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### ***a room with you in it - jared/jensen - adult - 1/3***

#### **a room with you in it**

in which jared and jensen are clueless for an entire year. and there's a road trip.

jared/jensen (rps)

adult

28,000 words

### ***July***

The summer hiatus starts off awesome. Seriously. On a scale of one to ten, the beginning of Jared's summer rates an eleven-point-fucking-*awesome*.

And then suddenly summer is over, and he's on a plane, flying away from two months of overwhelming dry heat and missed calls and rental cars and crying and falling asleep alone with the television on.

He finishes his book early in the flight, and he can't stop touching the empty places on his hands. He spends two hours thinking about nothing, just driving his tongue through the holes in the centers of the ice cubes until his mouth goes numb.

When they land, he's barely had time to turn his phone on before it's ringing. "Jensen!"

"You here?"

"Dude," Jared says, looking around at the ostentatious airport art as he makes the familiar trek toward Customs and Immigration. "I never thought I'd be so glad to see these creepy-ass totem poles."

"I'm partial to the whale skulls myself. Hurry up through customs, would you? Your flight's an hour late - I've been circling the terminal forever and gas is like nineteen bucks a gallon. I like to be able to afford food."

Jared pauses. "I called for a town car-"

"Yeah, I canceled that," Jensen says. Jared can hear the smile in his voice. "Get your ass out here."

When Jensen pulls up in the snot-green Prius that Danneel made him buy, Jared doesn't bother attempting to stifle his laugh. "Pop the trunk," he calls through the window. He expects Jensen to stay in the car, but he's barely rounded the bumper when Jensen's door slams and he's there, grinning, grabbing Jared by the shoulder and pulling him in for a hug.

Jared lets go of his luggage and gets both arms around Jensen's torso. He's got his face tucked against the collar of Jensen's shirt and the side of Jensen's sunglasses digging into his ear, and neither of them are letting go. Jensen's fingers grip his shoulders so tight that Jared thinks about bruises.

"Missed you, dude," Jared says. He clears his throat when his voice comes out all weird. "In a really manly way, obviously."

"Obviously," Jensen echoes. He's still there, just letting Jared hang onto him and invade his space.

It's the first day of July, and the Vancouver air is thick. When they finally step apart, their shirts are clinging to their bodies, the bare skin on Jared's arms sticking to the bare skin on Jensen's.

Jared looks away. "You traded the truck in for *this*?" he says, palm flattening on the roof of the car. "You're more whipped than I thought."

Jensen winces. "There were blow jobs involved," he agrees solemnly, and just like that, they're home.

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They pull into the driveway and Jared says, "Come in and hang out." Jensen is about to beg off, to say that Danneel is waiting for him back at the hotel, when he looks down and realizes he's already turned off the engine, keys in his hand and one foot out the door.

"Sure," he says, surprising himself only a little bit. "For a minute."

They can hear Harley and Sadie grappling in the mudroom before Jared has even unlocked the door.

"Did Jordan bring them?" Jensen asks.

Jared nods, trying to find his house key on the keychain that still has his and Sandy's Christmas photo dangling from it. "He picked them up in LA and drove them up – dropped them off this morning, then left for the airport. He's going to Greece for two weeks, on vacation. Actually, I think he went grocery shopping for me, too, before he left. He's my bitch."

"He's your assistant, Jared, you *pay* him for that, and you pay him way too much. If anybody is anybody's bitch—"

But Jared gets the door open then, and the dogs spill out onto the porch, howling and wrapping their ways around Jared's legs. He's on his knees immediately, Sadie's face in his hands, her tongue sloppy along his chin.

Harley, though, makes a beeline for Jensen, barking gruffly; his tail wagging as he circles Jensen's ankles, laps happily at his fingers. When Sadie slips away from Jared to join Harley at Jensen's feet, Jensen raises his eyebrows. "Do I smell like a hamburger or something?"

Jared is still down on the floor, running one hand over Harley's back. "They saw me four days ago, man. They haven't seen you all summer. They *missed* you." He scratches behind Harley's ears. "They probably thought you were gone forever," he adds. "Wanna play Halo?"

Jensen texts Danneel that he might not be home for a few hours. *He needs to talk*, he lies, and *See u later love u*.

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Jensen was the first person Jared called when everything fell apart this summer.

He probably should've called Jeff, or Megan, maybe Jordan or Nick or Chad – people who had known him for ages, who had been there through so much good stuff that they *deserved* to be at the top of the list of people to call in case of bad stuff.

But when the door slammed and he was alone in a coldly decorated hotel room in Austin, the open windows eating the smell of her shampoo from the air, Jared just wanted to talk to Jensen.

"Jay," Jensen said when he picked up. "I was just texting you. There are these fans with cameras outside my trailer, and—"

"It's over," Jared said quietly. He sat down on the side of his bed and tore at the fraying edge of his boxers, stared at the top of his thigh where the brown faded to pale. His chest was seizing up, heart pounding. He felt like he couldn't get any air.

Jensen was quiet for a long time. He didn't ask what happened or how Jared was doing. He didn't suggest beer or strippers and didn't use words like *mistake* or *regret* or *fault*. He just waited until Jared's breathing was under control – until he wasn't wheezing through the phone lines – and said, "Okay?"

Jared sniffled a little. "Okay."

"Talk to me about Megan's graduation," Jensen had said. "I felt so *old* when Mac graduated."

When they spill out of the SUV onto the set on the first morning of shooting, Jared realizes that it's been six weeks and Jensen still doesn't know how it all went down.

He hasn't asked any questions or even made any assumptions. He hasn't offered any unsolicited advice ("Vegas," Chad had said. "Hookers. And those margaritas that come in glasses as long as my arm.") or unwarranted sympathy. ("Come on home for a few days, kiddo," was his mom's suggestion. "Your daddy will take you fishing.")

Everyone on set, down to the last PA, looks at Jared like someone's died. When he tries to crack a couple jokes, to prove to everyone that he's the same idiot who left here in April, he only gets a few sad-looking smiles. Manners doesn't snap at him when he spaces out during rehearsal and Shannon doesn't chide him about the zit on his forehead while she's airbrushing his face.

The general commiserative attitude only serves to bum Jared out. He briefly considers scrawling "I AM SERIOUSLY OKAY" on his t-shirt, or maybe climbing atop the Impala and holding an impromptu press conference on the state of his not-so-broken heart. He settles for eating half the box of gummy worms that has probably been abandoned in his trailer for months.

"What's up?" Jensen says, sitting down next to Jared at the makeup counter, where he's hiding out to eat lunch. He steals three pieces of pineapple off of Jared's plate. "You were all 'yay, I'm a TV star' this morning in the car, and now you're like freaking Eeyore."

"You just made a *Winnie the Pooh* reference." Jared shoves his plate toward Jensen.

"*You're* a poo reference. This is good fruit, you sure you don't want it?"

"I already ate the pieces with the Cool Whip on 'em," Jared says. He rubs at his wrist, watching his own face in the mirror. "Everybody's being weird."

"Haven't noticed," Jensen says. He accidentally bites into a piece of honeydew melon before making a face and spitting it into the wastebasket.

"Gross."

"The melon? Yeah, it's disgusting." He wipes his mouth and grins at Jared in the mirror. "So, I don't know if you're interested... never mind. You're probably not interested."

Jared rolls his eyes. "C'mon."

Jensen reaches into his pocket and comes up with a set of keys. There's a tiny silver skull dangling from the ring.

"Those are Kim's."

Jensen nods. "His car might be a little more comfortable all the way at the back of the lot. Like, behind the dumpsters. Maybe with the craft services truck parking it in."

Jared's already standing, heading for the door. "There's a kid's tricycle somewhere in props," he says eagerly, thumb still skimming over the veins in his wrist. "I'm thinking it'd look real good in Kim's parking space."

"Hang on." Jensen stands up and opens one of the drawers at the makeup counter, and then shuts it and goes for the one underneath. "Here we go," he says finally, after rifling through the odds and ends. He holds up a sparkly pink hair elastic.

"I'm not letting you French-braid my hair again. That was a one-time deal."

Jensen grabs Jared's right arm and holds his fingers, sliding the elastic over Jared's hand until it's snug around his wrist.

"Jensen?" Jared asks, fingers playing over the makeshift bracelet.

Jensen reaches past Jared to hold the door open. "When I was shooting this summer, every once in a while I'd reach up to touch the amulet," he says, patting his sternum lightly. "It's weird, you get so used to having something around that you start to feel it more when it's not there than you did when it was."

Jared hangs back in the doorway for a minute. "Dude," he says, voice coming thick and different, "Jensen," but really, it's just some guest star's discarded hair band. How do you thank a person for that?

"You kept touching your wrist," Jensen says. He shrugs. "Not a big deal or anything."

"Yeah." Jared stares down at the ugly carpeting. "It's like... I don't recognize my own hands."

"C'mon." Jensen shoves past Jared and Jared follows him out, door banging shut behind

them and Manners' keys jangling threateningly where they're hanging from Jensen's fingers.

"You gonna get me a new ring, too?" Jared asks, catching up and throwing an arm over Jensen's shoulders. "Because not having that on feels weird as hell, too. You gonna make me your girl? We could go steady."

Jensen flings the keys at Jared's face. "You drive. Idiot."

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Danneel has herself tucked into the crook of his elbow, mouth against his shoulder, the sweaty tips of her bangs brushing his chin.

"Is he doing okay?" she asks, her voice sex-rough and sleepy.

Jensen walks his fingertips down her flank. "Who?"

It's too dark to see her roll her eyes, but he knows she's doing it anyway. "The guy you're *not* staring at the ceiling worrying about."

"He's fine," Jensen says. His voice is clipped and tight. He can feel walls slamming down around him, stubbornness flaring in his chest. "He just had a shitty summer, but he's *fine*. Nobody has cancer, nobody died. Fuck's sake, Dan."

She pushes up on her elbow, tugging the sheet up over her chest to glare down at him. "Wow," she says. "*That* was uncalled for."

She's right. He knows she's right – that she was just expressing concern for his friend, for *their* friend, but he doesn't apologize. He just stares back at her until she rolls away, slapping her pillow to fluff it up before settling down, showing him the brown stretch of her back.

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Jensen's got his sunglasses on when Jared clambers into the back seat of the SUV, but Jared can still feel his unhappy gaze. "Uh-oh."

"Chad called me last night." Jensen's hair is still wet from his morning shower, and the air inside the car is warm and humid, like Jensen managed to carry the steam from the bathroom right out to the van.

"Chad... Lindberg?" Jared asks hopefully.

"Nope."

Jared sighs and sinks back against the seat. "But you changed your number after the last time he got it, so..."

"I think he ganked it from Danneel's phone." Jensen knocks his head against the window a couple of times and Jared winces in sympathy.

"Crap. Well, if he was calling about Vegas, tell him the answer is still no."

"No shit," Jensen says, tugging his sunglasses off. The sun has only just begun to rise, and it slants across the horizon straight into the car, striping Jensen's face with light. He squints at Jared. "You've got to do *something* for your birthday, man."

"I'm too old for a birthday party." Jared has already had this conversation – with Chad, with Jordan, with his mother and his brother and the attendant at the Petro Canada on Hastings.

Jensen shakes his head. "Fuck you. You made me take fifteen shots on my birthday and I was turning fifty-two."

"The last one didn't count." Jared reaches across the seat and palms the crown of Jensen's head, giving it a friendly pat. "There was whipped cream on it. That wasn't a shot; that was a liquid cupcake."

"Whatever."

Jared grins, tongue between his teeth. "A liquid cupcake that made you puke until you *cried*."

"You are the worst thing in my life."

Jared grins triumphantly. "Tell you what," he says. "If you help me convince the wardrobe ladies to sew Jim's pant legs closed, I'll let you take me out to dinner tomorrow night."

If Jensen is relieved that Jared isn't going to be spending his birthday in his dark bedroom cutting up old photos, he doesn't show it. "Deal."

"To Lumière."

Jensen laughs and shoves his sunglasses back on. "Dude, if I'm buying you a two hundred dollar dinner, you'd better be putting out."

"Oh, absolutely."

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It's the first time in a good five years that Jensen pulls the *television actor* card to get a reservation, and the last time he did it was because he lost a bet.

Things get more complicated after that. Because Lumière is nothing to fuck around with – all dim lighting and piano music and tiny square plates – but he feels like an idiot, standing in front of his closet worrying about what to wear to dinner with *Jared*.

The reservation is an hour off when he rolls his eyes at himself and picks up the phone. "What the hell do you wear to a place like Lumière?"

"Clothes!" Jared says brightly.

"Smartass."

"Dude, I don't know. I hadn't thought that far ahead. A jacket? Man, I probably can't wear my jeans, huh?"

"Not the ones with the holes in them," Jensen says. "Do you think they'd have a problem with me wearing shoes that cost less than my appetizer?"

There's a long pause. "Fuck this," Jared says. Jensen hears his closet door slam. "Come over; I'll fire up the grill. I got the *Dexter* DVDs. "

"It's your *birthday*. That's weak."

"So is choking down goose liver just so I can have the satisfaction of listening to you bitch when the bill arrives."

"I wasn't going to bitch," Jensen says. "I was going to take it like a man."

"Jensen."

"And then cry myself to sleep afterward and try to figure out if I could sell my TV."

"Uh-huh. So, beer, barbecue, TV with lots of blood and sex and violence. Man, if you're not here in sixteen and a half minutes I'm going to sedate you and put you on a plane to Nevada. I hear Chad needs a wingman at the Bunny Ranch."

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It takes Jensen an hour to show up, but Jared figures it's a forgivable offense, considering

he arrives with two big grocery bags and a case of Molson. "I figured there wasn't a hell of a point to turning on the barbecue if you haven't got anything to, y'know, *barbecue*," he says, struggling through the door with all the luggage, attempting some kind of dance around the dogs nipping at his heels.

Jared does his best to look outraged. "There's plenty to grill! I have old Chinese food, carrots, gummy bears, and strawberry protein powder," he protests. "And my mom sent me birthday cookies!" He's already up to his elbows in the groceries, though, and grinning – there are chips and two kinds of salsa and corn on the cob and thick steaks bleeding through butcher paper.

He pulls out the corn first. "Here, Jensen. Shuck these."

"Fine. You shuck this." Jensen takes the corn and replaces it with a heavy package wrapped in blue paper. "Happy birthday."

"Is it a motorcycle? It's a motorcycle, isn't it." Jared can feel his smile stretching his face.

It's already been a pretty good birthday – he got to sleep in, the guy at Starbucks didn't skimp on the chocolate syrup, and Sandy sent a friendly happy birthday text message, with one of those sideways smiley-faces and everything.

"I saw it in Pittsburgh," Jensen says, picking at the fibers on the end of the corn. "Thought of you."

Jared tears into the paper, and it's pretty much all he can do to keep himself from actually *squeaking* when he first sees the pale grey of the original Game Boy system. It's huge and bulky and it weighs more than his computer, but it's instantly familiar in his hands. "*Dude.*"

"These, too," Jensen says, pawing through the paper to find the box of cartridges. "You got, uh, Mario, Donkey Kong, Tetris obviously, and uh, Bill and Ted's Excellent Game Boy Adventure."

"Seriously," Jared says, bouncing on his heels. "I am not even *close* to cool enough to own this thing." He slings an arm over Jensen's shoulders and leaves it there, sweaty inside of his elbow against Jensen's neck, comfortable as Jensen shucks the corn and he studies the Bill and Ted instructions.

Five hours later, Jared is sleeping on the couch, full of meat and beer and birthday cookies. He stirs just enough to feel Jensen toss a throw blanket over him and mutter, "I'm taking your bed, lightweight."

It's a pretty great birthday.

*August*

It's one of the hottest Vancouver summers on record, but it still rains all the time. The air is always heavy with water until it spills, pouring buckets down on them without a whole hell of a lot of warning.

It makes for long, slow days of filming when they're on location. Even now, they've been waiting what feels like hours for the sky to clear enough for them to shoot Sam and Dean saying, "Well, that was a dead end," and walking from someone's front porch down the driveway to the car.

Twenty seconds of on-screen time, and Jensen's been trapped in his trailer for a million years playing Solitaire and watching a *Tila Tequila* marathon. When he beats the game for the hundredth time, he gives up and sticks his head out of his door into the downpour. He'd feel bad about messing up his hair, but now Jeannie will have to give him another head massage, and he just can't make himself regret that.

"Jared!" he hollers into the rain. Jared's trailer is all of ten feet away. "Hellooooo motherfucker, I know you can hear me in there."

Eventually, he grabs a hoodie and runs through the weather to bang on Jared's door. The water licks up around the bottom of his jeans. When Jared doesn't answer the door, Jensen just lets himself in.

Jared is sprawled on the floor on his stomach, headphones on and feet in the air, his ankle twitching to the music. When Jensen kicks him, he rolls over and grins.

"JENSEN! HEY!"

Jensen winces at the volume, leans down, and yanks Jared's earbuds out. "I'm bored," he says. "What are you doing?" Jared wriggles – as much as a person Jared's size can wriggle – to a sitting position and gestures at the magazines out in front of him. *Architectural Digest*, a Pottery Barn catalogue, and freaking *Elle Décor*. "Dude."

