

Can't Point the Way to Your Heart

by belyste

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Summary: All in the vein of movies like Hitch - Jensen's an unofficial advice guru, and Jared's his latest project. Except while Jensen's supposed to be helping Jared end up with the woman of his dreams, he falls for him instead.

Notes: Written for [spn holidays](#) for [erin2326](#), who requested a first-time J2 AU.

Title from Cary Brothers.

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Part 1

Jensen's good at giving advice. It's not something he learned or something he set out to do, just something he's always been good at, ever since he was little. He was never the most popular kid in the neighborhood - he wasn't picked first for kickball teams or invited to every birthday party or the kid with the best pudding at lunch - but when it was time to build a treehouse or plan a snowball attack on the Mason twins or talk Miss Kuhn into five more minutes of recess, it was Jensen all the kids came to.

It's just something inside of him, some innate ability to analyze the world around him and turn possibilities into a plan. His mind works in probabilities, always calculating options, and even from a young age, he could see past all the loops and snarls and to the heart of a problem, where the tangled strands could be unwound. It unnerved his parents and the adults in his life - they remarked on his quiet stillness like it was a problem, something to be wary of - but Jensen knew how to use silence, how to sink into a calm that was like time slowing down, slow motion making decisions clear.

It's just one of those things, the one thing he's better at than everybody else, and as a result, Jensen's given out a lot of advice in his life, on everything from fashion to feng shui. Always weighing pros and cons to every decision, though, always analyzing and projecting ahead for possible futures and considering repercussions, has its consequences. Jensen's an observer, forever watching from the outside, distanced. He thinks about things differently, sees the world through a different lens, and he comes off as cold or dispassionate because he doesn't let himself become entangled with the problems he solves. He can't - he can't afford to put his heart and soul into every issue he thinks about. It's easier on his sanity to stay distant, to analyze and resolve without the distraction of constant empathy.

It's probably why he's so good at his job - as a financial adviser, he analyzes trends and gives people advice on what to do with their money, and he's usually right. His clients don't need someone to care about every dollar they invest, or a friend who'll encourage them to buy stock they choose at random or because of a sentimental reason. They just want someone to tell them what their money's going to do, someone who can spread out their options and predict the success, and occasionally, someone they can blame if everything goes wrong.

It's also the reason why Jensen doesn't often give advice to the people close to him, unless they specifically ask for it. It's harder for him to speculate on something when he's involved, when it's personal. He was reluctant when his best friend asked for dating advice, not willing to risk their friendship on the success of his predictions, but it turns out that while Jensen has very little idea what women want in a man, he's got a firm grip on logic, and he's pretty good at guessing what will help the process along. Tom's engaged now, ridiculously happy with Jamie, and he and Jensen are closer than ever. It's that, more than anything, that makes Jensen agree to the whole stupid idea.

Besides, it should be easy. He doesn't have any reason to care about this kid - he's just some guy Tom knows who needs some tips on snagging the woman of his dreams. Jensen doesn't have to be his best friend, he just has to help him solidify his approach, refine his technique, maybe organize some areas of his life, and then let him go. If the whole thing crashes and burns, it's

not Jensen's fault - he was just doing a favor for Tom, after all, and this isn't his normal thing.

At least that's what he tells himself. And when he finally meets the kid and gets a good look at him (all six foot and then some, Christ), gets a hug instead of a handshake, and a warm, friendly smile with a flash of dimples that makes his stomach flutter and he realizes with a shock that he actually *likes* this kid, which might make detachment difficult, he smiles at Jared and says yes anyway.

Jensen's always been kind of bad at following his own advice.

* * *

"Thank you so much for doing this," Jared says for the millionth time in the fifteen minutes they've been sitting in the coffee shop. "I don't know what I'd do if you didn't say yes. I'm normally not this clueless, but I've never felt like this about someone before. It's like I suddenly realized that everything I thought I knew was useless, and now I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing."

"Relax," Jensen says, leaning back in his chair. "It's not a big deal."

"No, it is," Jared insists. "I know you're just doing this as a favor, but I really appreciate it, man. This girl, she's just - " He sighs, tracing the edges of a coffee stain on the table with long fingers and blunt nails. "I'll do anything to get her to feel the same way about me."

Jensen takes a sip of his Americano to hide a smile. He clears his throat. "Well, why don't we start there? Tell me how the whole thing started."

Jared sighs again. "It was love at first sight," he says earnestly. "I was at the library, looking for a pathology book and she came over to help me." He blushes. "I got a little speechless when she asked what I was looking for, though, and I think she thought I was kind of lame. She was just so beautiful, though."

Jensen doesn't really believe in love at first sight - hell, he has a hard time just liking most people based on a first impression - but it's kind of cute how obviously head-over-heels Jared is for this girl. He nods for Jared to go on.

"And smart," Jared says fervently. "She found what I was looking for right away - well, once I stopped stammering enough to tell her - and then she told me about this study she was reading on dogs that can sense cancer, and we got to talking."

