realizes; he does belong to Jared, and has for a while, and he honest to God loves it.

"We can't," Jared says, and then trails off when Jensen squeezes him again.

"Hmm?"

"We...oh, God, hang on a minute, we—"

Jensen grins; it's hilarious and hot, watching Jared try to make sense with Jensen's hand on him like this. "I'm sorry?"

"We — okay, stop." Jared laughs, and grabs Jensen's hand, stills it against him. "Fuck. Okay." Taking a deep breath, Jared moves his hands to Jensen's shoulders and pushes him back a step. "We can't actually have sex here," he says, and drops his head down onto Jensen's shoulder.

It's an angle that has to be really uncomfortable given Jared's height. It puts his neck inches from Jensen's mouth; Jared hasn't really thought this move through. Jensen licks gently, once, then closes his mouth over the long curve of muscle that stretches down to Jared's shoulder; he uses his teeth, just a little, and sucks heat to the surface, and licks again. Jared's hands close convulsively around Jensen's shoulders; then he groans, and pushes Jensen back again.

"We can't," Jared insists, a hint of a whine in his voice.

From where Jensen's standing he can see three or four flat surfaces that would work just fine, and that's not even counting the tables in the store room. "Why the hell not?"

"For one thing," Jared says, "it would be really unsanitary."

Jensen rolls his eyes. "We'll clean up, after."

"And it's against the health code."

Jensen's not convinced the health code says anything at all about sex in a bakery. "We'll be very, very careful."

Jared laughs; it comes out soft and sharp. He raises his hand to Jensen's face, cups his jaw, and just looks at him, warm and intent. "Careful," he says, finally, "isn't really what I want from you right now."

Jensen closes his eyes, because he can't look at Jared looking like that without violating the health code all to hell and back. "Okay," he says, keeping his voice as even as he can. "In that case, we're leaving."



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"We're not having sex in your kitchen, either."

Jensen just tugs Jared a little faster down the hall. "No offense, man, but your work ethic? Kind of a buzzkill."

"People eat in here," Jared says, but he lets Jensen pull him through the door. He doesn't make a fuss when Jensen waves him toward the table; just drops into a chair and watches Jensen poke around inside his fridge. "Seriously. If you come out of there with whipped cream or chocolate sauce, we're going to have to have a long talk about the realities of my job."

Jensen comes out with couple of bottles of water, hands one off to Jared and leans back against the counter. "We'll need these," he promises, and Jared's grin flashes out bright and hot.

"I feel fully provisioned," Jared says. "Can we go upstairs now?"

"Can we have sex in my kitchen?"

"No."

"Then, yeah," Jensen says, "I think we better go upstairs."

For once, Jensen wishes he'd bought a smaller house. It's a long way to the stairs, a long way down the hall. By the time they reach his bedroom, Jared's had his hands on almost every part of Jensen's body and Jensen's entirely lost his ability to navigate. Jared stops them in the hallway by the door, backs Jensen against the wall and bites gently at the curve of his throat. It wrecks Jensen in the best of all possible ways.

"You said I should come home." Jared runs his hand up Jensen's side, back down across his chest. He stops just shy of Jensen's waistband, rubbing in tight circles with his knuckles. "Is that where I am?"

Jensen draws in a shaky breath. "I hope so."

"I think it is," Jared whispers, and thumbs open the button of Jensen's jeans.

"If you want, I'll move into your house instead."

Jared's eyes gleam, and his hand doesn't move. Jensen groans, jerks his hips forward, and Jared laughs, shaking his head. "Don't be stupid," he says. "Here is good."

Jensen agrees, but he's a little too occupied with Jared's hand to worry about it, because Jared sucks at teasing. He slides his hand into Jensen's boxers and wraps it around his dick, squeezes and pulls and murmurs crazy good things in Jensen's ear, things Jared wants and things Jensen can have. His fingers are warm and tight, eager to please, and the crackle of heat under Jensen's skin starts to burn.

"Can't believe how much I missed you." Jared's hand stills; his breath is hot and humid against Jensen's throat; his voice is an uneven whisper. "I thought we were done, and I—"

Reaching up, Jensen frames Jared's face with his hands, makes Jared look at him. "No such thing as done for us." He closes his eyes; Jared's hand has gone slack around him but Jensen pushes himself forward, into the loose circle of Jared's fingers. His breath hisses through his teeth and he forces his eyes open again, lifts his chin and pulls Jared's head down to get to his mouth. "I was gone the day I met you," he says between kisses, "I had no chance, Jay, no chance at all."

It's all Jared needs; he opens up, lets Jensen's tongue slide against his, slick and hot before he pulls back. He fists Jensen's dick, not as easy now, not as gentle; his eyes on Jensen's are intent and focused. Jensen lets go, thrusts into Jared's hand, cheeks burning under Jared's steady gaze. His breath stutters, catches in his throat, too close too fast, but it's too good for Jensen to care. Jared throws off heat like a furnace and a bead of sweat slides down the side of his face until Jensen pushes up and licks it away, finishes it with a soft bite at the curve of Jared's cheekbone.

"Jesus." Jared pushes back, pushes Jensen back against the wall and breathes deep and fast, chest rising and falling with each gasp. "You just...just stay there a minute."

"You come here," Jensen says instead, and pulls at Jared's wrist, tugging him into the bedroom. Jared follows, not quite steady on his feet.

They don't have to go far, and Jensen doesn't waste any time. Standing by the bed, he pulls his T-shirt off, drops it, kicks off his shoes and toes out of his socks. Jared stops him before he can shuck out of his jeans and just looks at him, like he's committing Jensen to memory.