"I want to re-do my house," Jared says. He pats the ground next to him and motions for Jensen to sit. "It's too weird right now. Some of the rooms are all... well, Sandy did some of the rooms. And the other rooms look like somebody's dorm room, or something. You're going to help."

"Oh." Jensen sits down against the sofa. "Okay."

"Dude, I didn't tell you. Jordan quit," Jared adds. "Can you believe that? How do you just quit being somebody's buddy?"

Jensen laughs and rolls his eyes, pulling *Cosmopolitan Home* out from underneath the couch. "He didn't quit being your buddy, Jared. He quit being your *assistant*. What's he

doing instead?"

Jared shrugs. "Met a girl in Greece. Decided to hang out for a while, I guess." He lifts a hand, then drops it. "Everybody's falling in love all over the place."

Jensen doesn't want to touch that one. "You gonna get a new assistant, then?"

Jared screws up his face. "No. I'm perfectly capable of being independent. I can do things for myself."

Jensen chuckles. "Man, your *issues*," he says, shaking his head.

"What?"

"They're practically written on your forehead. *I'm an independent woman, roar*, or whatever. You should see a shrink."

"You're my shrink," Jared says, smacking him in the face with the Pottery Barn catalogue. "Now help me pick a fucking couch to lie on while you analyze my enormous complex brain."

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They go to Home Depot on their next day off. Jensen grumbles when Jared shows up to drag him out, but once they're there he's rambling with the sales guy about latex paint versus water-based paint for the guest bathroom.

Every once in a while, Jensen still manages to surprise Jared. Like now, Jared kind of wants to ask him when the hell he learned so much about painting houses, and then he realizes that Jensen has lived in a whole bunch of different places – apartments and a condo and his big, empty house in LA. Sometimes it's weird to imagine Jensen's life before Jared was in it.

"You know a lot about this stuff," Jared says, when the salesperson wanders off to help someone choose doorknobs, or something.

Jensen shrugs and tilts his head up to stare at the wall of color choices. "A few years back, Chris and Steve and I were supposed to go camping, but Chris bailed on us because his girlfriend's Pomeranian had a tummy ache, or something."

"And then you found twenty bucks?"

"Shut up. Couple weekends later he flew to Wilmington to shoot a spot on *Dawson's*, and Steve and I broke into his house and painted every wall Pepto-Bismol pink. We were hardcore about it, did it all professional."

Jared can feel his grin stretching his cheeks so hard they hurt. He leans in, stoops to rest his cheek on Jensen's shoulder. "Dude. I love you."

Jensen bats him away. "Man, we're *interior decorating* together, and now you're all up in my space. I should just bend you over and get it over with."

"You love me, too," Jared says.

When the sales guy comes back and says, "Got any color schemes in mind?" Jared gives Jensen the brightest smile he can and says, "We like 'raspberry ice' for the bedroom, isn't that right, sugar lips?"

Later, when they're walking through the parking lot with a bunch of cans of paint in deep reds and navy blues, Jensen says, "When we die, they are going to make a special level of heaven for me, where I get to sit around drinking Macallan and *watching* them torture you in your special level of hell. For all eternity. You'll see."

"All eternity, huh?"

"Two eternities. Three."

Jared swings an arm, smacks Jensen in the ass with a bucket of Arroyo Red. "At least we'll be together, lover pie."

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There's a women's college lacrosse team staying on the second floor of Jensen's hotel, and when he gets up on his day off to hit the gym, it's already packed with girls decked out in navy and white, ponytails swinging, iPods clipped to their shorts.

A few of them glance at him curiously, but they mostly don't seem to recognize him. Still, all it would take is one girl with a cell phone camera, one grainy video of him stretching or grunting, and who knows what the internet could manipulate it into.

The gym in Jared's garage smells like mildew and wet dog, but it's suddenly a much better option. He doesn't bother to go back to his room and get his phone, just goes downstairs and snags his keys from the Valet. It takes fifteen minutes and like zero gasoline to get to Jared's.

He hates his stupid car.

Jared's garage is locked, but his front door is open. Jensen finds him sitting on his brand new gigantic leather couch in a pair of worn and over-bleached sweat pants, phone tucked into his ear. He looks up without surprise when Jensen strolls in, gives him a grin

and a wave, gesturing to the phone.

Jensen tilts his head to the garage.

"I know," Jared says into the phone. He stands up and leans over the kitchen counter, belly flat against the marble as he stretches to a drawer on the other side. His pants slide down, and Jensen rolls his eyes when the top of Jared's ass crack peeks over the edge. Jared comes up with the garage key and hands it over to Jensen as he says again, "Yeah, I know."

Jensen reaches for Jared's hip and gives his pants a good tug back up to where they're supposed to be before he walks past him to the door.

If he pauses in the hallway when he hears Jared's voice go soft on "Happy birthday, Sandy," and, "You know I miss you too, all the time," it's not because he's being nosy, it's just because he's got to tie his shoelaces.

### *September*

In September, Jared becomes outrageously enamored with his own torso.

Jared has a tendency to *fixate* on things. He obsesses and finds them wildly entertaining for a burst of time, and then he gets bored and moves on to something else without warning.

A couple years ago, it was a hot glue gun he found in the wardrobe trailer. Jared bought a bag of tiny plastic animal figures at the CVS, and suddenly every guy on set had a giraffe or an elephant glued to the brim of his baseball cap. There was a lion stuck to the steering wheel of Jensen's rental car, and Jensen had to pay out the ass for the damages when he returned it.

When Jared got the Kinkaid part, he bought every movie Peter O'Toole had ever been in and he watched them constantly. They'd play in the background in his trailer while he and Jensen ran lines; on their nights off he'd refuse *Die Hard* and *Braveheart* and insist on *Lawrence of Arabia* for the third time. The quotes were the worst – "If you cooperate, you'll receive a first-class ticket to Amsterdam where you can stick your finger in a dike!" Jared would howl across the space between their trailers.

When the first season was winding down, there was a pudding phase. Chocolate pudding, vanilla pudding, tapioca pudding. There was more pudding in the man's fridge than beer. He stuck plastic spoons into pudding cups and froze them and went around set offering people's kids home-made popsicles. It became *normal* for the two of them to sit on the floor eating pudding like four-year-olds while watching baseball.

This time, it starts when they've got a scene where a chupacabra tears into Sam's shirt

with its claws, so Jared has to have Sam's tattoo applied just in case. He's tipped back in his makeup chair, eyes closed, practically meditating. Shannon is touching up the lines with a tiny paintbrush when she says, "Have you been clocking in more gym time? Your chest looks insane."

Jensen groans from across the room where Jeannie is trying to convince him he's not balding, and Jared lets out a triumphant whoop and jumps out of his chair, hands above his head. "She thinks I'm hot!" he howls. "She wants to touch my boobies!"

"You are going to regret saying that," Jensen tells Shannon. "*Forever.*"

"*I have* been working out, Shannon, thank you for noticing," Jared says, voice dripping with faux-politeness.

She rolls her eyes. "Sit down, let me finish that thing."

Jared plops back into his chair and grins at Jensen. "See," he says, pointing to where Shannon is painting the tattoo. "She just wants to touch me. It's *adorable.*"

Jensen hates his life.

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Jared wasn't really *planning* on making the chest thing a *thing*, but he sort of wants to see if he can get Jensen to roll his eyes so hard that they actually spin in their sockets.

Autumn is starting to settle in and there's a bit of a chill in the air, but Jared still yanks Sam's t-shirt and sweater up over his head the minute Sgriccia calls cut. The cold feels amazing against the sweat clinging to his collarbone and the insides of his elbows.

Sure enough, Jensen rolls his eyes.

"Whatever, dude," Jared says, stretching his arms high above his head. "This is like community service. All day long, these P.A.s run around all, *how do you like your latte, Mr. Ackles*, and *can I shine your shoes, Mr. Ackles*, and *would you like me to chew your food for you, Mr. Ackles*. It's the least I can do to show them my nipples once in a while. You're supposed to *give* to the less fortunate, Jensen."

Jensen shakes his head. "I am the less fortunate."

Jared digs into his pocket for the hair elastic and slides it onto his wrist. "You can look at my nipples, too, Jen. I am an equal opportunity exhibitionist."

"Of course you are," Jensen laughs and reaches out to roughly tweak Jared's left nipple as he walks by, headed back to his trailer.

"I won't judge you!" Jared continues, calling after Jensen's retreating form. "Love the sinner, hate the sin!"

Jensen flips him off and Jared laughs, but when Jensen disappears behind the craft services bus, Jared lifts his hand and touches the tender skin Jensen pinched, flattening his palm over his chest.

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Kripke flies up from LA to direct another episode, and it feels like the entire set just guzzled a case of Red Bull. He's a tiny little man but he always seems to take up a lot of space – he's everywhere, a hand in every pot, voice pitching higher as he bounces on his heels.

Jensen thinks he's pretty brilliant, and pretty hilarious, but most of the time entirely exhausting. He and Jared speed each other up, like they're racing to the highest possible energy level, and Jensen doesn't even bother keeping up.

It's one of the longest days they've ever worked, and it's a Dean-centric episode, so Jensen has spent the last ten hours on his knees screaming at a tennis ball on a stick, soaked by a fake rainstorm, while Jared hangs out off to the side playing Tetris and listening to Bon Jovi on his iPod, feet kicked up on Jensen's empty chair.

He could be back in his trailer, sleeping, but he's there, hair in his eyes and mouthing the words to his song. Every so often, between takes, Jensen will look up to see Jared looking at him, lips pressed together and thumbs frozen on the Nintendo, squinting at Jensen like he's studying, trying to figure something out.

Every time their eyes catch, Jared just smiles and goes back to his Tetris.

"Ackles," Kripke shouts, "get your head in the game. Action."

When they finish the last take, Jensen's back hurts and his knees ache and he feels like he's a million years old. "You look tired," Jared chirps, popping a Swedish fish into his mouth as Jensen walks past his chair.

"You look ugly," Jensen says.

Shannon's gone home hours ago, but the quiet of the makeup trailer is more than welcome as Jensen scrubs away his foundation with a baby wipe.

Until he hears, "Jensen!" from outside the trailer. He releases a long, exhausted breath and tips until his forehead hits the mirror. There goes all hope he had of getting out of here before tomorrow becomes today.

Kripke bursts through the door with this flurry of energy. "Listen—"

"What drugs are you on?" Jensen mutters. "Seriously, is it coke? No judgment here. I will pay for your rehab if you go *right now*."

"Pimp Juice," Kripke says. "Nelly's energy drink, you should try it. Makes you wanna shake your tail feather. Listen, I was thinking that if we can get your B-roll shots outside the motel finished tonight, then—"

"Kripke!" Jared howls from outside. "I have a bone to pick with you."

"I quit," Jensen says as Jared bounds up the steps, trailer swaying beneath his weight. "I quit right now."

Jared's in a fighting stance, feet squared with his shoulders, hands on his hips. "I want more shirtless scenes," he says, face solemn, chin jutting out defiantly. "I'm serious, Eric; starting now, I'm gonna need more naked."

"I'm serious, too," Jensen says, forgotten behind Jared. He's got fake blood in his ear, sunburn on the back of his neck, and he's not sure how he let all this become his life. "I am going back to Texas to sling burgers. Someone book me a flight."

Kripke laughs at Jared and starts to turn back to Jensen, but Jared steps in the way and grabs Kripke by his scrawny bicep. "Look at me," he demands. "Do you see how hot I am?" Out of Kripke's peripheral vision, he points to Jensen, and then to the door.

Jensen feels his eyes widen when he realizes what Jared is doing. He begins to inch away from the counter.

"Uh. No?" Eric replies.

"*Exactly*," Jared says as Jensen eases the door open behind Kripke. "That's because I? Am still wearing my *shirt*."

"Jared—"

"Ask Shannon, she'll tell you. She thinks my chest is insane. Come here, feel my shoulders. Don't fight it!"

Jensen doesn't hear the rest of it because he's sprinting for the parking lot, still in Dean's boots and half a face full of pancake makeup.

An hour later, he's stepping out of his shower and his cell phone starts to buzz. He answers it with, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"You love me," Jared says.

"I do. I really, really love you."

"And my ginormous pecs."

"And your ginormous pecs."

"I'm coming over to drink all of your beer."

-

Jared can't find his makeup shirt when he gets to set the next morning. He probably accidentally wore it home or shoved it in his bag – he's always doing stuff like that – but when he walks into the makeup trailer in his jeans and his boots and nothing else, Jared says, "I know you stole my makeup shirt, Shannon." He keeps his voice down because Jensen is passed out in the other chair, probably lulled to sleep by one of Jeannie's famous massages.

She rolls her eyes.

"If you wanted to see all this, all you had to do was ask," Jared says, running a hand over his chest. "I'm not greedy. You should know me better than that."

"I'm going to find Jeannie and tell her you finally got your ass in here," Shannon says. She points to a tub on the counter where Jensen's feet are propped up. "Moisturize."

The door shuts too loudly behind her, and Jensen begins to stir awake as Jared stretches over and across him to grab the cream.

"Hey," Jared says, not sure why he keeps his voice lowered now that Jensen's up.

Jensen blinks at him, eyes fixed somewhere below Jared's collarbone, and Jared thinks, *huh*.

Jensen's boots kick a couple of brushes off the counter as he puts his feet on the floor. "Jared," he says, hoarse from sleep and his long day yesterday.

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you five bucks if you start wearing clothes again."

"Deal," Jared says, holding out his hand. Jensen is already tugging his wallet out of his back pocket – they always pay their debts, no matter how small. It's man rule #482, or something.

Jensen stands up, flinching as he rifles through his wallet. "Damn. Don't suppose you take

major credit cards."

Jared grins, turning to the mirror to slather up his face and neck. "Oh, I take 'em. Don't give 'em back, though."

Jensen shakes his head, but he's looking at Jared again, at his back. Jared can see it in the mirror.

"And that was a limited time offer," Jared says. "Looks like you're going to have to get used to my nipples."

"Looks like," Jensen parrots as he heads out the door, probably headed for wardrobe.

The trailer is too warm after he leaves. When Jeannie's fixing Jared's hair later, she says, "Something up? You're quiet."

"I'm admiring your technique," Jared says, but he can't keep his hands still for some reason, and when he closes his eyes for his massage, he keeps seeing the way Jensen's gaze fell away from his face, dropped lower.

After that, Jared keeps his shirt on a little more often. Vancouver gets cold in October.

### *October*

They're in the sound truck, dubbing dialogue that the wind ate, when their cell phones start to hum at the same time. The sound guy tugs his headphones off, throws his hands in the air and goes for a cigarette.

The text message is from Rosenbaum. *I will b there 2morro go buy some tequila u pussys n not te cheap shit.*

Jensen laughs and leans back in his chair.

"He spelled tequila right, at least," Jared offers, putting his phone back into the holster he keeps on his belt.

"Tequila was his first word," Jensen says. "His first steps? Toward a bottle of tequila."

"I'll be right back," Jared says, following Charlie out of the trailer. Jensen responds to Mike's text with a simple bitch.

When Jared comes back, it's with two big water bottles. Jensen lifts an eyebrow.

"Mike's coming *tomorrow*," Jared says, the "duh" implied in his tone.

"You're right," Jensen says. He twists the cap off his bottle and tilts his head back to drink. "We should definitely start hydrating."

-

It's just the four of them – Jared and Jensen and Tom and Mike – like it hasn't been for a while. Jared likes the easy camaraderie and the friendly competition, the familiarity of their shared experiences.

They're in the hotel room that the studio booked for Mike – a million times nicer than any room Jensen or Jared ever got. "I'm a *special guest star* now, bitch!" Mike says, welcoming them in with his arms outstretched.

"Damn," Jared whistles. He's pretty sure that's a hot tub out on the balcony. "I should quit *my* show."

"You really should," Jensen says, but he tips sideways into Jared a little, his shoulder fitting under the curve of Jared's neatly.

The plan is to have a few drinks and go out to one of the handful of bars where Mike became a regular over the better part of the last decade, but by half-past midnight, it becomes pretty clear that they're not going anywhere.

There are cards on the table but Jared is too far into his eighty-fourth margarita - which isn't so much a margarita as a giant glass of tequila with melting ice and some kind of sugary syrup that's going to hurt in the morning – to distinguish between the clubs and the spades.

Tom is lit up like a Christmas tree, face shiny and red from drinking. He keeps grabbing handfuls of Mike's hair and tugging, cackling that Mike is going to cry when they pull the razor out in the morning.

"I am," Mike slurs, "It's true. I'm much hotter with hair."

"I missed you, man," Tom says, slinging an arm over Mike's shoulders. "I really did. In a not-gay way."

Jared looks at Jensen, who is lying flat on the floor with an empty beer bottle in his hand. Every so often, Jensen will go to take a sip, and then chuckle, face flushing, when he realizes that it's still as empty as it was five minutes ago.

Jared can't remember why he needed to know the difference between clubs and spades in the first place.

On the couch, Mike leans in and kisses Tom's cheek sloppily. "If I was going to go gay," he says, "it would be for you, you gigantic hunk of man meat."