"Okay, so you connected over a common interest," Jensen says. "You both like animals."

"Well, not really," Jared says. "She's studying to get her Master's in psychology, so I think she was interested in the neurology part, not so much the dogs. But she did say she did an internship where they studied slices of rat brains, so she's at least interested in animal brains."

"Uh, okay," Jensen says. "Maybe not so much of a common interest, then."

"Well, I like animal brains, too," Jared says quickly. "It's just that I kind of like them better when they're in the actual animal, you know, because that way they're not dead." He pauses. "Unless it's an MRI, or something. We could both enjoy a scan of a still-living animal's brain."

"Yeah, that'd be a hot date," Jensen mutters. "Okay. So you talked for a while. Then what happened?"

“Well, I already knew she was the woman of my dreams,” Jared says, and once again it takes Jensen a moment to realize Jared’s being completely unsarcastic. “But I didn’t want to scare her off, so I just hung around at the library for the next few days and checked out a lot of books.”

Jensen makes a mental note to cover stalking in his list of dating don’ts later, nodding for Jared to go on.

“And then, after a week, I got up the nerve to ask her out,” Jared finishes. “And that’s when the whole thing went to hell.”

“She said no?” Jensen guesses.

“No, she said yes,” Jared says morosely. “It’s just - she’s so *smart*. She knows all this awesome stuff about how brains work and reads these incredibly complex books, and she totally has the Dewey decimal system memorized. So I wanted to impress her by doing something better than the usual dinner-and-a-movie. I figured she’d want to do something more intellectually stimulating.”

Jensen winces. “Please say you didn’t take her to a poetry reading.”

“Foreign film,” Jared says flatly.

“A little clichéd, but not that bad,” Jensen reassures him. “Is she interested in film?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, did she enjoy the movie?”

“I don’t know,” Jared repeats.

“You were there, weren’t you? Was it any good?”

Jared flushes. “I’m not really good at movies where you have to read instead of just watching.”

Jensen raises an eyebrow.

“I always get distracted watching the people, and then I miss what’s being said, and then I get bored and just start making things up in my head,” Jared confesses. “And I’d had a long week at work, and I’d been on my feet all day, and I, uh. I kind of fell asleep.” He winces. “And I might have snored a little.”

“Okay, that’s not good,” Jensen says frankly. “But it’s not necessarily fatal. What did she say?”

“Nothing. I only woke up when the movie was over and people were starting to leave, and she wasn’t there.”

Jensen winces. “Yeah, that’s pretty bad.”

Jared moans and drops his forehead onto the table, narrowly missing his coffee cup. “I know. She’s just so beautiful and classy and brilliant, and I wanted to take her on the perfect date so she’d fall in love with me, but I fucked it all up.”

Jensen sighs. “Jared, you didn’t fuck it all up.”

Jared raises his head a little. “Really?”

“Really,” Jensen reassures him, smiling a little. “You made some mistakes, but I don’t think it’s anything you can’t fix. She obviously liked you enough to go out with you, and I think if you make a few improvements in your approach, she’ll give you a second chance.”

Jared’s face is all hope, that bright grin showing up again with a cautious edge. It turns a little shy when he asks, “And you’ll help me? Even after I told you how badly I messed it all up?”

“I’m not afraid of a little hard work,” Jensen teases lightly. “Besides, you’ve got a lot of potential.”

This time Jared’s grin is all out, no holds barred, and Jensen very pointedly does not notice how it lights up his entire face, or what that does to his stomach. Detached people don’t notice that kind of stuff, so he obviously just imagined it.

“Thank you so much,” Jared says again, the million-and-first time, and Jensen waves him off again.

“Thank me later. Right now, let’s just get to work.”

* * *

Jared’s aware that he’s gushing, and he’s also aware how pathetic he sounds, describing Sandy like some lovesick idiot. But that’s the problem, he really is a lovesick idiot over her, and he needs someone to slap some sense into him so he doesn’t write her an epic poem or try to serenade her outside her window, because the sad thing is that he’s actually considered both things. He even wrote a few lines of that poem before he realized he’d rhymed Sandy with randy and ripped the whole thing up.

But he can’t help it. It’s not so much that it was love at first sight, although he noticed right away how beautiful she was. It’s more that every word that came out of her mouth after that initial moment revealed something even more appealing about her, and every time Jared thought she couldn’t get any higher in his opinion, she came out with something even more amazing that just made him wonder how anyone so perfect could exist, much less want to talk to him. And that’s kind of the thing - Sandy is this amazing, gorgeous, perfect person, and it’s suddenly making Jared question everything about himself, from his own attractiveness to his job to his intelligence. He’s never doubted himself before in a situation like this - he can tell when someone’s interested, and he’s not afraid to make the first move. But with Sandy, he has no idea what to do or say or think, and it’s driving him crazy, because he can’t walk away. Even a failed date hasn’t deterred him - he just feels an even more urgent need to fix things, because if he can’t be with her, he doesn’t know what he’ll do. Die, maybe.