"I think I've got a thing about your feet," he says finally, with an air of grave confession.

Jensen grins. "My feet, huh?"

"Not that the rest of you is hard on the eyes."

"Gee, Jared. I'm all overcome with your sexy talk."

"I get that a lot." Jared bites his lip, eyes gleaming with amused affection. "Now, get naked and get on the bed. I have needs."

Jensen laughs, and he moves to strip off his jeans, but Jared is suddenly standing very, very close and his hands are already there. He slides his hands over the rise of Jensen's ass, pushing boxers and jeans down as he goes. He bends down to finish the job, stroking the backs of Jensen's thighs. Jensen steps out of the last of his clothes and pulls Jared back up, gathering the hem of Jared's T-shirt into his hands. Jared raises his arms and Jensen rolls the soft cotton up his body, revealing smooth, hard skin already gleaming with sweat.

"Now I'm developing a thing," Jensen says, smiling up at Jared with pathological appreciation.

"The bed, Jensen."

That's an order Jensen can get behind. He goes, and seconds later a ridiculous amount of Jared is braced above him and coming down slow all along the length of Jensen's body.

Jared's skin feels good sliding sweet and slow against Jensen's. He can't imagine ever risking this again, and he tries to tell Jared that with his hands, urging Jared against him. He tries to tell him with his mouth at Jared's throat, sucking heat and color to the surface.

"That's gonna leave a mark," Jared says, "keep doing it," and Jensen does, licks and bites at Jared's skin until it's slick and red, until Jared's hips are rolling against him in a stuttered, distracted rhythm. It feels new: Jared reckless and beautiful above him, mouth open and head thrown back with pleasure; Jared's hands on him, winding him up until he can't think and doesn't really want to.

"Move," Jensen says, and proves he means it with a push against Jared's shoulders. Jared doesn't mind or he's too far gone to care, because he lets Jensen manhandle him onto his side. It's better, so much better, and everything else was already crazy good; it's just that he can see every inch of Jared now, can reach the places his hands have been aching to touch. "So many things I want to do to you," Jensen tells him, "you would not believe the list I have—"

"Is this on it?" Jared grins, and pulls Jensen all the way in. He tangles their legs together and lines them up, rubs his dick against Jensen's, a sweet, hot burn of friction that completely erases Jensen's train of thought. He ignores the question in favor of decisive action, and Jared seems to approve because there's a long, breathless stretch of nothing but skin on skin in every way they can have it.

"Jared," Jensen says; it comes out needy and too loud.

"Shhhhh," Jared says, "I've got you," and then he does; he wraps his hand around Jensen's dick, around both of them, and squeezes. Jensen's entire body shudders, and Jared strokes them together, rubbing his thumb over the head of Jensen's dick,



over and over, until Jensen's control snaps and he ruts into Jared's hand, his breath sobbing out of him as he comes apart.

Jared eases up, slow soft strokes that don't demand anything, slick with sweat and come — a little disgusting, Jensen reflects, and can't find it in himself to care. Jared's hand feels as good bringing him down as it did winding him up, just a different kind of good. Comforting, and a little sweet, and a lot more sticky.

"This is your bed, too, now," Jensen says breathlessly, grinning dizzily at Jared. "Just so you know."

"Awesome." Jared smiles back, a little tight around the corners of his mouth; his hips nudge against Jensen's in a very unsubtle hint. "Tell me all about that later."

"You don't want to talk about our future?" Jensen shakes his head. "Ouch."

"You can talk till you're blue in the face if you just do it with your hands on me," Jared says, "pretty much anywhere, I'm not picky—"

Jensen shoves Jared over onto his back, and shifts himself lower on the bed. He puts his hands on Jared's hips and says, "Is here okay?" and lowers his mouth over the crown of Jared's dick.

His hands holding Jared down are key; they keep Jensen from being choked to death. The element of surprise: a little overrated in certain situations. Jensen makes a mental note, squeezes Jared's hips in warning, and sucks him down. Jared shudders, says, "Jesus" and "Jensen" like he thinks they might be the same person and tries so hard and so obviously to stay still that Jensen takes pity on him. He coaxes Jared into moving, lets him thrust up into Jensen's mouth, and the groan that escapes Jared's throat is the best reward he could have asked for. There's a moment when Jared tries to say something and fails completely; his voice dissolves into a growl and he shoves up into Jensen's mouth a little too hard, and then again. While Jensen's coming to terms with how much he likes that, Jared is losing it, his limbs going shivery and boneless under Jensen's hands.

He tugs at Jared's arm, slides under it, drapes himself across half of Jared's chest, and gives the nearest nipple a casual lick. Jared twitches and makes a pleased, sleepy sound. "I'm going to need at least ten minutes before we move to the next item on your list," he says. His hand rubs a slow, deep circle between Jensen's shoulder blades, then moves up to rub against his scalp. It feels ridiculously good, considering the wealth of good they've just been through. "I'm on board," Jared promises, "believe me. I just have to catch my breath and remember how my muscles work."

"They work just fine," Jensen says. He's thinking about later tonight, and tomorrow, and next week. He's thinking about next *year*. A lot of the items on his list are infinitely repeatable as long as their work schedules don't conflict too badly.

"You know, this list of yours, if it's really that long," Jared says after a while. "Getting through it's probably going to take us a while."

Jensen props himself up on one elbow, looks down into Jared's deliberately casual face, and smiles. "I'm not all that worried," he says. "We've got time."

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