Jensen struggles to sit up and only makes it halfway, ending up leaning back on his elbows. He peers down the length of his body at Jared. He looks like he's about to say something.

"I'm going to get ice," Tom says. "It's eight million degrees in here."

Mike rolls his eyes. "That's just because you're drunk and disgusting. I gotta pee."

And then it's just Jared and Jensen, and Jared says, "Truth or dare," even though he's pretty sure that's not the card game they were playing. Pretty sure that's not a card game at all. It could be.

"Truth," Jensen says, which is new. Jensen always picks dare and never follows through.

Jared looks down into his sugary tequila and downs the rest of it. Maybe he won't remember this in the morning. "You ever kissed a guy?"

Jensen's head rolls on his neck, tilts to the side, and he regards Jared amusedly. "Maybe you won't remember this in the morning," he says.

"Maybe," Jared agrees. "Trying not to."

Jensen flops back down onto his back. From this angle, Jared can't see his face. "No," he says.

Jared reaches for the tequila bottle. He doesn't bother with the ice this time, or the mix, or even the glass. "Oh," he replies, hissing around the burn of the liquor.

"But there was this time."

"Oh, um. Oh."

"It wasn't – there was this guy. It was a long time ago – I was really drunk. Drunker than I am now," he adds, like that's an important qualifier. "He asked if he could – I mean, I didn't kiss him, but I kind of let him suck me off. I guess. It was – I was really drunk. A long time ago."

"Oh," Jared repeats.

Jensen sits up and reaches toward Jared, and Jared stares at his hand for a few beats before he realizes that Jensen wants the tequila. He passes it over.

"So how was it?" he asks. Jose Cuervo has taken control of his mouth. Which isn't fair, because this is a moment when he would really like to, like, decide for himself what he wants to say. But it's hopeless.

"Dunno," Jensen says, handing the bottle back. Jared just puts it back on the table. Jose is a traitorous bastard. "Fell asleep before, well." He makes a vague gesture with his hand. "It was kind of a low point."

Mike comes back inside then, and kicks Jensen in the hip. "Cigarette," he says.

"Kay." Jensen rolls to his feet in one strange, fluid motion. Jared watches him follow Mike out to the balcony.

By the time Tom comes back with the ice, Jared has managed to find himself a bottle of water and chug most of it. "They're smoking," he explains.

Tom nods, kneeling in front of the mini-bar.

"Mike is going to die of lung cancer and emphysema and be really gross."

"You're wasted." Tom tilts his head to the side, considering Jared. "And really weird."

"I know." Jared tosses his empty water bottle in the direction of the balcony. "You ever think it's strange, how you can't ever know somebody all the way?"

"Huh?" Tom tugs at the cardboard around a Toblerone bar.

"Like, Mike. He's your best friend. But you'll never know *everything* about him. You can't."

"Dude, I don't want to know everything about him. I don't want to know even close to everything about him." Tom wrinkles his nose. "I don't think *he* wants to know everything about him."

Jared thinks, *I want to know everything about Jensen*, and then his vision kind of goes dark around the edges.

-

He wakes up wedged against the back of the couch. The first thing he registers (other than the horrible taste in the back of his throat and the fact that he's got to pee) is that Jensen is on the couch, too, and he's all pressed against Jared. They're both on their sides, rolled face to face. Jensen's arms are folded between them, the backs of his wrists against Jared's chest.

Jensen smells like smoke and chlorine, which means there was a hot tub on the balcony, and Jensen was in it. Jared thinks that's totally unfair. Unless he was in it, too. He might have been.

Jared blinks a few times and cranes his neck, trying to see past the rise of Jensen's shoulder without actually moving enough for Jensen to wake up.

Mike is passed out naked on the floor, legs splayed unfortunately, face pressed against the carpet, and Tom is above him in the bed, wrapped neatly in the down comforter, sleeping like a baby.

Jared settles back down against the couch. It's a pretty big couch, but not really big enough for him and Jensen together. And he has to pee.

Their faces are so close together that when Jared tries to focus on Jensen's nose, his eyes kind of cross, and that's not a good idea, because he's feeling gross already. He swallows against the nausea nestling in his throat, and Jensen's eyes fly open.

"Hi," Jared says quickly.

"Hey," Jensen says. He doesn't move. His eyes are open really wide. He looks frozen.

Jared feels the tension break in his own shoulders. He grins. "Is this weird for you?"

Jensen rolls his eyes and then he rolls with them. Right off the couch, where he lands *hard* on the floor.

"Ow," Jared says in sympathy, wriggling over to peer at Jensen on the floor. "You okay?"

"Yes," Jensen says, pressing a hand to his eyes. When he takes the hand away, he lets his head loll to the side, facing Mike, where he's obviously got a really, really good view of really, really bad things. "Oh, god. I take it back. So, so not okay."

### *November*

"You've failed me, Sam," Adrienne says. "You've failed everyone." She keeps her voice low, her eyes on Jared's, unfaltering and cold.

He's on the floor at her feet, on his knees, hot tears spilling down his face and fake blood smeared at the corners of his mouth. Jensen is a beat or two late on his cue but nobody's called cut, and Jared chokes out, "*Jess*," to fill the space, the name coming out gurgled through the mess in his mouth as Jensen crashes through the door behind him.

"Sam!"

"Cut," Singer shouts. "Print it. That's a wrap for episode four-ten, kids. Go home and get some sleep."

Adrienne pulls her nightgown up around her knees and leans in to put a hand on Jared's shoulder. "That was awesome," she says, smiling, her teeth a perfect white line against her bottom lip. "Seriously."

Jared blinks up at her for a minute. His hands are still down on the floor, splinters digging into his fingers and his knees. He twists to look at Jensen.

Jensen is watching him, too. "You did good, Jay," he says softly. He sets the prop shotgun down and bends down, grabbing Jared by the arm and hauling him to his feet. "You okay?"

Jared ducks down to wipe his teary, snotty face against the collar of Dean's leather jacket. Jensen shrugs, making a vain attempt to appear like he's pushing Jared away, but Jared knows better. Jensen already has an arm around Jared's shoulders, hand anchoring Jared against him.

Adrienne shifts awkwardly, folds of white cotton still clutched in her hands. "I'm, um. I'm going to go get this thing off." She gestures to the curly blonde hairpiece that Jeannie spent four hours attaching this morning.

It's taken a moment, but Jared comes back to himself, detaches from Sam in time to say, "Hey, great work, Annie." He sounds like a toddler after a tantrum, voice raw and dense, like he's underwater.

She smiles at him, at both of them. Jared is still flicking tears away with the heels of his hands when she heads off in the direction of the trailer.

Jensen squeezes a little. "You killed that scene," he says. "I'm impressed."

"You sound surprised," Jared says weakly. "You forget. I *have* worked with Peter O'Toole."

"And Jon Bon Jovi, lest we forget."

"No way, bitch. Bon Jovi worked with *me*."

They're tucked up against each other, Jensen's hand wrapped firmly around Jared's arm. Jared watches as Jensen's eyes fall to his mouth, tracking the stripes of red dye running to his chin.

Jensen starts to reach up to Jared's face, and then stops himself, hand in the air. Jared meets his eyes and he feels his eyebrows tug together, knows that he's got *what?* written all over his face. Jensen lowers his hand awkwardly.

Jared clears his throat and looks away, spits out the blood capsule he's got tucked against his molars. He stares away from Jensen, riveted by the lighting guys dissembling the

reflectors. "Man, I really hate crying."

"We should go get a drink." Jensen lets go of Jared's arm, taking a wobbly step backward.

"Yeah," Jared says. "Or twelve." He licks his chapped lips and grimaces at the sickly-sweet taste. "I'm gonna go invite Annie."

-

There's this pub right off of the highway that forms the border between Burnaby and Coquitlam. It's definitely the dirtiest dive bar in Vancouver, if not the dirtiest dive bar on the continent. Jensen isn't even sure the place has a name – Jared always refers to it as "that one place? You know the one." It always reeks of stale beer and fake cheese, and it's usually packed to the brim with guys in sweat-stained t-shirts and girls with yellow teeth and thick eye shadow. It's pretty much Jensen's least favorite place in the entire universe.

"This is my favorite place in the entire universe!" Jared announces as they push through the door, wind chasing them inside.

"It's fucking freezing out there. My nipples could cut glass right now," Adrienne says, hissing. Jared's eyes widen and he whoops, delighted, grinning at her while she shrugs her parka off.

"C'mon," he says. He puts one arm around Adrienne's shoulders and grabs Jensen's wrist with his other hand. "I'll buy y'all some shots." He pulls them toward the crowd of people at the bar.

Jensen knows that Jared is already moving toward drunk – while Adrienne was getting her hairpiece taken out, he broke into Jim's trailer and finished all of the emergency six-pack. His hand slips away from Jensen's arm when he talks to the bartender, elbows on the bar as he rocks forward, gesturing wildly at the top shelf and counting what he wants off on his fingers.

Jensen swivels his head around, takes stock of the room – the way people are pressed up together on the dance floor in front of the low stage, the way they congregate and crush close, fighting for a spot along the sticky bar. The muscles in Jensen's shoulders pull tight as people swarm and close in around them. He grinds his molars together hard, counting out against the panic that rises in his chest whenever-

"Hey," Jared says. His mouth is suddenly at Jensen's temple, close enough that the edge of his lip curls against Jensen's skin when he speaks. "They're just after their Jaeger."

Jensen nods, but someone behind Jared shoves and he stumbles even closer, body pressing up against Jensen's side.

"Nobody here cares about us," Jared says. Jensen can feel Jared's voice rumbling in his chest where it's touching Jensen's arm. "We could do whatever we wanted; nobody here cares."

"Okay," Jensen blurts suddenly, wrenching his shoulder and elbowing Jared back a couple steps. "I'm fine, Jay, leave it."

Jared lifts his hands, palms out. "Hey, chill," he says, voice suddenly pitching up higher than normal. "You looked freaked, is all. With the crowd and--"

"Well I'm not," Jensen says. "Man, you *know* I hate this place."

Jared lowers his hands. "I'm – yeah, I'm sorry."

"Hey!" Adrienne says, carefully side-stepping a short, round woman as she tries to get closer to them. "I thought I lost you." She's got a bunch of shots in her hands, nestled between her fingers, liquid slopping out over the sides. "Shots!"

Moments later, the glasses are empty, and Jensen, his throat tight with the liquor burn, is watching Jared watch Adrienne lick the Southern Comfort from her knuckles.

-

It takes Jared four tries to get his front door open before they tumble through – he and Adrienne, tripping over each other, her stomach pressed flat against him, his mouth on her throat. Sadie lifts her head from the couch. "Don't give me that look," Jared mumbles into Annie's mouth.

"Huh?" Adrienne pants, breath wet against his ear.

"Nothing," he says. "Come on, c'mon." He gets a hand against her thigh and pulls, hitching her up until her legs close up around his waist. He's at eye level with her collarbone, her hair brushing his face as she tips forward.

The next hour and a half of Jared's life is nothing short of spectacular.

His brain takes snapshots through the veil of alcohol – her long, brown leg bending over his shoulder, the warm salt smell when he presses his nose into the sweaty back of her neck, the taste of lime when he licks along her lower lip. He almost blacks out when she blows him, finds himself with his fingers wrapped around the pillars of his headboard, praying to God at the top of his lungs.

Afterward he feels wrung out. His throat hurts and his thighs are sore when she rolls off of him. "Gonna get some water," she says. She doesn't reach for the blanket, or for his shirt on the floor the way that Sandy used to – she just walks naked out his bedroom door

like it's no big deal. He hears Harley bark at her as she heads downstairs to the kitchen.

His underwear's been kicked to the floor over by the desk; he pulls it on and tries to tug his sheets back into place. Outside, the dark is fading, birds beginning their morning cacophony.

When she comes back, she leans against the doorframe, watching him slide into his bed and twisting the silver ring on her thumb. She's uninhibited, standing there naked with her miles of skin on display for him. "I should probably go," she says. "I've got a flight back to Austin in the morning."

"Kay," Jared says. "Or you could stay."

She smirks.

"Come on," he laughs, pulling back the covers. "I'll set the alarm; you'll have time to go back to the hotel and get your luggage."

She rolls her eyes but comes toward the bed anyway, leading with her hips when she walks.

She falls asleep quickly, rolled on her side with her back to him. His body is exhausted, but his brain won't quit – he watches the sun come up through the window, running his knuckles along the back of her arm as she sleeps. When his phone's alarm goes off just after seven, he kisses her awake and calls her a cab while she uses the bathroom.

"On their way," he says, hovering in the bathroom doorway while she spits mouthwash into the sink.

"Cool," she says. She smiles big, all white teeth and pale, thick lips. "So. This was fun."

He wraps one arm around her waist and gets her off with his other hand, both of them watching in the mirror as she arches against him, breasts heaving, fingers curling first against the marble countertop and then deep into the muscle of his thighs.

When she's gone, he stares at his bed. He's got the whole day off. He could climb back in; get some real sleep until Sadie inevitably wakes him up by nudging a slobbery tennis ball into his arm.

Instead, he sighs and finds a clean t-shirt, steps into the jeans he wore off the set yesterday, and grabs his keys.

-

*"Jensen."*

Jensen's eyes flutter open and he immediately regrets everything. That last tequila shot, Jared's general existence, the fact that he was too wasted to remember to close the blinds last night so the room is currently full of harsh, ruthless sunlight.

Jared makes another attempt at a stage-whisper. "You awake?"

Jensen closes his eyes. His voice is thick with sleep when he grumbles, "How did you get in here?" He pulls the covers tighter even though he's sweating underneath them. He can smell the booze in his pores.

"Told the guy at the front desk that this was my room and I lost my key," Jared says. "You gotta ask for better security. Any old riff-raff could get in here."

"Any old riff-raff just did." Jensen opens one eye long enough to glance at the clock radio. "Man, it's not even nine. On our day off."

"I brought breakfast."

Jensen sighs loudly and rolls over, blinking. It takes a moment for Jared to come into focus; Jensen's eyes are gritty, his contacts still in. Jared is leaning in the doorway with a Seigel's Bagels bag in his hands. He looks ridiculous, sunglasses pushed up on his head so that his hair sprouts up behind them, t-shirt inside out underneath his long black coat. "I'm sorry if I was a dick last night."

Jensen was used to watching Jared flirt. It's what he does best; it's what he's always done. Even when Sandy was an almost constant presence at Jared's side, she'd laugh and roll her eyes as he charmed his way through a day, winning over everyone from waitresses to grocery store butchers, from makeup artists to TSA officers.

Last night, though, was different. Watching the casual shift in Jared's demeanor with Adrienne as he moved from innocently flirtatious with to almost *predatory*, his voice dipping low, eyes burning toward her.

It had thrown Jensen off, a little. He'd ended up bailing without really saying goodbye.

Jared shrugs. "It was a long day. You just took off."

"Didn't want to cock-block," Jensen says. "Do me a favor and close the curtains? The sun is burning holes in my retinas."

"Sure thing." Jared drops the bagels on the table and draws the shades before he shrugs his coat to the floor and knees up on the empty side of the bed. He makes himself comfortable, tucking his arm behind his head. He's still got his boots on.

"So, last night," Jensen prompts. He turns his face away from Jared, mostly out of

courtesy – his mouth tastes like something dead and can't smell much better.

"Yup."

"She's fucking hot."

"Seriously. I've been wanting to hit that for like... how long ago did we shoot the pilot?"

Jensen grins and punches his pillow a few times, fluffing it up. "Do anything weird?"

Jared rolls his eyes and blushes, going pink the way he always does when they talk about sex. If you didn't know better, you'd think the man was some kind of shrinking violet. Jensen knows better. "Um. I'm pretty sure she deep-throated me."

"Fucking liar."

"I'm serious!" Jared curls up on his side, facing Jensen, eyes bright. "The *whole* way down, Jensen. And there's a lot of me."

"Lie. Besides – you can't be *pretty sure* about something like that. Either she had your cock in her esophagus or she didn't."

"I thought it was a myth, man! Best head of my life, but I feel like I saw a UFO or something. It could have happened, or I could have been slipped some bad E, or something."

"Or good E."

He ducks his head and scratches at the seam of his jeans. "Yeah."

"So what the hell are you doing moping around here? Shouldn't you be, like... demanding black coffee or singing possibly racist Disney songs in the street?"

"Zip-a-dee-do-dah," Jared says weakly.

Something's wrong; Jensen might still be a little drunk but Jared has always been transparent, heart beating away on his sleeve. "Jay?"

"How's Danneel?"

Jensen's eyes close again. "She's good," he says. "She's comin' up here for Thanksgiving next week."

"That's good," Jared says. "I like Danneel."

Jensen snorts. "I know you do."

He feels Jared shift around on the bed, climbing under the comforter, boots and all. Motherfucker. "I think I'm still a little drunk," Jared says. "Wanna sleep? I wanna sleep."

"Yeah," Jensen says. His eyes flutter open for a moment – Jared's rolled on his side with his back to Jensen. "Sleep."

The hangover drags him down quickly, sick feeling in his stomach surrendering to the exhaustion in his brain. He's halfway to dreaming when Jared rolls onto his back, tugs Jensen back to consciousness with the hoarse, thick sound of his voice.