And that’s why Jensen is such a godsend. Jared had been lamenting the Sandy disaster to all of his friends, most of whom were sympathetic (well, not Chad, but when he called Jared a ridiculous douche, it was said with affection, so that’s something), but Tom was the only one who really understood. He told Jared that Jensen had saved his life when he met Jamie, and he even said he’d convince Jensen to help Jared.

And okay, Jensen is a little standoffish and reserved, but he at least thinks Jared isn’t a totally lost cause, and even better, he has a plan. They stay at the coffee shop for another half hour, working out the details. Jensen says he wants an idea of what Jared wants to accomplish, so he can plan accordingly.

“Does it have to be a realistic goal?” Jared asks. “Because if I could just choose the fairy tale, happily-ever-after ending where we get married and have three kids and two dogs and live in the

suburbs so we can commute to the city for work but still raise our kids with a yard to play in and a porch swing out front where we'd enjoy the summer evenings, I'd totally take it."

Jensen blinks, and Jared reminds himself that it's good to think about words before he lets them go rampaging out of his mouth, especially with someone he barely knows. Blushing, he amends, "Or, you know, we could work on me getting another date with her."

"Yeah," Jensen says. "I think that would be a good thing to concentrate on first. Before you name your hypothetical children."

"Come on, I'm not that bad," Jared protests, although he's pretty sure Jensen is joking. "I don't have the children named. And three was just a rough estimate, not a requirement."

Jensen raises an eyebrow. "And the house in the suburbs with the yard and porch swing?"

"That's just a possibility," Jared says. "Something Sandy and I might theoretically choose to have in our theoretical future."

"And the dogs? Are those theoretical too?"

"Of course," Jared says. "Well, I mean, they'd have to be big dogs, because dogs that are smaller than cats weird me out. And we'd adopt them from a shelter, not buy them from a breeder, and you can't just get one, you need two so they have someone to keep them company." He pauses. "And I might have put a little thought into their names, because wouldn't it be awesome to have two dogs named Sonny and Rico? They could keep the neighborhood safe from drug cartels. It would be seriously cool."

Jensen just looks at him.

Jared groans and slides down in his seat. "Okay, okay, I know I have a problem. Stop judging me."

Jensen laughs. "I'm not judging you. It's great that you're thinking big, man. Just - you do know that it's probably best to keep these things to yourself for now, right?"

"That's why I need you, to make sure I don't just run up to Sandy and tell her that I fantasize about owning two *Miami Vice* dogs with her someday."

"Yeah, that's the thing about women," Jensen says. "I'm pretty sure 99% of them would not find that romantic."

"Seriously?" Jared asks. "Because co-ownership of a pet is a pretty big thing. It shows a lot of trust in your partner. It's like adopting a kid together." He knows he'd think long and hard about getting a pet with a girlfriend, even Sandy. Pets aren't like the rest of the stuff you can just send back after a breakup - they end up on the streets or in animal shelters, and that's not fair. "It'd be like me telling her I trust her enough to walk and feed and groom my children."

"Now that's romantic."

Jared sighs. "See? This is what I mean. I know I haven't been this completely clueless over a woman before. I didn't spend nights awake trying to figure out what to say to my previous girlfriends, and I never totally ruined a date. There's just something about Sandy that turns me into an idiot who's only capable of saying extremely stupid things." He pauses. "She's like my Kryptonite. Really hot Kryptonite."

Jensen clears his throat. "Right. But since you can't keep her in a lead-lined box for the rest of your lives, you're going to have to face her." He flips over a napkin and pulls a pen out of his briefcase. "And the best way to do that is have a plan. We'll divide it into three parts - the approach, the apology, and the argument. The approach is crucial, because you don't want her to be busy or stressed or upset when you talk to her, so you'll have to read her body language to make sure she wants to talk to you. The apology is where you tell her what an idiot you are, and the argument is where you're going to convince her she should give you another chance."

Jensen's even sketching a diagram to go with his explanation, and Jared tries to follow the convoluted arrows for a second before completely giving up. "Dude, I thought this was just something you were doing as a favor for Tom," he interrupts. "I didn't know you had a whole scientific method for dating."

"It never hurts to be methodical," Jensen says defensively. "I'm just a very organized person."

"Okay," Jared says, taking a deep breath. "Hit me. Let's plan this thing."

* * *

The plan they come up with isn't foolproof, but Jensen thinks it's pretty close. If Jared just follows the outline they made and applies a liberal amount of charm, he should be fine. He insists he needs Jensen there, though, so Jensen finds himself in the library after work, wandering through the stacks in search of his advisee. He's not sure if he's supposed to be Jared's moral support or emergency rescue or icebreaker, but whatever. He kind of wants to see the whole plan in action, anyway, because he has a feeling Jared might go off-script without warning, and that could cause trouble. He might need Jensen doing those air traffic control signals in the background to avoid completely embarrassing himself.

That possibility only looks more likely when Jensen finds Jared, at a circular table near the front desk, and sees what he's doing.

Jared looks up from his book with a smile when Jensen sits down across from him. "Hey."