"It's just, I forgot, you know, what it's like."

Jensen makes some kind of a noise that he hopes implies I'm listening.

"Having sex with someone that's not... that you don't feel..." Jared pauses, keeping his eyes intently focused on the smoke alarm's green light at the corner of the dimly lit ceiling. His thumb and forefinger work together, furiously rolling a hangnail while the rest of his body remains perfectly still.

"Yeah," Jensen says finally. "Yeah, Jared."

They sleep until it's dark out, when Jared finally drags himself up to go take care of the dogs. Jensen watches three reruns of *That 70s Show* and calls Danneel, lets her talk him through jerking off. He doesn't wash his hands, after, just wipes his come off on his sheets. He falls asleep while she's telling him how well her *Grey's Anatomy* audition went.

### *December*

"That's a wrap for Jared," Manners says. He's got his gloved hands against his own cheeks, scuffing his knuckles along his skin to keep it warm. "You're good to go. Jensen, we've got to re-shoot the close-ups from scene fourteen."

Jared rolls off the roof of the Impala, and Jensen winces in sympathy when Jared's shirt rides up in the back, knowing the burn of cold metal against skin.

"I could stay," Jared offers. His teeth are clacking together audibly. "We could ride back together."

Jensen shakes his hand and takes his parka when a PA comes jogging up with it. "Thanks," he says, "But I've got a couple hours left here at least. Go home."

Jared should be making a beeline for his trailer about now, but he hovers for a moment,

boots deep in the snow. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'm pretty busy," Jensen says. "I'm on the red-eye tomorrow night, and I still have to pick up Danneel's gift and find something for Mac."

Jared nods. His face is uncharacteristically solemn. Jensen wants to say, *it's only three weeks, dude*, or *why is this weird* but he keeps his mouth shut until Jared says, "Well, Merry Christmas, man."

"Dude, you too. Tell your parents—"

"Yeah, you too. And MacKenzie and Josh."

"Kiss that new baby for me."

"Dunno if I'll have time in between all the kissin' her for me, but I'll try," Jared says. He stands there for a minute more, wavering on his feet, and before he finally turns around he punches Jensen in the arm. It's awkward and hesitant.

Jensen's stomach hurts, later. Bad salmon at craft services, he thinks.

-

"He really might be upstairs," the concierge – Emmaline – says the next day, puzzled. "You can just—"

"C'mon," Jared pleads. "Just ring up, tell him someone dropped off a random package."

She peers at the package, wrapped haphazardly in sparkly pink "Merry Christmas from My Little Pony" paper. "Somehow, I think he might know who it's from."

"Seriously, tell him... tell him a handsome stranger left it. Call up there and say 'Mr. Ackles, a much taller and better looking guy who smelled awesome left a package for you.' Can you remember that?" He grins. "I can write it down for you."

She sighs, smiling. He's got her blushing, now, pink lighting her cheeks. "Get out of here," she says, putting the package under the desk.

"Thanks, Emmaline. Happy holidays!"

In the parking lot, he casts a glance up at Jensen's window as snow crunches under his feet. The winter light reflects harsh off the glass, blinding him until he ducks his head.

The hail starts before he's halfway home. By the time he pulls into his driveway and runs for the front door, it's coming down so hard that he barely notices Jensen's Prius tucked

against the garage.

He tugs his beanie off as he steps through the door. "If you're trying to rob me, Jensen, you're doing it wrong. I know where you live and I've seen where you sleep," he calls into his den.

He finds Jensen on the couch with Harley's head in his lap, feet up on the coffee table. "Hey," Jensen says. He gestures behind him to a large, flat package on the dining room table, wrapped neatly with the latest *Vancouver Sun*. "I was gonna drop that off and run, but Harley just gave me this *look*, man, and then *The Mighty Ducks* was on—"

"We said no presents this year," Jared says. He hangs his trench coat on the hook by the door.

Jensen shrugs, watching the TV, where Gordon Bombay is quacking at his boss. "Gotta spend two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year to qualify for that AmEx."

"Right."

His eyes flick to Jared's. "I want that AmEx, Padalecki."

Jared sighs and flops down next to Jensen. He grabs for the remote to turn the volume up against the sound of the hail battering the windows. "I just dropped your present off with Emmaline," he admits.

"We're so—"

"Don't say gay."

"Wasn't gonna," Jensen says, attempting to look offended.

"*Mighty Ducks*, huh?" Jared hits the 'guide' button on the remote. "Oh, man, it's a marathon. You know, you could just stay."

"I'm not flying out until the red-eye," Jensen replies. "And the third one is the best."

"Well, yeah, that. And those hailstones are about to turn that environmentally friendly matchbox you drive into a piece of scrap metal."

Jensen sighs and looks out the window. "I hope it's recyclable."

"So what'd you get me?"

"You'll find out when you open it on Christmas. Dumbass, that's the whole point of wrapping it."

"I got you a bottle of that Glenfiddich 40 you've got a hard-on for," Jared says. "It comes in a really fancy box."

Jensen grins. "Dude. That's a good fucking present. I got you this big ass map of Texas. It's an antique, from the Mexican-American war. Figured you can replace that *Scarface* poster you got hanging in your room, now that we've redecorated everything else in the house."

"That is *awesome*. Man, we really fucking suck at keeping secrets."

"I don't," Jensen says.

Jared rolls his eyes.

"Well, fine. But just from you."

-

He doesn't bother knocking before barging in. "Yo, Mac. Get up." Jensen hasn't been back in Dallas for more than twenty-four hours and he's already bored.

"Hello, privacy," she snaps, but she's just sprawled on her bed on her stomach, watching TV. "You can't just storm the castle, asshole."

"That almost rhymed." Jensen leans against the doorframe. "Are you watching *Grey's Anatomy*?"

She flutters her eyelashes and pitches her voice high. "McSteamy just makes me all—"

"Shut up. C'mon, grab your keys. I need a ride."

She pauses the DVD. Jensen derives bizarre satisfaction from the awkward mid-conversation freeze of Patrick Dempsey's face. "Where we going?" she asks, already pulling her keys from the top desk drawer.

He follows her out into the hall. "Car dealership."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Yeah? Which one?"

"Uh," he stalls, pausing on the landing of the staircase. "I hadn't thought about it. I need something... big."

"Something that guzzles gas like Nana guzzles eggnog?"

Jensen slings an arm around her shoulders. "Yep."

"So, you got money to spend? Or is the internet right, and you've spent it all on strippers and cocktail waitresses?"

Jensen puts on his best deeply appalled expression. "Excuse me. Stop generalizing, please. I spend my money on collagen injections and ridiculous lawsuits." He pauses. "And reading lessons."

"Of course."

He tugs her French braid. "Yeah, kid, I got money."

She grins, wide enough to show the place where he accidentally chipped her tooth when he lost his grip on a baseball bat when he was fifteen. "Then we're so going Cadillac."

He grabs the keys from her hand and says, "Let me drive," but she snags them back as she shoulders the front door open.

"My car, bitch."

"It was my car first!"

She rolls her eyes. "You know, Jared bought Megan a Jeep for graduation."

"Jared is compensating for his failings as a brother. You don't need a Jeep, kid." He smiles. "You have me, to guide you down the winding road of adulthood."

"You're so full of shit," she says. When the car starts, Rihanna is playing from the CD changer.

Jensen has accidentally sung along through a song and a half when MacKenzie reaches over and kills the music. "So, what's up?"

He glances at her. "Uh, the sky?"

"Original. You're such a dick. I mean what's up with randomly deciding to buy a penis extension."

"Ew. Shut up. You don't know what that is."

"Jensen!"

He shrugs and fits a knee up against the glove compartment. "Hailstorm in Vancouver turned the Prius into a crushed soda can," he says.

"Uh, plus, you hate that car."

He toes at the empty Vitamin Water bottles and pair of black stilettos kicking around in the footwell. "God, I really hate that car."

They're well out of the residential area before Mac speaks again. "So, how's Danneel?"

"She's good."

"Not coming for New Year's Eve?"

He suddenly realizes he's been grinding his teeth. "Chrissake, MacKenzie, she's got her own damn family too."

Mac's eyes go wide immediately. "Whoa. I just asked."

"Yeah, well." He shifts in the seat and jams a knee up against the glove compartment. "I just don't appreciate the fucking inquisition, is all."

"You have such issues. You need a shrink."

"Jared is my shrink," Jensen says. It comes out of his mouth unbidden, and he winces when he hears himself.

Mac turns the music back up and raises one eyebrow neatly. He wishes he'd never taught her that.

-

Christmas Day in San Antonio feels... weird. The house feels bigger than it used to, especially since Jared left the dogs with Sandy for the holiday. He left them with her because she asked, and because he's not entirely convinced that Harley isn't making himself sick missing her.

Jared doesn't miss her much anymore – not her smile or the feeling of her hand in his – but he still misses the idea of her. He misses noise she made and the shift of his mattress during the nightmares she'd have once in a while. The sounds of her unloading the dishwasher with his mother while he and Jeff played air hockey in the next room. The smell of the cookies she attempted every year, saying, "They're still not right! I swear, baby, the way my mom used to make them, you'd have loved them."

It's late on the twenty-fifth and Jared's belly is full of ribs and smoked salmon and his daddy's favorite bourbon. He and Megan are flat on their backs with their heads underneath the tree, staring up through the branches at their preschool ornaments and haphazardly strung popcorn.

"It's quiet around here this year," Meg says.

She doesn't mean it as an accusation, but he can't help the dirty look he throws her or the sting behind his eyes.

Her mouth drops open a little. "I didn't—"

"I know that," he interrupts sharply, and then, softer, "I know that."

She sighs and brushes a fallen pine needle off her forehead. "Have you been working harder than normal?"

"I normally work harder than normal."

"It's just – Mac says Jensen's been a dick, too."

He laces his fingers together over his chest. "Man, we never should have allowed your forces of evil to combine."

"Seriously. Is something up? Are you fighting?"

"What? No!"

She rolls onto her stomach. "Fine. By the way, JT, if you've resorted to stealing my hair things, it might be time to cut your freakin' mop."

"What?" he asks, sitting up a bit.

She reaches out and snags the elastic around his right wrist; it smarts as it snaps back against his skin.

As if on cue, Jeff comes in, Juliette cooing in the crook of his arm. "Yo," he says, kicking Jared's leg. "Jensen's on the phone for you." He drops the cordless unmercifully on Jared's full belly.

"Oof," Jared grunts, struggling to his feet. "Thank you." He holds out an elbow for the baby and Jeff sighs but hands her over, settling her against Jared's chest.

"Don't drop her, drunkass," he says.

Jared heads out to the porch with the baby and the phone, waiting for the screen door to click shut behind him before he answers. "Hey."

"I miss you," Jensen says.

Jared blinks. "What?"

"I bought a car. A big ass – a freakin' truck, Jay."

"Whoa." He leans against the porch rail and stares out across the back yard. The treehouse he and Jeff built with their dad the summer Jared was ten is falling apart, the slats of the floor sagging against branches. "Christmas present to yourself?"

"Yeah. Speaking of which, I think Danneel didn't like her present."

"What? Why? What'd you get her?"

"This diamond necklace thingy. Kind of like the one you got Sandy last year."

"Oh. Huh."

"She wasn't very enthusiastic about it over the phone, is all. Maybe she was pissed that it looked like Sandy's? But, I mean, Sandy liked it, didn't she?"

Jared laughs. "By all means, *please* use me and Sandy as your paragon of romantic bliss."

"Whatever," Jensen says. His vowels are long; he's drunk, too. "You have a good Christmas?"

"It's – um. Different." He shifts Juliette against his body. She turns her little face into the crook of his neck and he pauses to inhale the smell of powder and milk. "I think Megan feels like I stole her sister away, or something."

"She said that?"

"She'd never *say* that. I can just tell."

"Maybe you're projecting."

"Thanks, Dr. Phil."

"You feel guilty?"

"I just – maybe. Sandy spending Christmas with my dogs."

"Oh, my God. She's spending Christmas with her aunt in San Jose, Jared, same as she did every year of her life before you showed up. You're so—"

"Whatever. You know what I mean." Juliette gurgles and a long string of drool spills from her lower lip down to Jared's wrist. He hitches her up higher against his body. "Tell me about your truck."

"See, that's the thing," Jensen says. "I'm gonna need to get it to Vancouver."

### *January*

Jared steps into the sun outside of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport late in the afternoon on New Years' Day, wearing brand new sneakers and a familiar-looking hoodie. Jensen feels like he hasn't seen him in a year.

"You're a fucking thief," is what he says as soon as Jared climbs into his passenger seat and tosses his bag into the back. "That's my shirt."

Jared looks down and plucks at it. "I'll be sure to jerk off into it later." He reaches over to poke at Jensen's face. "Are we not shaving this week, you fucking troglodyte?"

"Did we get a new thesaurus for Christmas, you fucking Neanderthal?" Jensen smacks him away with one hand, turning the wheel to get to the on-ramp with the other.

Jared grins and settles back against the seat. "You missed me," he says.

Jensen wishes he could deny it, but he's already *said* it, blurted it out after two hours of drinking eggnog with his Nana, so he just scowls. "You like my car?"

"Oh, man," Jared says. He pops the glove compartment and pulls out the owner's manual. "Love it. Does it mow down civil rights activists on its off-days?"

"Shut up."

They're on the highway now, heading north without a map. Jensen is playing Ray LaMontagne and the sun is setting, slanting into the car from the left, lighting the hair on his arms. Jensen is happy, settled and comfortable. He's got his new truck and good music and his best friend. Everything that's been churning in his gut, weirding him out, kind of falls away into the whole scene. It's peaceful.

After a few minutes of flipping pages and poking at the stereo, Jared puts the manual away. "Dude."

Jensen looks at him over the tops of his sunglasses. "Yeah?"

"You know this car is kind of a huge black cock extension, right?"

-

The car has a fancy GPS system, but Jensen insists that they spend most of the time with the guidance turned off. "We've got like a week and a half, if we want it," Jensen says, so they go by general direction and the occasional flip through the Rand McNally shoved

into the pocket of Jared's door.

"This is the most cliché thing you've ever done," Jeff tells Jared on the second day. "A couple of actors having simultaneous existential crises." Jared's driving, so he's got his Blackberry on speaker, and Jensen laughs from the passenger's seat, tipping his head back enough that Jared can see the fillings in his back molars.

"We're not having a crisis!" Jared insists. "We're – we're going method."

"Fuck you," Jeff says. "You staying in motels? Driving all day, shooting ghosties all night?"

"We stayed at a Ritz-Carlton last night," Jensen chimes in. "They upgraded us to the presidential suite."

Jared punches him. "You're not helping, asshole!" he screeches. "We ate gas station hot dogs for breakfast today," he tells Jeff. "I'm fuckin' roughing it."

Jensen is still fucking giggling, rubbing the sore spot on his shoulder, resting his temple against the window.

"I was calling to thank you again for the bouncy seat you bought Jules," Jeff says. His voice crackles a little over the line; Jared is down to one bar of service. "I don't know why we never thought of it, but I think it was the only good idea you've had in your life. It keeps her occupied endlessly, man. I think my wife wants to marry you."

"If you don't quit being a dick, I'll come back there and sweep her off her feet," Jared threatens. "I'm a famous actor, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, call mom. She worries."

"I will," Jared promises.

He's about to end the call when Jeff calls out, "Bye, Jensen."

"Kiss that baby for me, man," Jensen responds. When the call is over, he grabs his iPod. "You got a music preference, Jay?" he asks, squinting at the screen from under the brim of his Rangers cap.

"Nah," Jared says. His chest feels hot; his throat is a little dry. "You pick."

Jensen has three tiny gray hairs in his beard, up next to his right ear. Jared likes that he knows that.

"Are you going to marry her?" Jared asks, in a McDonalds booth that's closer to the bathroom than Jensen would usually prefer.

A French fry lodges itself high in Jensen's throat. "Huh?"

"Danneel. Are you going to propose?"

Jensen swallows hard. The French fry won't budge. "No. Why? You think I should?"

"No."

Jared seems incredibly focused on getting the tomatoes off of his burgers without losing too much of the mayo. Jensen thinks that's probably a good idea; the tomatoes do look a little paler than they should.

They eat in silence for four minutes. Jensen knows, because he watches them tick by on the clock above the dollar menu.

Jared's voice is soft when he breaks the companionable silence with, "I don't want you to."

Jensen swallows hard again, but the French fry is gone, washed away a few minutes ago by a gulp of his strawberry milkshake. "Oh," he says. "Are you going to use that extra mustard packet?"

"No," Jared says. He slides it across the table. "It's all yours."

-

That night, Jensen shells out over a thousand dollars for a couple of rooms at a ranch in Tetonia, Idaho. "You get this one. I bought you *two* quarter-pounders," Jared says at the front desk, his face the picture of sincerity. "And they charge extra for cheese now, you know."

They haven't been upstairs thirty seconds when Jared bangs on the connecting door between their suites. When Jensen releases the chain lock, Jared is standing there grinning with a wad of hundred-dollar bills in his fist.

"What—"

Jared tucks them into Jensen's breast pocket. "Just wanted to see if you'd do it," he explains.

"You carry five hundred bucks cash on you? Somebody's going to jump you and steal it."

Jared rolls his eyes and pushes past Jensen into his room, like he owns the place. "Right. Someone's going to think *hmm, there's a slight possibility that that nine-foot-six dude with the enormous biceps has five hundred bucks in his pocket, I think I'll jump him.*"

"You need to leave, now. Your ego is crushing my lungs."

"Whatever. Sometimes I like to feel rich." Jared goes to stand by the window. The sun is setting bright and blue across the snow-covered hills behind the lodge, and when it hits Jared's pink sweater and dances around the turned-up tips of his hair, Jensen feels himself grind his back molars down. "Man," Jared says, pressing his palms to the windowsill. "I can't believe you paid for two rooms."

"As opposed to what," Jensen asks. He unzips his bag and starts digging for his shampoo. "Spooning with you? I'd rather drop a grand."

"We both know that's not true," Jared says. His voice is low and serious, but when he turns away from the window he's grinning stupidly. "Hey, if we're going to pay out of our ass, we might as well raid the mini-bar. Want to make gross drinks when you're out of the shower?"

-

When midnight rolls around, they're not drunk, but they're maybe a little lubricated. *27 Dresses* is on the flat-screen, because apparently Jared's thumb slipped when he was trying to choose *28 Days Later* from the on-demand menu. Jensen would've called bullshit but he was too busy choking down Jared's heinous attempt at a martini.

"She's hot," Jared says, lying on his stomach with his head propped on his elbows.

"Katherine Heigl?" Jensen shrugs from the top of the bed. "Not really. Besides, no fraternizing with the enemy, Padalecki."

"They're TV Ratings, Jensen, not weapons of mass destruction." Jared gets up on his knees and swings his body up to sit next to Jensen. He lands a little too close, his shoulder pinning Jensen's to the headboard.

"What're you doing?"

"Don't wanna lay down there with my face next to your rank-ass feet," Jared replies. He doesn't make an attempt to give Jensen any room, just sits there comfortably in his personal space.

The movie is predictable and trite, but Jensen kind of likes it, even if he does think that the bitchy little sister is a million times hotter than Izzie Stevens. Jared falls asleep fifteen

minutes before the end. When Jensen gets up, he jostles him, and Jared rolls to the other side of the bed.

Jensen's jeans are on the floor where he dropped them after his shower. He pulls his phone out of the pocket and goes out into the hall in his boxer shorts and his t-shirt. He listens to it ring three times, staring down at his pale legs and his bare toes curling against the thick carpet.

"Hey, hon," Danneel answers. "It's late," she adds, but there's music playing in the background, the low hum of a handful of voices.

"Do you want to marry me?"

He hears something crash on her end, a plate on the floor or a glass in the sink. "What?" she yelps. "Are you *proposing* to me over the phone in the middle of the night?"

"Dan—"

She laughs. "Wait, is this a drunk dial? Are you *drunk* proposing?"

He leans against the wall. The hallway is mostly dark, except for a warm light between the doors and the exit sign by the stairwell. "I'm not proposing, Danneel. I'm asking you. Is marrying me – is that something you want?" He exhales shakily. "Ever?"

Jensen hears the click of a door closing and the background noise disappears. He counts Danneel's slow, careful breaths – one, two, three, four – until, "Jensen," she says. "Baby."

Her voice cracks on the last syllable, sharp and high and unfamiliar.

-

At the last gas station before the Canadian border, Jensen's trying to decide between juicy fruit and doublemint when Jared steps up behind him and says, "Hey. You been kinda quiet."

Jensen rolls his eyes. "Got no other choice, you've been singing at the top of your lungs for the last three hours."

"Bruce Springsteen speaks to my soul," Jared says. "Seriously though. You good?"

Jensen looks out to the car. It's noon, and the sun is cutting hard and sharp across the dirty snow piled at the edges of the lot. The back seat of his brand new car is piled high with candy bar wrappers and drive-thru cartons and the stupid tabloid weeklies that Jared buys at every stop. It smells like socks and old Chinese food in there, and Jensen kind of hates Bruce Springsteen. His back is stiff and he's out of clean laundry and Jared keeps

using his deodorant without asking and that's fucking gross.

"I'm awesome, Jay," he says. "I could do this forever."

He means it.

"Yeah." Jared says. He rocks forward a little, nudges Jensen's shoulder with his. "I - yeah."

-

When they get back to Vancouver, nothing has changed. Carl still shows up in the SUV every morning before the sun comes up, with Jensen half-asleep behind the driver's seat. Impala number two still smells like strawberry from the gummy bears that Jared once let melt into the upholstery. They still argue over who's going to pay for the taxi they share home from Jeannie's birthday party.

But every time they're in a car together, Jared feels like he's home, or something, and it's weird. He thinks maybe Sam Winchester has gotten too deep under his skin. He thinks maybe it's time to start looking at scripts for hiatus movies.

Christmas vacation has been over for two weeks and they're shooting in the green-screen car. Jared's knees are cramping; he thinks about asking them to cut some of the floor out of the passenger's side.

"I'm exhausted," Jensen says after Kim calls cut. He leans back against the seat, his neck arcing over the top of the bench.

"I saw Danneel on *One Tree Hill* last night," Jared says.

Jensen raises just one eyebrow. "While you doodled Mrs. Jared Michael Murray on your geometry notebook?"

"Yes," Jared replies. "She was good. Didn't you think she was good?"

Jensen sighs and puts one hand on the steering wheel, spinning it around a couple times and watching it turn. "I didn't catch it," he says.

The realization comes to Jared slowly, like he's stoned. He stares at the side of Jensen's face, the three tiny bits of grey stubble that he's not even sure Jensen knows about.

"Oh," he says. His hand slips a little on the door handle. "I've got to piss," he says.

He doesn't go back to the car until the second time the first AD comes to knock on his door.

## *February*

"You've been weird," Jensen says. He swerves a little, enough to knock Jared's shoulder with his own as they approach the heat of the craft services tent.

"And this is new?" Jared asks. He reaches for a stack of Styrofoam cups. "You drinking coffee?"

"Yes," Jensen says, taking a cup. "And I mean weirder than normal."

"Not true."

"Jay, you haven't tried to stick a gummy worm to my face with spit in like a week."

Jared snorts and grabs a handful of sugar packets – the real stuff, not the aspartame. Typical. "Maybe I'm growing up, or some shit."

But Jensen can tell he's full of shit because his eyes are darting around rapidly, the way they always do when he's lying. He grabs Jared by the elbow and steers them toward an empty corner. "Jay."

Jared sighs. "It's nothing, man. I'm not pissed at you."

"Okay, I didn't think you were pissed at me before, but now I do."

"I just – whatever." He starts to gesture, but Jensen guesses he forgot he was holding hot coffee because it splashes over his fingers and they both wince. "Fuck."

Jensen takes the cup while Jared wipes his hand on Sam's jeans. He's going to need a new pair. "If you just gave yourself a second-degree burn to avoid talking to me—"

"It's not a second degree burn. And Jensen – man – it's." Jared turns away and touches the back of his own neck. "When everything went down last summer, you were the first person I called. And then, with Danneel – I don't know."

Jensen's breath gets stuck in his throat. "Oh."

"I called you before I called my brother, dude. I called you before I called my *mom*. Sandy was still in the damn elevator and I was already dialing. I just – I wish you'd told me. That's all."

Jensen's stomach hurts all of a sudden. "I should have, probably," he says. "I wanted to. I

just, um."

"What? I don't get it, dude. What happened? You were fine at Christmas, right?"

"Stuff just changed."

"What stuff?"

He sighs and the exhale comes out stuttering and shaky. "Jared."

"*What?*"

"I never asked you what happened with Sandy," Jensen points out. He holds Jared's coffee out to him. "You didn't want to talk about it, and I never asked. Ever."

Jared just stares at it for a beat before he takes the cup. His shoulders slump and he finally meets Jensen's eyes. "Fine," he says. "But from now on, this is a full-disclosure friendship."

Jensen snorts.

"I'm serious! You tell me things about your life, and I judge you for them. That's the deal."

-

It's three-thirty in the afternoon by the time Jared shows up on Valentine's Day. To his credit, Jensen expected him to crack much earlier. Jared doesn't function well on his own in normal situations. It would be far too much for Jensen to ask for him to stay quiet for a full twenty- four hours on their first Valentine's Day as single men.

"Are you proud of me?" Jared asks immediately when Jensen opens the hotel room door.

"Because it's three- thirty? Sure."

"Fuck you! It's three- thirty-four. Quit selling me short."

Jensen steps aside to make room. "C'mon in."

"Here," Jared says. He shoves a card and a flower into Jensen's hands. The card says, *You're a kick-butt Valentine!* and has a picture of the green Power Ranger on it. The flower still has dirt clinging to the stem from where Jared tore it from the planter in the lobby.

Jensen scowls. "This is bullshit."

"Get over it," Jared says, "You're my Valentine, baby."

"That's not what I meant." Jensen follows Jared into the suite, dropping the flower on the end table in the hall. "I meant that you're a crap Valentine, Padalecki. No candy?"

Jared turns around so he's walking backward and jams his index finger into his own mouth. He fishes out a well-chewed piece of bright purple grape-flavored Bubble Yum. "Here," he says, shoving it in Jensen's face.

After four years together, it's just instinct to call Jared's bluff, so Jensen grabs him by the wrist and closes his lips around his finger, sucking the gum into his mouth.

Jared's eyes go wide and bright as Jensen pulls away with a wet noise. "That was absolutely fucking disgusting!" he says, completely delighted. He's grinning so hard Jensen can see his back molars. "Awesome!"

Jensen smiles, holding the gum between his teeth so Jared can see it.

He chews it until it's tough as taffy, until the flavor has all melted down his throat.

### ***March***

Jensen would like to say that he really understands Jared, that they comprehend each other on some profound, enigmatic level. The truth is that every once in a while, Jared still surprises him. Every once in a while, Jared sort of blows Jensen's mind.

Carl has Collective Soul playing in the van when they pull up in front of Jared's house, a little louder than normal because it's pouring rain outside. Jensen is curled over in the backseat, wringing water from the bottoms of his jeans and watching Jared try to slip out his front door without letting Harley through.

When Jared finally gets out to the car, the crown of his head is soaked. As he's clambering in, he says, "Hey, Jensen, in the interest of full disclosure, I accidentally beat off thinking about you last night."

He just says it, like it's nothing, like *did you catch Letterman last night* or *I think I might've left my iPod in your trailer*.

Jensen swallows his tongue a little bit, air catching in his throat, and makes a noise that sounds something like, "Chuh?"

Jared shakes his hair out like a dog, a fine spray whipping across Jensen's forehead. He smiles broadly. "Weird, right? One minute I'm thinking about Angelina Jolie – only, not now, because nobody wants to bone somebody that's got nineteen kids," he says. He's talking faster than normal. "But a while back, when she did that movie with Ethan Hawke

– and the next minute, I was just—well, whatever, you know how it goes—your brain just, whatever." He laughs. "You don't want to hear this, huh?"

"No. I really, really don't." Except he really, really does.

Jared grins. "Anyway. You want a piece of gum? It's strawberry lime."

Jensen kind of feels like he's underwater, like his brain is lagging about ten seconds behind. "Gum," he echoes, opening his hand for a piece, but he's thinking about the gum on Valentine's Day, how easy it was to make Jared's face light up.

It's ridiculous, because Jared just told him that he *jerked off thinking about him* and Jensen's mind is stuck on chewing gum, but if he keeps thinking about gum and its obvious significance in the course of their friendship then he doesn't have to think about anything else.

He doesn't have to worry about it or ask himself the questions he wants answers to or *picture it*, Jared against his navy blue sheets, thinking about *Jensen*.

"Gimme two pieces," Jensen says.

"Greedy, greedy," Jared replies.

-

There are nine screenplays in Jared's trailer – including several of the sex-fueled gore-fests he expected after *Friday the 13th* and a new Pixar film in which he'd voice an actual *gym sock*.

He's reading the final script – a tiny part in a Sorkin movie that films in London – when someone knocks on his door. He knows it's Jensen before it opens, mostly because he wants it to be.

Jensen doesn't wait for Jared to invite him in; he just walks in. He leans against the door with his hands in his pockets. "Whatcha doing?"

"Deciding whether there's a future for me in playing athletic footwear," Jared says. He grabs the Pixar script and waves it around a little before chucking it at Jensen's head.

Jensen catches it before he manages to get a paper-cut on his cornea. He drops the script on the counter. "Hey, so. Question."

Jared leans back and props his feet on the coffee table. "Okay."

Jensen looks out the window, and Jared follows his gaze. They're almost done setting up; someone's going to come get them any minute. "So, remember back a few months ago,

when Mike was here? Remember how you asked me if I'd ever kissed a guy?"

Jared feels his face flush immediately, cheeks burning with the rush of blood. "Rather forget."

"So have *you*?" Jensen asks, voice low, the tone he uses when Dean is pissed as hell. Jared's a little nervous.

"Hooked up with a guy?"

Jensen nods.

Jared laughs and reaches up to scratch his head. "Chad spit at me once, and my mouth was open, and a little got in there, if that counts," he says. Jensen doesn't look amused. "No. No, I've never – that."

Jensen reaches behind himself and unlatches the door without looking away from Jared. "Gotta be on camera in two minutes," he says.

They're mostly quiet on the short walk to the set. "Sorry if that was weird," Jensen blurts out after a minute. "I was just - wondering."

"It's cool. You can ask me whatever," Jared says quickly, tongue tumbling over the words. "So, I think I'm going to ask Torrey on a date."

"Guest star Torrey?"

"Yeah. We talked while you were doing B-roll; she's a pretty cool girl. Chad thinks it's a good idea."

"It is a good idea," Jensen says. "She's hot. You should do that. It's a good idea."

"I should?"

"Definitely. You should definitely do that. You should take her out tonight." He clears his throat.

"Or *we* could do something," Jared says. "Play Halo or something."

Jensen shakes his head and reaches up to touch his fingers to Dean's amulet. "I'm in LA this weekend. You should take her out."

-

She giggles a little when she agrees to the date, regards him with an amused smile. Jared

suggests a sports bar that's not too far away. Over her shoulder, he watches Jensen toss an overnight bag into the SUV that's going to take him to the airport.

The date is fun. It's perfect.

Torrey's pretty and she's funny; she wears the sexiest pair of shoes Jared's ever seen in his life and she orders cheese fries and a pitcher of beer. When she catches him watching basketball over her shoulder she just swivels her chair around a little and cheers with him. Their knees touch under the table and their eyes meet and... it's fun. It's perfect.

Jared hasn't ever actually *dated* someone without knowing them pretty well first. He'd passed out drunk on Sandy's couch dozens of times before he ever made it near her bed. He'd kissed Alexis on camera so often that by the time he kissed her off-screen he'd half forgotten that he was allowed to use his tongue. This feels weird, now, like he's too aware of himself – his size, his breath, the beer he orders. By all counts, he should be enjoying himself.

He should.

He kisses Torrey goodnight in her hotel lobby, and her fingers curl into his collar enough that he knows he could make a night out of this if he wanted to. On the way back down the highway he pulls his phone out and texts Jensen, one eye on the road as his thumb works over his blackberry. *i think i forgot how to do this whole thing.*

It takes Jensen long enough to respond that Jared gets nervous, but when he's refilling Sadie's water bowl, his phone buzzes at him. He barks out a laugh when he reads it.

*just pinch the tip and roll it on kiddo.*

### *April*

Shooting season four ends at the end of April, not with a whimper, but with a bang. The final scene they shoot involves Sam and Dean beating the living shit out of each other, and it's exhausting and emotional and Jensen feels like a wrung rag.

Shooting runs late. After Manners calls wrap, they change clothes in the wardrobe trailer. The clothes rack divides the room between them, but when Jared pulls off his t-shirt, Jensen sees the mottled line of bruising that wraps around his ribcage. "Fuck," he says, fingers slipping on the clasp of his necklace. "Ouch."

Jared pauses and looks down at himself, running his fingers over the redness. "'S what happens when you get thrown into a kitchen table seventeen times in a row," he says. "Battle wounds."

Jensen reaches over the rack before he can stop himself, shirts swaying on their hangers

as he brushes his fingers briefly over Jared's swollen skin. Jared doesn't move away or step back, doesn't even breathe until Jensen pulls back.

"Your hands are shaking," he says then, turning away and grabbing the Cowboys Jersey he wore into work this morning. When his head pops up through the neck his hair is all over the place.

Jensen looks away, down at his palms. "I'm exhausted," he says. He tries again to unhook the amulet, wrinkling his nose. "And I think there's fake blood in my fucking sinuses."

"Here," Jared says, knocking Jensen's hands out of the way and stepping up close behind him. "I'll get it." His fingers nudge up at Jensen's neck. The cord releases, and Jensen catches the amulet before it slides down his chest.

"Thanks. We should hurry. If we miss our flight and don't make Mike's party, we'll hear about it forever."

Jared moves away. "Don't know about a fifth season yet," he says, naming the elephant in the room.