"Hi," Jensen says. "What're you reading?"

Jared glances down like he's surprised to find out there's a book in front of him. "Oh, I don't really know. It was on the table when I got here. I was just pretending to be reading while I was watching for Sandy."

"Good plan," Jensen says, taking the book. "Except you should probably read the cover first." He shows Jared where it says *Blow His Mind (and more!): Fifty Ways to Wow Your Man in Bed* in hot pink letters.

"Oh," Jared says, blushing.

"Yeah," Jensen says. "Probably not the best signal to be sending when you're asking a girl for a date."

Jared drops his head down onto his folded arms. "I think I'm seriously cursed."

"You're not," Jensen says, pushing the book aside. "If she walked up when you were in the middle of reading it, then I'd say you were cursed. As it is, I just think you might have some bad karma."

"I did steal a traffic cone on a dare during my freshman year of college," Jared says

thoughtfully. “You think that’s coming back to haunt me?”

“Definitely,” Jensen replies. “Heinous crimes against humanity like that never go unpunished. You’ll probably be struck down by lightning soon and fast-tracked to hell.”

Jared laughs. “Yeah, probably. And there were so many things I wanted to do with my life.”

Jensen lifts up the book. “Like finding out how to give a man a mind-blowing orgasm?” He leafs through a few pages. “In case you were wondering, putting the condom on with your mouth adds an extra-sexy touch to any foreplay.”

Jared chokes, and of course, it’s right at that moment that Sandy walks by their table. She was clearly intending to talk to Jared, already slowing down, but she stutters to an awkward stop when she hears what they’re discussing.

Jensen revises his opinion on Jared being cursed.

“Hey, Sandy!” Jared says loudly, like he can ignore the whole thing if he smiles bright enough.

“Um, hi,” Sandy says. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I was just wondering if we could talk for a minute.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Jared says eagerly. “You’re not interrupting at all, we were just...” He gives Jensen a pleading look.

“Uh, we were just reading this screenplay someone wrote for a creative writing class I’m in,” Jensen ad-libs awkwardly, shoving the book under his folded arms. “People write the weirdest stuff, huh?”

“Oh, you’re a writer?” Sandy asks politely.

“Are you kidding?” Jared asks, before Jensen can reply. “He’s amazing. He wrote this one story that was funny and sad and touching, all at the same time. He’s like the next...uh. The next really great writer.”

Jensen glares at Jared, but nods and smiles when Sandy looks his way. “Yeah, but I don’t write about giving men great orgasms or sexy ways to put condoms on,” he says, just to clarify. “That’s the other people in my class.”

Sandy blinks, and Jensen starts to think that him coming along on this thing is really not helping Jared at all. He decides to shut up now, and just stick to hand signals.

“Anyway,” Jared says quickly, “You wanted to talk?” He stands up and motions to a quieter area, away from the crowded tables, and Sandy walks ahead of him. Before he follows, he sends Jensen a glare, which Jensen assumes means something like *Dude, you’re supposed to be helping me, not convincing her I have crappy taste in friends.*

Jensen shrugs helplessly, and shoos him toward Sandy with a weak thumbs-up. Jared shakes his head, but goes.

* * *

Sandy’s still pretty weirded out by the conversation she stepped into, but she listens to Jared’s explanation for the disaster that was their date, and she accepts his apology. Her demeanor softens a little when Jared explains just how nervous he was, even though she tells him he

shouldn't have been, that she just wanted to get to know him, not evaluate him.

Jared's more than relieved that she's not still angry, so he cautiously asks if he can make it up to her with dinner. She considers it for a long, terrifying second, but then she nods, and Jared can barely keep his elation from spiraling to inappropriate levels. It would be really bad to pick her up and hug her right now, he reminds himself. Jensen would not approve.

Sandy suggests a restaurant she likes, something fancy that Jared's only heard of, but he'd take her to the middle of the desert for freshly-squeezed cactus juice if that was what she wanted, at this point, so he agrees and lets her choose the date and time.

It's still hard to contain his excitement, and he slips a little when Sandy writes her cell phone number down on the back of someone's receipt, grabbing her fingers for a quick squeeze when she hands him the scrap of paper.

She looks a little startled, but smiles before excusing herself to get back to work. Jared nearly bounds across the room back to Jensen, because this is officially the best day of his life. Every fear he had about Sandy totally hating him is gone, and he's got a date with her in four days, which will be the perfect chance to convince her that he's an awesome guy that she wants to marry and own two vice cop dogs with. In less than 96 hours, he'll be sitting at a table with her in a romantic restaurant, leaning over the candlelit dinner to say something clever, and she'll be smiling at him adoringly, maybe even holding his hand, looking absolutely gorgeous in a fancy dress, and -

But that's where Jared's brain hits a snag, because he can picture Sandy perfectly, hair up in an elegant twist and curves sheathed in something silk or satin, but when he turns his mind's eye to himself, all he can see is a giant blank.

"Jared?" Jensen interrupts, hovering anxiously. "How did it go?"

"Good," Jared says woodenly.

"She said yes? Awesome!" Jensen lifts a palm for a high-five, but Jared pushes his hand down and says, "Not awesome, because I'm totally screwed."

"What? Why?"

"Because she wants to go to a fancy restaurant, and I said yes without thinking, and this?" - Jared motions to his button-down, jeans, and sandals - "This is about as fancy as I get." His voice is rising, but he can't help it, he's panicking. "And what am I going to do with my hair? I can spend hours trying to get it to behave, and then as soon as I look away, it just ignores me and does whatever it wants anyway, like some kind of devious cat. And shoes, Jensen! I don't even know what kind of shoes you wear to a fancy dinner, much less own any!"

Jensen's mouth has been quirking all through Jared's diatribe, and he finally loses control and bursts out laughing.

Jared sighs and glares at him. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Jensen wheezes. "But did you just compare your hair to a *cat*?"

Jared blushes, shrugging. "I spend a lot of time with animals. I can't help it."

"I get that," Jensen says, wiping his eyes. "But now I can't stop picturing a cat on your head, and it's really distracting."

“Shut up,” Jared says half-heartedly, but he’s smiling. It is kind of funny, especially if you imagine those stubborn little turned-up pieces at the sides making that chirruping “Mrow?” curious cats do. He doesn’t mention that to Jensen, though.

“Okay,” Jensen says, regaining control of himself. “Jared, aside from your seriously weird hair similes, we can fix all that. It’s not a big deal.”

“Really? Even though we only have 96 hours to work with?”

“Really,” Jensen assures him, patting him on the shoulder. “One shopping trip and a haircut, and you’ll be fine.”

“So I didn’t really need to have a breakdown in the middle of the library?” Jared asks sheepishly.

“Well, it was pretty entertaining,” Jensen says. “And I think Sandy enjoyed it as much as I did.”

“*What?*” Jared’s looking around him in horror when Jensen says, “Just kidding, man. She went in the back room right after you two talked. She missed the entire cat-hair rant.”

“Don’t do that to me!” He smacks Jensen on the shoulder. “Jesus, you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Yeah, well, consider if payback for telling really unconvincing lies about me being a writer. We should probably leave before she really does come back,” Jensen says, and Jared nods, grabbing his jacket from the chair.

Jensen holds up the *Blow His Mind* book. “You sure you don’t want to check this out?”

“Fuck you,” Jared says, flushing. “You were the one actually reading it - you check it out.”

“I don’t need the help,” Jensen says, winking.

Jared splutters a little at that, totally failing at a comeback, so he just knocks the book out of Jensen’s hand and pushes him toward the door.

* * *

When Jensen actually sees Jared’s closet, however, he starts to think Jared was right to freak out in the middle of the library.

It’s not like Jensen is the most fashion-forward person on the planet. He doesn’t obsessively track every trend or try to stay two steps ahead of the rush, and he has no idea what’s coming out in whose winter line or why fashion shows feature such over-the-top clothing. What he does know, however, is what looks good on people, and how to find something that will flatter a person’s features. It’s not some innate talent or gift, it’s just an awareness of the way clothes fit and how they complement someone’s coloring. Anyone could read a couple of magazines and know the same things, but most men wouldn’t bother.

And Jared looks like he hasn’t bothered with much in the way of fashion in a very, very long time. Jensen doesn’t claim to be any expert on haute couture, but even he can see that Jared’s wardrobe is kind of a disaster. For one thing, it consists entirely of jeans and t-shirts, with the odd sweater or button-down hiding in the mix. The jeans, which come in states of wear varying from ‘mostly intact’ to ‘paper thin’, are all of the baggy, shapeless, impersonal variety, and the t-shirts are either random or meant to be funny. Jensen appreciates the humor of *The Simpsons*,

but that doesn't mean Homer's witticisms should be plastered on anyone's chest, especially not anyone over the age of twelve.

Basically, what it amounts to, is that if Jared wants to go anywhere less casual than his apartment or a college campus, he's got nothing to wear.

When he points this out, Jared just shrugs. "I work all day with animals," he points out. "Then I come home and live with animals. It doesn't make sense to own nice clothes when they're just going to get puked or drooled or shed on anyway."

"Are you telling me you purposely buy ugly clothes so you don't care when they get ruined?" Jensen asks. "'Cause that's actually kind of a relief."

"I don't own ugly clothes," Jared protests.

Jensen leans in and pulls out a brown shirt with random colorful shapes that looks like it could be a fingerpainting project in some first grade class. "Jared, this shirt is so ugly that it makes Dick Cheney look like Miss America."

"It's unique! It's original."

"It's terrifying. It looks like some kind of sewing machine experiment gone freakishly wrong. I think Dr. Frankenstein might have been behind its design."

"It's not a monster!" Jared argues, clutching the shirt protectively. "And besides, Frankenstein's monster was just misunderstood, not evil."

Jensen raises an eyebrow. "I think you missed some parts of that story."