Jensen shrugs and tightens the clasp on his watch. "There's always a guest appearance on *90210*."

Jared smiles, looking at the floor. "There's always that."

-

Somewhere in Mike's kitchen, Tom is handing out shots. He and Alison and Erica and everyone else they've ever worked with are toasting to never spending another winter in Vancouver and never wearing another red t-shirt and never shaving again and to making it through eight years without ever having to actually wear tights.

Jared is only a few drinks deep, but alcohol, sheer exhaustion, and the hit he barely took off of somebody's joint are turning out to be a hell of a combination. The floor he's sitting on feels like it's swaying, his back hurts, and some girl he met five minutes ago is sitting behind him on the couch with her hands in his hair. She's rolling the ends between her fingers. Jared's pretty sure she's on ecstasy, and he's too damn wasted to pull away.

Jensen is leaning against the doorframe, hips out, one hand in the pocket of his jeans. Jared's just watching him talk to Kristen, holding his Rolling Rock against his stomach. There's an arc of wet on his green t-shirt where the bottle sweats against him.

"Move, Chewbacca," Mike says, unceremoniously shoving Jared aside as he pushes the coffee table into a corner. Ecstasy girl's ring snags in a tangle of hair at the crown of his head when he pulls away.

"The fuck," Jared says, mostly to Mike, as he scoots away from the stranger's hand.

"We're playing Truth or Dare," Mike explains.

"You can't play with the coffee table?"

"It's truth or dare, man, you gotta sit on the floor," Aaron says. "Obviously."

Above the rise of the couch, Jared watches Jensen curl into himself with laughter, little lines splaying out from his eyes as he shakes his head. Kristen smiles at him, pleased with herself for making him laugh, and Jensen reaches out to brush her bangs away from her eyes.

Jared and Jensen never made a point to catch up with each other's careers. Jared's never seen a moment of *Dark Angel* and he knows Jensen flips past the *Gilmore* reruns when they're on. Still, Jared has seen enough to know what Jensen looks like when he's kissing Kristen Kreuk, and the images flood into his mind like liquid spilling.

"Jared," Alison says, "you're spilling."

He looks down at where his drink is tipped over against his knee, at the spread of wet toward the seam of his pants.

"Party foul," Tom says, pulling his wife into his lap as he sits down. "So, you gonna play, man?"

Jared glances back up, but Jensen's gone. Kristen is, too.

-

If you asked him how he ended up alone on the floor of Mike's laundry room, Jensen couldn't tell you. But he's there, leaning up against the dryer, sucking happily on Mike's favorite bong.

Jensen doesn't smoke a whole lot of pot, but it's been a hell of a week and this is good shit. Besides, he's pretty sure there was a nineteen-year-old girl doing lines off of Mike's guest room dresser earlier, so Jensen figures he's still light-years away from being crowned the biggest idiot at the party.

Also, the basement is kind of pleasantly quiet, if you don't count the rumble of the pipes and the creaking footsteps above. He's pretty sure that Mike has never actually *used* the laundry room, except to hide the good bong.

Jensen didn't sleep on the plane – it wasn't easy to zone out with Jared passed out and

drooling on his shoulder – and at this point, he thinks he might be pushing a whole day and a half without sleep. He's trying to count out the hours and light the bowl at the same time when the door swings open.

"Hey," Jared says. He looks weird – circles under his eyes and his mouth pinched like he's worried. He steps into the laundry room and closes the door behind him. "Was looking for you."

Jensen's lungs are full of smoke, so he holds up a finger. Jared waits patiently until he coughs out the hit. "How'd you find me?"

Jared shrugs and leans back against the wall. "I know where Mike hides the good bong," he replies. "And it's quiet down here. Where's Kristen?"

"Went home." Jensen sets the pipe down and stares straight ahead, looking at Jared's knees. One of them is wet; probably spilled beer. Jared gets clumsy when he's wasted. "She's doing a self-esteem building seminar for underprivileged teenage girls in the morning. Seriously."

Jared nods. "Hey, Jensen."

"Mmm."

"Stand up?"

Jensen furrows his brow. "Dude, that sounds like a horrible idea."

Jared laughs, low and quiet. "C'mon, man. Please." He holds out a hand and Jensen takes it reluctantly, letting Jared swing him up to his feet. The whole room spins around them a little, but Jared stays still and solid, fingers folded around Jensen's.

"What?"

"We were playing truth or dare," Jared says.

Jensen snorts. "Are you twelve?"

"Thirteen and a half," Jared says. He's still holding on. When he takes a step closer, Jensen takes one backward, ends up against the washing machine. "I picked dare."

"Oh," Jensen says. Jared's eyes are on his mouth; he can feel the gaze like it's a tangible thing there in the smoke-filled room with the harsh light and the party wearing through the floorboards overhead. "And you have to—"

Jared says, "I *have* to kiss you," and if there were any time Jensen would debate the implication of the emphasis, but there isn't – Jared moves so close that their clasped

hands are trapped between their ribcages and then he's tipping forward and they're kissing.

Jared doesn't half-ass it, either. His lips are wet and cool against Jensen's smoke-chapped mouth, and he's all in from the first moment, kissing so firmly that the edge of the washing machine digs into Jensen's back. It might be painful if Jensen could feel anything other than the heat of Jared's palm against his, the wet swipe of tongue across the middle of his bottom lip.

It's only been a few moments – heady, dizzy moments – when Jared lets go of Jensen's hand. Jensen pulls away as best he can, trapped against appliances, but as he cranes his neck away, Jared whispers, "No, no. C'mere." He puts one hand on either side of Jensen's face, guides him back to the center, he drags his mouth over Jensen's chin, his jaw, the rise of his cheekbone.

"Jared," Jensen says, flattening his hand against Jared's chest – not pushing him away, exactly, but creating a false barrier between their bodies. "Jared."

Jared freezes; Jensen feels the muscles seize under his fingers.

He stutters. "I think, uh."

"Yeah," Jared says. He backs away and Jensen can still hear him breathing, can smell the beer and the sweat and the stale airplane air, see the flush of his cheeks. "I – sorry. That was... sorry. It was a really stupid dare."

"Yeah," Jensen says. "Listen, it's been a long night." He feels startlingly sober all of a sudden. He's desperate for fresh air and for the blood to stop rushing in his body. "I'm gonna go home."

"Call me tomorrow," Jared says. His eyes are glued to the floor, though. He doesn't move – Jensen has to step around him to leave the room.

Upstairs, Mike and Tom and the others really are playing truth or dare, sitting cross-legged on the floor like the breakfast club.

Jensen calls a cab. He doesn't hang around inside; instead, he walks to the end of the driveway to wait for it to show up. It's humid and hot. Summer is closing in on the city.

-

Jared wakes up on the floor of the laundry room, with his head pillowed against a pile of towels and Mike's bong in his hand.

"Hey, kiddo," Mike says when Jared makes it upstairs. It's not even nine AM and he's got

a beer in his hand, eggs sizzling in the frying pan on the stove. "How you feeling?"

"Like I'm going to be puking up stomach acid in about three hours," Jared says. "I hate myself. And you. I hate you way more than I hate me, actually."

"Hair of the dog?"

"I'd rather die."

Mike grins. "I could make you some bacon?"

Jared feels the blood drain away from his face.

"Your phone rang," Mike says, pointing to where it's sitting on the coffee table. "I took the liberty of answering."

"Please tell me it wasn't my mom."

"Unfortunately not. Just Ackles. He sounds about as good as you look right now. Wants you to give him a call."

Jared swallows and picks up the phone. The low battery signal is flashing. He hits the power button and watches the screen go blank.

Five days later, he leaves for the Sorkin shoot in London. He texts Jensen before the plane takes off, just *leaving for the uk now, wish me luck. have a good summer shmackles*, like it's totally normal for them to go five days without talking, normal for Jared not to call Jensen back.

Like it's totally normal for them to make out against a washer-dryer at quarter to three in the morning.

## *May*

Jared has been in London for almost four weeks, and Jensen hates himself for measuring time that way. He's taken some time off – gotten some private acting lessons from a hot-shot coach, spent a few days in the studio with Jason and a few days attempting to surf in La Jolla with his brother and sister.

All in all, it's been an okay break, but Jensen feels like he's ricocheting from distraction to distraction.

The summer has been about staying busy, about carefully maneuvering his entire life around the fact that he *made out with his best friend*, who promptly left the country.

He feels like a thirteen year old girl, heart tripping every time the phone rings.

He hates Jared for it, a little bit. It's his fault; he started it. Jensen would've been fine with sitting on it for the rest of their lives, never doing anything, and then Jared had to go and put his mouth on Jensen's mouth and fuck everything up.

Jared has been in London for almost four weeks and he's due back in two days when Jensen runs into Sandy as he's walking out of his dentist's office in Sherman Oaks.

He almost misses her, just this blur of dark hair and white cotton, but she reaches out, touches the inside of his elbow. "Jensen!"

"Holy shit," Jensen says. He laughs and stoops to hug her. "It's good to see you."

"You too!" She says, smiling as brightly as ever, her dark eyes catching light. "How are you? How's Jared?"

She says his name like it's easy for her, and Jensen doesn't know why that surprises him, but it does. "I'm good," Jensen says. "And he's – well, I think he's good. He's in London, doing a movie."

She still has her hand tucked into his elbow. "A horror movie?"

"No," Jensen laughs. "A *good* movie. Well, the script was good. I haven't talked to him in a while."

"Well, you look great."

"You, too."

"Listen," Sandy says, toeing up to kiss him on the cheek. "I'm late for getting my teeth cleaned, but it really is so good to see you. Tell Jared I said hello, okay?"

When she walks away, he thumbs her lip-gloss off his face and watches her go. She's as bubbly as ever, and he's not sure why that surprises him or why he spent the last year always imagining her sad.

He's on the freeway when it occurs to him that it won't be like that, for him.

Jared isn't someone he'll just get over, someone he'll ask about in passing a year later without stomach twisting in his gut.

He pulls over onto the shoulder and throws the car into park almost violently.

His shoulders are shaking and his mouth's gone dry.

Jared is back in LA for twenty-four hours before he actually calls Jensen, even though he's spent every one of those hours trying to work up some nerve.

Jensen doesn't answer the first time. Jared forces himself to sit through an entire *Law & Order* rerun before he calls again, and this time, it goes straight to voicemail.

Sadie is sprawled beside him on the couch, rolled onto her back so that he can scratch her belly. "He's probably busy," Jared tells her, burying his fingers in her fur.

She lets her tongue loll out of her mouth and pants up at him.

"*Fine*," Jared sighs. "But if he gets pissed, I'm telling him it was all your idea." He whistles for Harley and grabs his keys.

Jensen's house is high up in the hills. It's small, but it's private, and it has a fantastic view of the city at night. As soon as Jared pulls into the driveway the dogs are barking wildly, climbing over each other in the back seat.

Jared doesn't hesitate before he rings the doorbell. If Jensen's home he's already heard Sadie and Harley freaking out, so there's no point in stalling.

It's been a month since they've seen each other, and when Jensen opens the door in torn jeans and a white t-shirt, his hair wet from a shower, Jared's lungs relax like he's coming up for air. "Jensen."

"Yo," Jensen says, stepping back to let Jared in. He bends down to greet the dogs and nods toward the living room. "I'm watching *Teen Wolf*. Grab a beer."

Jared hesitates in the entryway. It would all feel so normal, like another boring night in Vancouver, except Jensen won't look at him. "*Teen Wolf*? Hell of a Friday night, Ackles."

"Like you weren't sitting at your hotel watching reruns," Jensen says, grimacing as Harley laps at the side of his face.

"You know me too well." Jared offers a hand to help Jensen stand but Jensen opts to struggle to his feet on his own.

"Maybe," he says. He walks past Jared to the kitchen and takes two beers from the fridge. He pops them both open with his ring before handing one over on the way back to the couch. He sprawls across the cushions, not leaving any room for Jared, so Jared sits in the armchair and puts his feet up on the coffee table.

Sadie settles down in the shadow of Jared's legs and Harley makes himself comfortable

belly-up within reach of Jensen. On the TV, Michael J. Fox's buddy is wearing a t-shirt that reads, "What are you looking at, dicknose?" Jensen is staring at the screen with this look on his face like he's watching *Schindler's List*.

"You're wearing your Dean ring," Jared says, mostly just to make noise.

Jensen looks down at his hand. "Yeah. Kept *feeling* that it wasn't there, you know?" He gestures vaguely at Jared. "Like how sometimes you still wear that thing that reminds you of Sandy."

Jared looks down at the hair elastic around his wrist. It's not the same one Jensen gave him last summer; it's been through several replacements as the old ones warped and stretched. Jared clears his throat.

"It doesn't remind me of her anymore," he says, and then Jensen finally looks at him for the first time since he rang the doorbell. The blue light of the television reflects off the whites of Jensen's eyes, and Jared looks away.

Jensen doesn't.

Sparks of hope and fear zip down Jared's spine and he can't keep himself from putting it out there – *in the interest of full disclosure* – and just saying it. "It just reminds me of you."

Jensen nods once, slowly, and then settles himself back against the cushions of the couch to watch the movie.

The movie hasn't even gotten to the good part when Jensen stands up and heads for the stairs without even glancing at Jared. "I'm going to bed," he says when he reaches the landing, like an afterthought.

Jared just sits and stares at the TV long after the movie ends.

-

Jensen wakes up to the shrill ring of his cell phone on the nightstand.

"Ungh," he answers.

"Thirteen episodes," Kripke says, his voice higher than normal. "We've got at least thirteen episodes, and maybe more if you don't suck."

"If you don't suck," Jensen retorts. He turns his face into his pillow and grins.

"We're having a team meeting next Friday. In Burbank at five PM. Tell Jared."

Jensen starts to protest, "You tell—" but Eric has already hung up.

The clock on his phone says that it's not even eight in the morning, but his chest is so full of relief that he feels like he could climb Mount Everest on one breath. Going back to sleep isn't really an option.

He's still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when he walks downstairs, so he doesn't see Jared until he's on the landing. Jared's still in the chair, arms folded and his chin to his chest. He's just starting to wake up.

Jensen watches as his eyes open slowly. The first thing Jared sees is the television, still stuck on the menu screen of the DVD. His mouth stays a straight, stony line, and his eyes blink slowly.

Jensen isn't completely used to looking at Jared when Jared doesn't know he's being looked at. He tends to keep himself switched-on when he's around people, even Jensen. Always the entertainer, all high energy and brightness. Now, he thinks he's alone, and he looks... older, somehow, and sadder.

He tips forward, elbows on his knees, and lets his head drop into his hands.

It's not even like Jensen makes a decision; it's more like an instinct. He just knows he has to be touching Jared right then. Of course, he takes one good step and trips over Sadie, who leaps up and scowls at him, bursting away with her tags jangling as she bolts for Jared.

When Jensen straightens up, Jared is eyeing him warily.

"Jensen. Hey."

"Hey." Jensen twists his ring. "You stayed." He still wants to be closer to Jared, despite Sadie bringing him abruptly back to reality.

Jared stands up, his movements abortive after what must've been a long, uncomfortable night on the chair. "You didn't ask me to leave," he says quietly. "So, yeah. I stayed. I can, um. I can leave now."

"Oh."

Jared laughs unconvincingly. "I *should* leave now. Gotta go feed the dogs, and—"

"I've got food."

"Dog food?"

Jensen shrugs. "People food that we can pretend is dog food. Got some ground meat we can fry up, toss in a couple eggs. C'mon, they'll think it's Christmas."

"Well – well, yeah, if you, I mean."

They're quiet as they dig through the fridge. The beef goes into the frying pan first, then a few eggs. "They like cheese," Jared says, sitting up on the counter behind Jensen. "Extra-sharp cheddar. Or – do you have provolone?"

Jensen rolls his eyes and jiggles the frying pan a little. "This is for the dogs. Not you, you fucking garbage disposal."

"They *like* sharing with me."

Jensen smiles, mostly because Jared is behind him and can't see the grin. "I'll make us omelets after."

Jared's feet bang against the cupboards. "Damn straight. Cook me things, woman."

The eggs are cooking nicely, so Jensen reaches above him for the ground coffee – the hazelnut stuff that Jared always creams himself over. "Then maybe we can go to Runyon Canyon? Hang out for a while?"

"You totally missed my dogs while they were in San Antonio."

Jensen pauses, then flips on the faucet to fill the coffee machine with water. "It was quiet," he says. "Without them."

"Missed you too," Jared says, a little too quickly.

Jensen is shoveling scrambled eggs into plastic bowls for the dogs when he remembers. "Oh," he says, bending down to put the bowls on the floor by the fridge. "Kripke called. We got thirteen."

In an instant, Jared is leaping off the counter. He squeaks and throws his arms around Jensen from behind, squeezing him so tight his feet nearly come off the ground. He laughs, and then Jared says, "I was *scared*," and presses a quick, loud kiss against the crown of Jensen's head.

It's something Jared used to do all the time, ridiculous sloppy kisses that Jensen would grumble about and wipe away, but that was before – *before*. Jensen feels Jared freeze when he realizes, arms dropping away immediately.

Jensen spins around, the kitchen whirling around him, and catches Jared by the front of the shirt as he's backing away. "Whoa." Jared's eyes are wide and worried, but Jensen pulls him back in, gets his arms around Jared, their cheeks pressed together, Jensen's jaw

tucked into the sleepy curve of Jared's neck.

It's just a hug, normal and platonic and solid, just relief and happiness gone physical.

If it lasts a little longer than it should, well. Nobody's counting seconds.

-

They've been running the canyon for forty thousand hours when Jared finally gives up, slowing to a stop and plopping down in the dirt that slopes beside the pavement. He gets a little tangled in Harley's leash, but he leaves it, letting Harley lay hot and wet and smelly across his legs.

He throws his arms out wide and stares up at the sky through his steamed-up sunglasses. Jensen jogs up with Sadie and says, "You need snow to make a snow angel, Einstein."

Jared is too tired to smile, so he blinks a few times and hopes that'll do.

Jensen sits down and kicks his legs out in front of him. He's tanner than he was the last time Jared saw him. Jared kind of wants to reach out and touch him, feel the fine blonde hair and his shin bone underneath it.

"Hey," Jensen says, turning his ankle so that he can bump Jared with his sneaker. "Something wrong?"

"No."

"Full disclosure, Jay."

Jared sighs, watching his own chest rise and fall. "I'm just sorry. About that thing at Mike's, and not calling you back afterward."

Jensen looks away. "No big deal."

"We didn't talk for like a month, Jensen. That *sucks*. I don't get why you're not mad—"

"I was. I am, a little."

"So why'd you even invite me in last night?"

Jensen doesn't say anything. Sadie rolls over onto her back between them, and they both instinctively reach out to rub her belly. Their fingers bump together, buried in her fur.

"Jensen?"

Jensen leans back from Sadie and tears a fistful of grass up from the ground. The sun is in his eyes and they're crinkled tight, tiny flashes of green barely visible behind thick eyelashes. "If – if it's full disclosure, I guess, um. I don't know, Jared. Doesn't really matter how pissed off I am at you for acting like an immature cockmunch. I still – I'd still always choose to be in a room with you in it over one without you in it."

Jared's heart speeds up a little, nervous energy sluicing through his veins. "Oh," he says.

"Yeah. Oh."

Jensen lifts his hand and opens his fingers. Dozens of torn-up blades of grass fall back down to the earth.

### *June*

"I still don't get it," Jensen says. He's practically shouting above the noise in the strip club. "Isn't the whole point of a stag night to have one last night out *without* your fiancé?"

"The last time Chad got married, he had sex with three strippers at his bachelor party, one of whom may have had her pole turned into a hole," Jared yells back, finishing his beer and reaching for the pitcher to refill. "Trust me, this is better."

At the next table, Kenzie is writhing in Chad's lap, completely oblivious to the fact that he's far more focused on watching the dancers over her shoulder.

Jensen shudders. "Dude, I can't do this. We're at a strip joint with a girl who just finished her Art History midterm. Her *mom* is sitting there while she's grinding on Chad. I'm in North Carolina at a strip club with a chick who like, just got her braces off. How did I even *get* here?"

"I asked you to come," Jared says, "and you said okay." He's not quite drunk yet, but he's tipsy enough for the Texas to slip into his words. His eyes are bright above flushed cheeks and every so often, the light catches the sweat at his hairline.

"Was I drunk?"

"No."

"Drugged? Hypnotized?"

"No."

"Was I asleep, then? Because I must have been out of my mind crazy to get on that plane with you."

Jared grins. "Might've been asleep. I take no responsibility."

"I hate you."

Jared leans in close enough for Jensen to taste his breath, and suddenly it's like the world gets smaller, tightening up around them. "You say that stuff all the time," Jared says. "I hate you Jared, or you're the worst thing in my life Jared, or go away Jared." He smiles. "It's like – it's a dead giveaway, Jensen. I can always tell, when you say those things, that you're really thinking the opposite."

Jensen rolls his eyes, but Jared doesn't laugh or lean back; he just sits there, hovering in Jensen's face, dark eyes glittering.

"Gotta go to the bathroom," Jensen blurts out suddenly. He pushes his chair out from the table so quickly that their beers slop over the edge of their cups.

He has to push through a throng of people to get to the restrooms, but he barely feels them brushing up against him, hands on his arms and his back as he maneuvers.

The bathroom isn't so bad as far as strip joint bathrooms go. Jensen has been crowded into far worse ones, years ago with Steve and Chris and Jeremy, doing God knows how many illegal things.

He doesn't actually have to piss, so he washes his hands and then his face and counts to ten staring at himself in the mirror.

Jared was right. He'd mentioned it to Jensen sometime in March or April – "Chad's getting married in June, wanna be my date?" – and Jensen had agreed right there, deadpanning, "If by be your date you mean hold your hair back while you barf Jack Daniels and carrot cake into a potted plant, then sure. It's what I live for."

Things feel different, now. They're doing their best to pretend nothing has changed, but Jensen knows what Jared's mouth feels like on his. He knows what Jared sounds like – *no, no, c'mere* – when he's desperate and up close. And he can't just erase that.

He flicks the water off of his hands and starts for the door, but then thinks better of it and leans against the wall. The music from the club pounds and reverberates through the tile, vibrating through Jensen's torso. He closes his eyes.

When he hears the door open, he knows it's Jared before he says, "Jensen, yo."

Jensen sighs as he opens his eyes. It takes a lot of effort. "Hey."

Jared smiles weakly. The tips of his hair are sweaty, clinging to his forehead and his neck. "You falling asleep in the men's room? There are naked women out there, man,

willing to do ungodly things to you for less than it costs to buy a donut, and you're in here, taking a nap against a wall that's probably really unsanitary."

"Got hot out there," Jensen says.

"Hot in *here*," Jared replies quickly, and then his eyes widen. "Wow. I mean – I don't know. That was retarded. Sorry." He takes three steps forward. There are three urinals against the wall between them, and it still feels like Jared's right up against Jensen.

"We gonna have this conversation in the john in a titty bar in North Carolina?" Jensen asks. It's the first time anyone has acknowledged that there's a conversation that needs to be had.

Jared shrugs. "Depends," he says. Two steps forward and now there are only two urinals between them. "You gonna say something?"

"You say it," Jensen says quickly.

"No. You."

Jensen shrugs and pushes away from the wall. He puts his hands in his pockets, fingers flexing in the denim. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because," Jensen says. "If this – there's a lot to lose here. And if we fuck it up, it can't be me – it can't be me that started it. Because then I have to look back and know, you know?"

"No."

"So you say it."

Jared shifts his weight from foot to foot, comes forward a few more steps. "You," he says, and Jensen isn't sure if that's the beginning of a sentence or the whole thing.

The whole room feels like it explodes when the door bangs open, the handle slamming against the tile wall with a deafening ring. "MOTHERFUCKERS," Chad yells, swerving into the bathroom. "What are you doing in here?"

"Nothing," they say in unison.

Chad starts to slide down the wall and Jared dives to catch him by the lapels, hauling him to his feet. "You two," Chad says, "are adorable."

Jensen snorts.

"Pretentious," Chad says. He loops an arm around Jared's neck and Jensen can see Jared straining as Chad's knees give out. "The word I was looking for was not adorable, the word was pretentious."

Jared grunts. "Chad—"

"I'm going to throw up now," Chad says. "For the record." He pats Jared's chest placatingly. "And I'm going to need your help, buddy."

-

To Chad's credit, the wedding is kind of beautiful. Jared was at the last one, too, and he remembers the way Chad worked the room at the reception, remembers the way Sophia danced with her father more than she danced with Chad. This time, Chad's eyes don't leave Kenzie all night.

It's kind of nice to watch. Even if it does make Jared feel like it's time to turn in his man card.

After dinner, Kenzie leaves to change out of her dress, and Jared gets a moment to talk to Chad, standing by the bar. "You clean up good, Padalecki," Chad says, touching his glass to Jared's.

"You too, man. 'Specially considering last I saw you, you had puke in your hair."

Chad winces. "Yeah, well. One last night."

"Right."

"Nah. I mean it this time. If I fuck this one up, man, it's not because I didn't love her. If I ever tell you otherwise, don't believe me."

"So don't fuck it up, *man*."

"Yeah," Chad replies. "You either."

"What?"

"Dunno. Thought you'd bring Sandy or your sister or something, as your plus one. Didn't expect it to be—"

"Don't," Jared interrupts. "Just... don't."

Chad smiles wanly. "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Congratulations, buddy."

When Jared gets back to the table with their drinks, Jensen isn't there. "He go to the bathroom?" Jared asks Shannon, Chad's sister. Maybe he'll follow him, maybe tell him exactly what he wanted to tell him last night and couldn't.

She shakes her head and points a thumb to the dance floor.

When Jared turns his head, Jensen is the first thing he sees. It's always like that, like Jared's eyes have Jensen-shaped radar and they just hone in on him no matter how thick the crowd around him.

He's dancing with Danneel, his hand on her waist and her palm splayed across his chest. She looks so small next to him with her head fitting underneath his chin and his fingers spanning her back. They're like puzzle pieces, tucked together, and even twenty yards away Jared can see the smile lines spider out from Jensen's eyes when he laughs that good genuine laugh that the camera never captures.

Jared finishes his drink and moves in on the vodka tonic he got for Jensen.

-

"It's kind of comforting to know that you haven't gotten any better at dancing in the last six months," Danneel says. She smells good and feels tiny and soft against him.

"Shut up," Jensen says, leaning his cheek against her hair. "I've only stepped on your toe twice and we're almost halfway through this song."

She leans back in his arms, her back arching under his hand. "You look stressed," she says.

"I don't."

"You do. You can't hide under-eye circles with a good tan, Jensen. If I taught you anything, let it be that."

"Been a little stressed," Jensen says. "That's all."

She raises her eyebrows. "Right. Well, your show got picked up again, because apparently Dawn Ostroff has been hitting the bong. *Bloody Valentine* didn't bomb completely. Your mom still calls me, so I know that Josh and MacKenzie are doing good. You don't look like you've got a drug problem or cancer or like your goldfish died, so what exactly do you have to be stressed about?"

"Stuff."

"Love stuff?"

"No."

"Whatever, that's the only category left. You know, if you miss me that much, we can totally have a quickie in the linen closet."

"That was one time!"

"At my *grandmother's* house. I still can't smell mothballs without getting all a-flutter."

"Yeah, well. You're hot when you're making jambalaya. A man has urges."

The song ends and she lifts up on her tip-toes, presses a kiss against his bottom lip. When he feels her start to step away he clutches at her back a little and leans in, enough to taste the heat of her mouth, just for a second.

She pats his chest gently and winks. "You be good," she says.

When he looks up, Jared is sitting at their otherwise empty table, running his thumb around the rim of his glass and making it whistle.

Jensen walks over. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You want to get some air?"

Jared shrugs and finishes the last of his drink before standing up and following Jensen.

Joy and her husband are on the steps of the country club, his cigarette burning down between his fingers as he kisses her neck. Jensen smiles at them sheepishly and keeps walking, down the steps and farther, out across the sloping green lawn. There's a fountain a hundred yards away; he figures that's far enough away for them to be alone, close enough that they haven't quite left Jared's best friend's party.

Jared stops him before they get there, though. "Jensen."

Jensen turns around. Jared is just a silhouette, the big white house with all its lights burning behind him. "Yup."

"I think I'm going to go back to Vancouver," he says. "Like, after this. I'll go pick my dogs up from Sandy and then I think I'll just hang out up there for the rest of the summer."

"There are only three weeks of summer left, Jared."

"Yeah. But I really – I hate LA, you know? And I've got that house up there, just sitting empty, and I thought I wanted to be in California for the next few weeks but I don't, really. I mean, I do, but I... don't."

"Yeah," Jensen says. "Okay. I mean, I don't have the hotel until July second, but I could—"

"No," Jared interrupts abruptly. "It's cool. I'll see you July second."

"Oh."

Jared smiles weakly. "Come on," he says, jerking his head toward the club. "I requested the Macarena from the DJ." He turns around and heads back up the hill without waiting to see if Jensen will follow.

Jensen does follow, though, picking up his step until he reaches Jared. "Was Kenzie even born when that song came out?"

"Yes."

"Liar."

"I think she was at least potty-training," Jared insists. "I bet she was wearing pull-ups. No big girl panties quite yet, but getting there—"

"You're disgusting," Jensen says. He bumps their shoulders together reassuringly and throws an arm over Jared's neck, and they pretend for a minute that they don't have this whole year sprawling out behind them.

-

Turns out, Vancouver is pretty lonely when all of Jared's friends are enjoying the off-season. He reads a million books and starts growing a goatee and downloads two whole seasons of Gossip Girl from iTunes.

He misses Jensen.

Two weeks in, he gets a text. Jared reads it on a break between sets of sit-ups.

*earth to padalecki, it says. you alive? call me. let it ring twice if ur alive three times if ur dead.*

Jared laughs and hits the callback key. Jensen picks up on the first ring. "You're alive!"

"That was a dirty trick," Jared says.

"Man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," Jensen replies. Jared can hear the game on TV in the background. "So how's being up there all by your lonesome?"

"Fuck you. I'm here to live deliberately," he says. "To front only the essential facts of life and see if I can not learn—"

"If I let you, you'll go on for hours, huh."

"I paid attention in tenth-grade English," Jared says. "Not all of us were ditzy cheerleaders."

"Steve and I went to Vegas last weekend," Jensen says. "We went to a party at Pure. Lauren Conrad was there. It was totally awesome."

"Ugh, you're totally harshing my mellow, John Fields."

"You would've liked it," Jensen says.

"Maybe."

There's a heavy pause. "Okay," Jensen says finally. "Enough literary allusions. I'll see you in a week."

"Six days," Jared says, words out of his mouth before he realizes how they make him sound.

"Yeah."

### ***July (Again)***

The day before he leaves LA, Jensen seals up his house. He empties his fridge, unplugs his electronics, drops his spare key into an envelope to send MacKenzie for when she inevitably begs him to let her and her girlfriends use the place.

He makes sure all his clothes are packed and then he sits on his bed and texts Jared again. He deletes and re-words the message eight times, and finally settles on *let's not be weird this year ok*.

It takes Jared a half an hour to respond, even though Jensen knows he always has his phone on him, in the little hip-pouch he insists makes him look cool. *Sounds good*, it says.

Jensen writes back, *good. this whole thing was stupid. Ill call u when im settled at the hotel.*

Jared doesn't write back.

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Jared calls four different Vancouver car services before he finds the right one. And then he realizes he's not even sure which flight Jensen is on, so he just drives to the airport and stands under the Arrivals listing for half the day, trying Jensen's cell after every plane from LAX lands.

It's two in the afternoon when Jensen picks up. "Hey," he says. "I'm still at the airport, can I call you when—"

"You get through customs yet?"

Jensen laughs. "Just cleared it. Why, are you—?"

"Hurry up with your baggage," Jared says. "I've been waiting all day and nobody's asked me for a picture. My ego needs to go home and cry into a carton of Ben & Jerry's."

Jared's seen a million airport reunion scenes in movies and on TV shows. This one doesn't go like that at all.

Jensen comes around the corner to the public meet-and-greet, wheeling his suitcases behind him, and Jared's palms go sweaty. He suddenly feels awkward and doesn't know what he's doing there, why he couldn't just stay home and play Grand Theft Auto and wait for Jensen to call him like a normal person.

When they meet up, they don't touch. Jared wants to hug Jensen so badly his body aches with it, but there's this invisible barrier between them in the air.

"You know, I ordered a car," Jensen says.

"Yeah," Jared replies. "Well, you know how that goes."

And that's it. He takes one of Jensen's suitcases and they walk out of the terminal, one in front of the other, quietly. So much for things not being weird.

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There's an accident on Highway 99, and traffic crawls around it. Jensen can't help

thinking about the text message he sent last night. He must have been an idiot, to think they could just wish the entire year away.

Because the truth is that he doesn't want to. Sure, it sucks that things are awkward with him and Jared now – and they are, awkwardness as obvious in this car as the smell of wet dog and the shitty music on the radio – but Jensen thinks maybe it was worth it, for the house painting and the road trip and the laundry room floor.

"So," Jensen says. "You enjoy solitary confinement the last few weeks?"

"Kind of." Jared keeps one hand on the steering wheel and wipes the other off on his jeans, then switches.

"Your mom called me. Says you didn't call her."

"Oh, damn. I meant to, man, but then Nate and Serena were all – and Blair and Chuck – I got distracted."

Jensen laughs. "You're an idiot," he says.

"That's one of those things," Jared says. "Where you say one thing but you mean the opposite."

When they pull up to Jensen's hotel, Jensen doesn't make a move to get out of the car. "You gonna come up?" he asks.

Jared shakes his head. "You gotta get settled."

"So, what, you're like... my chauffeur? Let's hang out, Jay."

Jared looks over at him and opens his mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. "I gotta get back to the dogs," he says. "I left them all day, and I didn't feed them." But for a decent actor, Jared is a shit liar.

"Oh. Okay. Well thanks for the ride." Jensen is pretty sure there's disappointment all over his face, because he's too fed up to hide it, but he opens the door anyway. Three valets crowd in immediately, offering to help him with his bags and addressing him as Mr. Ackles and sir. Jensen is busy digging for loonies in his backpack when Jared drives away.