"He just needed a brain transplant. And to get laid," Jared says, grinning. "I totally saw the movie."

"Yeah, well, we're hoping to get *you* laid," Jensen points out, yanking the shirt away. "And that's not going to happen without some serious shopping. So let's go."

* * *

Jared's restless and awkward at the store, fidgeting when Jensen holds things up against him and wandering off to look at belt buckles or cufflinks or anything shiny every time Jensen turns his back. When Jensen's finally accumulated an armful of possibilities, including pants that aren't jeans and shirts that aren't having identity crises, Jared tries to convince him there's no need to try any of it on.

"I know my size," he insists. "So just pick whatever you think will be good, and we'll be done."

"First of all, I'm not picking clothes *for* you," Jensen feels obligated to clarify. "I'm just suggesting things, and then you can pick what you like or try something else. And second, trying things on is not optional."

A passing sales assistant gives Jensen a pitying look, obviously used to this sort of conversation. Jensen sighs and puts on his sternest nonnegotiable face.

"But it takes such a long time," Jared whines. "We'll be here forever."

"But you'll leave with clothes that actually fit you, not a mannequin," Jensen says. "Dressing

room. Now. Go.”

Jared pouts and mutters under his breath, but he takes the pile of clothes and disappears into a changing room.

Jensen leans against the wall near a set of mirrors and waits. He can see Jared’s feet under the stall doors, which allows him to monitor Jared’s exact state of undress. He watches a shirt hit the floor, shoes get kicked off, and jeans slide down, belt buckle thudding against carpet. Then there’s the clanking of hangers and a pair of slacks go on, looking a little ridiculous over Jared’s fuzzy grey socks. Jared’s feet move in front of the mirror, doing a slow three-sixty, and then pause for an awkward shuffle.

“How’s it going?” Jensen calls out.

“Um,” Jared says. “Jensen, are these pants supposed to fit like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like...I don’t know.”

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Well, if you come out here, I could tell you.”

“Uh, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Jared, just get out here.”

He can hear Jared sigh, but then the door swings open, and Jensen’s mouth goes a little dry, because the answer to Jared’s question is yes, a thousand times yes, that is *exactly* how pants are supposed to fit. Good God.

“Aren’t they kind of tight?” Jared asks, fidgeting uncomfortably. “They’re really kind of tight, Jensen.”

Exactly, Jensen wants to say, but instead, he corrects, “No, they’re just pants that fit a person, instead of a piece of plywood.” He leans around Jared. “Hey, you actually have an ass. I was starting to wonder.”

Jared looks, too, twisting in front of the mirror on the wall next to Jensen. Then his head snaps up. “Wait, you’ve been checking out my ass?”

“How could I?” Jensen asks, smirking. “I only just found out it exists.”

“I have a fabulous ass, I’ll have you know,” Jared says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Michelangelo’s David? He’s got nothing on me.”

“And you’re so modest, too,” Jensen says. “Take your sculpted ass back into the dressing room and try on the other pants.”

Halfway through obeying, Jared turns and says accusingly, “So you are checking out my ass!”

Jensen rolls his eyes.

Jared gets bored halfway through the trying-on process and wanders out into the store, regardless of the fact that he’s barefoot and trailing price tags, claiming he wants to pick out a shirt he actually likes, not the boring choices Jensen picked.

“Boring?” Jensen demands, following Jared from rack to rack. “They’re perfectly nice shirts, Jared. I hate to break it to you, but *you* are supposed to be the exciting part of this date, not the shirt.”

“They’re all just so - “ Jared flaps his hands. “Shirts need to have character.”

“They really, really don’t,” Jensen protests, because this is how someone ends up with a closet full of monstrosities, and he cannot in good conscience allow Jared out of the store with anything more in questionable pastels or loud patterns.

Jared holds up a silky bright yellow button-down. “See? Like this. This shirt says *I’m bold and adventurous.*”

“Really? To me, it screams, *Help! I was attacked by mustard!*” Jensen says. “Or possibly, *my cat mistook this for the litterbox.* Neither of which is really the impression I think you want to make.”

Jared makes a face. “Come on, it’s not that bad.”

“Jared, one of my ex-boyfriends had a dog that was a mix between a Chihuahua and a Pomeranian and had alopecia,” Jensen says. “And that dog was still less ugly than that shirt.”

“There’s no such thing as an ugly dog,” Jared says automatically, but he puts the shirt back. He traces a hand over the metal rod above it, not looking at Jensen, and asks, “So, you’re gay?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jensen says slowly. All of his friends know, especially Tom, so he hadn’t even thought that Jared might not. “You didn’t - “

“I thought maybe, but I didn’t want to assume,” Jared says quickly. He meets Jensen’s eyes and smirks. “So this is kind of like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.*”

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Well, it would be. But judging by the number of pink shirts in your closet, the straight part is in question.”

“Pink is a good color on me!” Jared says indignantly.

“No offense, Jared, but whoever told you that was blind and stupid, desperate for a commission, or hates you. Maybe all three.”

Jared glares at him. “It was my mom!”

There’s a long, terrifying second where Jensen thinks he might have just crossed a very bad line and he might need to run for his life, but then Jared’s mouth twitches and he bursts out laughing, bumping Jensen’s shoulder with his own.

“I did give her an ironing board for Christmas last year,” he admits, ducking his head. “She was probably trying to find a way to get back at me.” He gives Jensen a stern look. “No more talking smack about my mom, though, or I’ll kick your ass.”

“Deal,” Jensen says. “Now would you pick some shirts that aren’t loud and exciting? Maybe some that say, *I’m just here to make this dork look good?*”

Jared sticks out his tongue, but turns back to the racks.

* * *

They leave the store two hours later, armed with everything Jared needs to look amazing on his date. His hair is still an issue, though, so even though Jared complains about being exhausted from all the shopping, Jensen drags him to a salon and turns him over to a stylist. He doesn't know that much about hair, but the stylist nods when he asks if she can do something to maybe make it neater and easier to manage.

Jared starts to look nervous as she sketches out what she can do with her hands, reaching for a scissors to illustrate, and his hand creeps protectively to the back of his head when her fingers near a set of clippers.

"Relax," Jensen says. "She's just going to trim it and take a little of the weight off. More wavy, less Wookiee."

"Fuck you," Jared says, shoving him, but he goes willingly to the chair and lets the stylist tie a cape around his neck. Jensen waves and heads next door for a cup of coffee he desperately needs.

What he's not expecting, though, is to run into Sandy. But there she is, sitting at a table with a latte and books spread out in front of her, and she looks up right when Jensen picks up his drink, so it's not like he can walk by.

"Hi," she says. "You're Jared's friend, right? The writer who doesn't write strange porn?"

Trust her to remember that. "Uh, yeah," he says. "Jensen."

"Nice to meet you."

Jensen nods to the books. "What's all this?"

She sighs. "Just some studying. I've got a big exam coming up, so I thought I'd get some caffeine and reading out of the way at the same time."

"Nice," Jensen says awkwardly. "So, I hear you and Jared have a date this week."

"Yeah," she says, looking down and then up through her lashes. "Dinner."

"He's really excited," Jensen tells her. "Kind of like a little kid with candy."

She smiles a little. "I'm just hoping it goes better than the last one."

"I'm sure it will be," Jensen rushes to say. "You know, he was just really tired that time, and he picked the wrong thing to do. But I'm sure this time will be great. Jared's a really good guy."

"You don't have to convince me," Sandy says with a faint smile. "I already agreed to go out with him."

"Yeah, I just wanted you to know how much he likes you," Jensen says lamely. He shifts, the coffee heating his fingers uncomfortably through the cardboard cup. "Well, I should go. Have fun studying."

She nods. "See you."

* * *

Jensen has to leave after that, of course, so instead of enjoying the peace and quiet of the coffee shop, he goes back to the hair salon and sits in the waiting area, pretending to read some magazine that was sitting on a chair.

He's actually thinking, because that whole encounter with Sandy was just weird. Maybe he's just used to Jared and his enthusiasm over everything, but Sandy seemed extremely reserved and not very excited at all about their upcoming date. She could just be one of those people who doesn't show much in the way of emotion - Jensen's had people say the same thing about him, so he more than understands - but if that's true, it seems weird that Jared's so hung up on her. She doesn't seem like the type to appreciate exuberant outbursts, which is generally Jared's primary mode of communication, so to Jensen, it seems like they wouldn't get along very well.

But maybe she needs to get to know someone before warming up to them, or maybe she was just having a stressful day. Jensen reminds himself that he barely knows anything about her, and that it isn't up to him to determine her compatibility with Jared. Jared thinks she's the best thing since the Internet, so Jensen's going to help him pick the right clothes and say the right things and hopefully win her over.

Besides, why does he care if Jared and Sandy are a perfect match, anyway? Jensen's just here for the material parts, just doing a favor, and the logistics of their relationship are really none of his business. He doesn't need to get involved in all this. All right, he likes Jared, but it's not like they're best friends or anything. And yeah, he's noticed that Jared's maybe a very attractive guy, but that's just an impersonal observation. It's objective - Jared has the qualities of a physically pleasing human being. It's not like Jensen spends a lot of time daydreaming about Jared's eyes or his smile or has a crush on him or something.

Jared startles him out of his thoughts, sitting down next to him and flicking a page of the magazine on Jensen's lap. "Didn't know you were a big *Seventeen* reader, Jen," he says.

"What?" Jensen asks, then looks down at the lurid pink cover. Shit. "Oh, uh. Yeah. Well, I have to keep up with all my teen heartthrobs somehow, you know." He flips it closed. "And the quizzes are so relevant. Apparently that hottie sitting behind me in social studies has totally been checking me out."

"Oh my God," Jared says. "You should slip a note in his locker to find out if he likes you."

"Well, first I have to tell my BFF everything," Jensen corrects. "And maybe have a sleepover and buy a cute new shirt. But then, yes."