-

Jensen's got a whole routine, for when he gets back to the hotel – switching out the sheets, putting his stuff in the drawers, hooking the PlayStation up to the TV, trading the hotel's obnoxious alarm clock for his iPod stereo.

He's barely got the comforter off the bed when there's a knock on the door. "Just a second."

Every time he comes back after a hiatus the hotel sends him this ridiculous fruit basket full of candied pears and sugared almonds and little pieces of marzipan shaped like vegetables. He's never touched one, but Jared likes them, so he lets them keep bringing them.

When he opens the door though, it's not the hotel staff. It's Jared, rocking back on his heels with his hands in his pockets and little marks on his nose from his sunglasses. "Hi," he says.

Jensen raises his eyebrows and steps to the side, but Jared doesn't come inside. "Thought you had to race home to feed the dogs?"

"I was lying," Jared says. "You knew I was lying."

"Yeah."

"I don't – I don't want it to be like this."

Jensen rolls his eyes and waves Jared inside, but Jared still doesn't move. "Like what, Jay?"

"Different," Jared says. He waves a hand between their bodies. "Awkward."

Jensen isn't having this conversation in the hallway, so eventually he just reaches out, grabs Jared by the wrist, and drags him in enough to shut the door behind them. "I don't—"

"That thing you said," Jared interrupts, staring at the floor. "At the canyon. What you said about how you'd always choose to be in a room with me in it – is that still true?" He's wearing flip-flops, and he lets them bend beneath his foot until his toes can curl against the carpet.

Jensen leans back against the wall opposite Jared. "You're my best friend," he says. "It's not like—"

Jared looks up at him, finally, and the impact of their eyes slamming together feels like a car wreck in Jensen's chest. "I want to know everything about you," Jared says, the words coming out jumbled, too close together. "And not in a normal way, either. I want to know things about you that people shouldn't care to know about other people."

"Jared—"

"I want to know what you were like when you were thirteen and what you're gonna be like when you're forty, and I want to know if your mouth goes dry after you smoke a cigarette like mine does, and I want to know if you want to have kids and where you want to travel. And sometimes I think this whole thing between us is just an extension of that, you know?"

"No." Jensen feels his face get hot. "Been pretty obsessed with you too, you know. I mean – you do know that, right?"

"Yeah?"

Jensen swallows and says, "Yeah, Jared. I think about you all the time."

Jared steps forward, one, two, three paces, and then he's right up in Jensen's face. Jensen stops leaning against the wall, raising up to his full height, still having to tilt his chin up a bit because Jared is so close. "I want to know what you look like when I," Jared says, "do this," and he lifts up the hem of Jensen's t-shirt and brushes the back of his knuckles against the bared skin above Jensen's jeans.

"Oh," Jensen says.

Jared moves in even closer, hand still between their bodies against Jensen's belly, and he touches his mouth to the pulse beating in Jensen's neck, just a dry brush of lips that could be chaste if all of Jensen's blood wasn't rushing south. "I want to know how long I'd have to do this to get you to make a noise," Jared continues, and it takes everything Jensen has not to make a hell of a lot of noise right then.

Jensen grabs Jared's t-shirt at his shoulder, tightening his fingers in the fabric. He does it to regain some control, since he's lost it so spectacularly - so that at any moment, he could draw Jared forward or shove him away.

He doesn't need to though, because Jared drags his lower lip along Jensen's jaw for one quick second and then moves away, though not far enough that Jensen has to let go of his shirt. "There," he says. His voice cracks on it. "I said it first. If it all goes to shit, you can blame me forever." He shrugs, and Jensen feels the bunch and release of Jared's shoulder under his hand.

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It's maybe the longest moment of Jared's entire life, and that includes the time he and his high school buddies went sky-diving when he was nineteen and his parachute didn't open on the first try.

Jensen's fingers are still wrapped up in his shirt and Jensen's just standing there, slack-jawed and wide-eyed and a little bit pink under his freckles.

Finally Jensen releases a long, shuddering breath, and says, "I fucking hate you. So much."

A wave of nausea rises from Jared's belly to his throat before he thinks, *he means the opposite*, and then the nausea is gone and Jared moves in, sandwiching Jensen between him and the wall, and says, "Yeah, I know you do."

This kiss is so much better than the one in Mike's laundry room because they both close in on it at the same time, tongues slipping together like they're trying to fuse their mouths.

Jared is noisy when he's turned on; he always has been, but this time he's taking it to an extreme. He's embarrassed, hearing himself, but he can't stop the rumble in his throat or the high, girly breaths he takes because he doesn't have time to get the air he needs.

Jensen pulls on Jared's shirt so hard that they both hear the stitches ripping at the collar and Jared can feel the fabric burning a line into his throat. He doesn't care, he just braces himself with his forearm against the wallpaper and lets Jensen pull him down like a drowning man.

"Hate you," Jensen says again, pulling his mouth away from Jared's with a wet burst of sound. "You're the worst thing," he continues, "that has ever – in my life – I wish," but the rest of his words are just mumbled into Jared's neck as his teeth mark along Jared's collar bone, scraping and nipping.

Jared's whole universe slants sideways when Jensen tugs his t-shirt neck aside and licks him hungry and desperate, and in that moment the only logical place to be is on his knees.

He's sinking down, pressing Jensen against the wall as he goes, when Jensen lets go of his shirt and presses both his palms flat against the wall.

"C'mon, keep touching me," Jared says, embarrassed at the vulnerability in his tone, but Jensen shakes his head. He side-steps along the wall until he's just out of Jared's reach, his head tipped back as he stares at the ceiling and tries to get his breath back.

Jared sighs and struggles to his feet. "Or, you know, bringing everything to a screeching halt is another option," he says. He's embarrassed, suddenly bizarrely aware that he was the first one to go to his knees, like that really matters in the midst of all of this.

Jensen looks at him, his head rolling against the wall. "Jay," he says, voice raw and scratchy, "I want you naked. I want, uh. Everything."

It's easily the sexiest thing Jared's ever heard, and as if he wasn't hard enough before, now the lack of blood to his brain is making him sway on his feet. "Oh," he says, steadying

himself with a hand against the doorframe. "I could – yeah."

Jared is proud of his body; it might be his greatest accomplishment ever, turning his too-big feet under skinny calves and too-bony shoulders attached to thready biceps into something that TV Guide wants to take pictures of. Still, he's shaky and nervous now, with Jensen heavy-lidded and watching him.

"You first," he says.

"No," Jensen replies. "You."

"It's not like I haven't seen you naked before," Jared says. "That time I walked in on—"

"That wasn't my fault—"

"Besides, I said how I feel first. You show me your dick first."

Jensen sighs, long and labored, but the corners of his mouth are tugging up into a smile. He reaches over his own shoulder and tugs his t-shirt off in one fluid motion. He's freckled and strong from a summer of swimming laps in his backyard pool, and Jared's mouth goes dry. He knows he's supposed to wait, but his shirt quickly feels like it's strangling him, stretched-out neck and all, so he pulls it off, too, elbows getting tangled in fabric for a minute.

Jensen is smirking at him when he surfaces, still wearing his jeans, only now Jared can see where the curve of his stomach flattens and bows underneath the waistline. "C'mon," Jensen says, using a foot to push himself away from the wall. "Bed."

They walk through the front room of the suite and into the bedroom. It's bright and white and the shades are open with the afternoon spilling through the windows. It startles Jared, that it's day, even though he was outside less than fifteen minutes ago and it's barely four. "This is weird," he says out loud.

Jensen has a knee on the bed when he turns to look over his shoulder. "Which part?"

Jared shrugs. "All of it. It's – I mean, it's the middle of the afternoon, and you're with me, and I'm about to take my pants off."

Jensen huffs out a surprised breath and sits down on the edge of the bed, one foot tucked underneath him. His chest is flushed and Jared can see that he's hard under his jeans. "Oh," he says. "Yeah, that's weird."

Jared shuffles forward and sits next to Jensen. He bends, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands. "You think we're about to fuck something good up?"

Jensen starts to speak, then hesitates and looks out the window.

"Full disclosure," Jared says.

"I think we fucked it up a while ago," Jensen says.

"Like when?"

Jensen shrugs. "I'm not sure. Maybe the road trip."

"Right," Jared says. He runs a thumb along the seam of the bedspread.

"Or maybe earlier."

Jared looks up. "Yeah?"

Jensen reaches forward and touches Jared's wrist, his fingers hot as they skim along the elastic there.

"Oh," Jared says. "Oh."

"I – don't get freaked out," Jensen says. "But I was thinking about it, after Chad's wedding. Remember when you called me after you and Sandy ended things?"

Jared laughs. "Course."

"I didn't – I don't remember feeling sorry. And I feel like maybe I should have been sad, should have told you to work it out or asked you what happened or something," Jensen sighs, "But I didn't."

"I loved you for that," Jared says. "For just – being there without judging or needing to *know* things." He's aware of the weight of the word – love – in the context of this hotel room and this day, but he doesn't hesitate in saying it because he's felt that way about Jensen for years, said it a million different times in a million different ways. They're just starting this thing, but in a way they're ending something, too, and Jared doesn't mind using the word when the whole moment feels so epic in itself.

Jensen shakes his head. "Needing to know things," he laughs. "This from Mister I-want-to-know-which-pant-leg-you-step-into-first, Mister I-need-to-know-the-name-of-your-dead-pet-goldfish."

Jared widens his eyes comically. "You had a goldfish? You never told me!"

Jensen reaches out without hesitation. He pops the button of Jared's jeans open, and Jared's abdominal muscles tense instinctively under the brush of Jensen's knuckles. "I was eleven," Jensen says. "It was a true tragedy."

Jared leans in and crushes his mouth hard against Jensen's. "Tell me after. I want to know everything."

[[deleted scene](#)]

Jensen doesn't know what time it is when his eyes open, but the room is full of dusky purple light. Jared is sitting on the bench by the foot of the bed, tying his sneakers. Jensen feels a little sick when he sees it. "You freaking out?" he asks, voice sleep-husky.

Jared's shoulders jump and he whirls around. "Hey," he says, whispering even though Jensen spoke in full-voice. "I didn't want to wake you."

"Yeah." Jensen sits up and tugs the sheets up so he's covered. "You're leaving?"

Jared rolls his eyes and swivels, crawling up the bed. He leans in and presses a firm, sucking kiss to Jensen's shoulders. "Dogs," he says. "Now I really do have to feed them."

"Oh."

Jared scoffs happily. "Yeah, you feel stupid now. You thought I was *leaving* you. You were going to cry, huh? I think you were going to cry."

"Fuck off," Jensen says, rolling his eyes. "This was obviously a huge mistake. I'm going to call management and request a room change so when you come back you can't find me."

"What you mean is that you love me," Jared says. "To the moon and back again. I see right through your flimsy attempt at preserving your masculinity."

"You make my life miserable."

"Stop talking dirty, Ackles, I have helpless animals to tend to." Jared scoots back off the bed and grabs his cell phone from the floor where it fell out of his jeans.

Jensen pulls the covers up over his head as the door closes. Under the blankets, it smells like him and Jared, hot and sweaty and masculine. It's a little bit scary and a little bit sexy. Jensen could get used to it.

He starts when he hears the door open and Jared's heavy footsteps ringing purposefully in.

"Hey," Jared says, tugging the covers down away from Jensen's face. "Come with me."

Jensen tries to pull the blankets back up. "No," he grumbles. "Comfy here. Hate other people. Bed is good."

"I mean come *with* me," Jared repeats, like that's going to clarify anything.

"Huh?"

Jared puts his hand on the side of Jensen's neck and runs his thumb along Jensen's jaw. Jensen doesn't bother trying to hide the pleasant shudder that runs down his spine. "You haven't even unpacked." Jared gestures to the two giant suitcases still standing in the entryway. "Just... put your pants on, grab all your stuff. Come stay."

"In your house?"

"Please?" Jared turns his lower lip out. "C'mon, man, I promise the hotel will still be here if you decide you can't handle how there are always cups in the sink or if you hate my music or if you can't deal with all the *Ace of Cakes* episodes on the Tivo."

"I like *Ace of Cakes*," Jensen says weakly.

"See? You like *Ace of Cakes* and I like *you*," Jared says. "Let's not – we've been idiots, you know? Not doing this months ago was the dumbest thing I've ever done."

"Not done."

"Whatever. Come on, Jen. Don't say that too-serious-too-fast thing you're about to say. It's already serious; it's *been* serious. I'm never... not going to be serious about you."

It takes two minutes for Jensen to find clean clothes that don't smell like airplane, and he and Jared are walking toward the elevators rolling luggage behind them.

"Oh," Jared says as they pass the sixth floor, "we have to stop at the front desk and complain, before we leave."

"Complain?"

Jared nods, head tilted up so he can watch the numbers roll by. "There was no fruit basket," he says. "The whole reason I came back up when I dropped you off was because of that fruit basket."

"The fruit basket."

"Yes, idiot." Jared smiles. "The rest was just a bonus."

"I hate you," Jensen says.

## ***a room with you in it - jensen/jared - adult - deleted scene***

Jared can't help the desperate sense of urgency he feels as Jensen gets his fly open. His heart's pounding and his brain is telling him to hurry up before something goes wrong and this all disappears.

He stands up once his zipper's down, letting Jensen's hand fall away as he shoves his jeans down off his hips.

Jensen is just sitting on the edge of the bed, frozen with his eyes fixed at Jared's hips.

"Don't get all freaked," Jared says, kicking his jeans away. "This is supposed to be the good part."

Jensen huffs out an uncomfortable laugh. "I'm not freaking out. I'm just a little – uh. Nervous."

Jared beams and steps forward, nudging Jensen's knees apart so he can fit between them. "I make you nervous," he says.

"Yeah, sometimes." Jensen lifts his hand and runs his fingers along the waist of Jared's boxers. It's a light touch, curious, but Jared's too keyed up not to gasp a little. "In between all the making me miserable, sometimes you make me nervous."

Jared leans forward, hunching down so that Jensen has to fall back on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows. His hands are sweating as he opens Jensen's jeans.

Jensen is hard beneath his underwear, heat coming up from his body. Jared's a little dizzy, just looking at him, the obvious erection.

"I feel like a virgin," Jared blurts out, moving to rub the heel of his hand over Jensen's cock.

Jensen laughs, but his hips falter, instinct sending him pressing into Jared's palm. "Touched for the—"

"Shut up, you know what I mean. I'm *good* at sex, dude, don't get me wrong, but this is like... this is..."

"New," Jensen offers. Jared is still touching him, and Jensen's face has gone red, his eyes bright, sweat darkening the hair at his temples. "Yeah, I know. We don't have to—"

"Shut up," Jared interrupts, "We totally have to. I mean, *I* have to, you can just sit there and watch if you want to—"

Jensen grabs Jared by the arm and yanks until he falls, crashing down on the bed beside Jensen like a felled tree. Jensen rolls over and just – *sits* on Jared, straddling him easily. "We can stop talking any minute now," he says, and then he works his hips against Jared's and Jared feels his eyes roll back in his head.

"Dunno about that," Jared says. He puts both hands on Jensen's legs, digs his fingers into the muscle just to hold onto something solid. He feels like a strong wind could blow him away any second. "Got things I want to say to you, man."

"Yeah?" Jensen's on a roll now, not hesitating at all. He leans over and bites at Jared's throat. It's so good to have Jensen's face right there and his mouth on him that Jared doesn't notice Jensen's hands - not until he's already worked Jared's boxers down - and then Jensen's hands are *all* he can think about.

"Fuck," Jared says as Jensen closes a fist around him and takes the first tentative stroke. Jared reaches up and puts a hand on the back of Jensen's neck, his other hand grabbing at the sheets.

"What'd you want to say, Jay? I'm listening."

For fuck's sake. "Wanted to say that you're – oh – that you're fucking ridiculous. And that I want to suck your dick, like, forever and I've never – I've never wanted that before. And, um. That time I told you I jerked off thinking about you – I – that wasn't just one time, that was all the time, I... *Jensen*."

Jensen laughs and kisses Jared, ducking down to get Jared's lower lip between his teeth. "C'mon," he says, his voice low and hoarse. "Do it."

Jared grabs Jensen's wrist, stopping the motion against his cock, which might be pretty stupid but he's got to get his mouth on Jensen. "Okay," he says. "Come here."

Jensen shivers and starts to move off of Jared, but Jared stops him. "What-"

"Just come up here," Jared says, and he pulls on Jensen's hips until Jensen gets the idea and moves forward, crawling up Jared's body until he's practically sitting on Jared's chest.

Jared pulls on Jensen's boxer-briefs, tucking them underneath Jensen's balls and then it's *right there*, Jensen's cock in Jared's face, so close he can smell him. Jared expected this to be terrifying, the first time he hitches his head up and runs his tongue along the length, but it's not, it's just – it's good, really fucking good.

He closes his mouth around Jensen and tastes him. Above him, Jensen groans and chokes out, "You're fucking incredible, you know that?"

And Jared would thank him, and say *yes, I do*, but his mouth is otherwise occupied.

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