"Wait, I'm not your BFF?" Jared pouts. "I'm still invited to the sleepover, right?"

"Only if you bring *A Walk To Remember* and let me give you a makeover."

Jared cracks up at that. "God, my sister loves that movie, but I can't watch it without laughing my ass off, which kind of ruins the parts where you're supposed to be all sad that Mandy Moore's dying and stuff." He grins. "And you're already giving me a makeover, remember?" He shakes his head, which makes his hair fly around.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, it looks good," Jensen says, tilting his head to see the back.

"It's awesome!" Jared says, pushing his bangs off his face. "Gloria did something totally amazing that made it not so all over the place, and she put this stuff in that made it really soft." He leans toward Jensen. "Feel."

“Uh, that’s okay,” Jensen says, but Jared grabs his hand and plants it on his head, and Jensen can’t help it, he lets his fingers sink in and stroke along Jared’s head. He was right, it’s soft and silky, and Jensen feels something warm curl in his stomach when his fingers catch in the curls at the back of Jared’s neck, bringing their faces closer together.

Jared just grins, though, bright and friendly, and Jensen reminds himself that he’s not actually a seventeen-year-old girl, and he doesn’t have a crush on Jared. He’s just observing, impersonally and objectively, that Jared has really nice, really soft hair, that feels good under his hands. That’s all.

Jared goes up to pay for his haircut, and Jensen groans. He needs help.

Part 2

To say Jared’s nervous about his date with Sandy is like saying the Sahara is a little dry or the Antarctic’s a little chilly. He puts on all of the clothes and accessories Jensen picked out for him an hour before he needs to leave, then paces around his apartment, only stopping to do stupid things like smooth his hair down again or line up the pile of magazines on his coffee table or scrub at that coffee stain on his counter that’s been there at least a few months.

The dogs, sensing his nervous energy, follow him uneasily, and after the tenth time Jared trips over a warm, furry body when he turns too fast, he gives up and sits on the couch. Jensen left him a list of conversational topics the last time they met, and Jared smiles a little as he scans through them. He’s not one of those people who micromanages their life - he likes spontaneity and the element of unpredictability that comes from a lack of planning ahead - but practically the first thing he learned about Jensen was that he’s the complete opposite. Jensen has a list for everything and anything, and if needed, he can distill any topic into a set of neat bullet points, often alliterative, that are easily memorized. Jared lets him summarize and lecture, because it’s useful and he needs to learn what Jensen’s trying to teach him, but sometimes he wonders what would happen if someone took away all Jensen’s mental lists and made him just do, instead of think. He’d probably explode, or have a nervous breakdown, or go totally wild and get his tongue pierced, or something.

Jared’s smirking at that image when the door buzzes and he gets up to let Jensen in.

“What’s so funny?” Jensen asks, leaning down to pet the dogs.

“I was just picturing you with a tongue stud,” Jared says, closing the door.

Jensen gives him a funny look, but then his eyes slide down to take in the date clothes, and something else flashes across his face. He’s oddly silent for a long minute, just looking.

Jared looks down at himself, at the dark slacks and mint green button-down the salesgirl had claimed made his eyes look amazing. “Do I look okay?” Jared asks hesitantly. “It’s not too much, is it?”

Jensen shakes himself a little. “Uh, no. No, it’s not.” He smiles. “You look good.”

“Well, it’s all thanks to you,” Jared says, spreading his arms. “If it was just me, I would have worn boots and a brown belt, or something.”

Jensen cringes a little. “I can’t believe no one ever told you to match your shoes and belt.

Seriously, Jared, even Kevin Federline knows that.”

“Kevin Federline probably has a stylist to tell him what to wear,” Jared points out. “Just like I have you.”

“I’m not a stylist,” Jensen argues, brushing dog hair off the couch before sitting down.

“Then what is your title?” Jared asks. “Fashion adviser? Relationship consultant? Giver of timely guidance?”

“I prefer life coach.”

Jared snorts, sitting down next to him. “Well, all I need you to be right now is a giver of moral support, because I have to leave in five minutes to pick up Sandy, and I need all the reassuring I can get.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jensen says obediently, reaching down to rub Harley’s ears. “And you can always call me if something goes horribly wrong. I can’t guarantee I’ll fix it, but I can talk you down from a ledge if it all goes to hell.”

“Wow, thanks for that vote of confidence.”

“No problem. Seriously, Jared, it’s going to be okay. You like her, she likes you enough to give you a second chance. All you have to do is relax and be yourself and it’ll be fine.” He pauses. “Or try to be someone a little cooler than you are, that might help.”

Jared punches him lightly on the arm and calls him a jerk, but he lets out a deep breath. “Thank you. And thanks for watching the dogs while I’m out. They get kind of weird if I leave them alone, especially if it’s dark outside.”

Jensen waves a hand. “It’s fine. There’s a *Baywatch* marathon on TV, and I’m betting you’ve got a lot of good food I can steal. As far as babysitting gigs go, it’s not so bad.”

“Hey,” Jared protests. “I’m trusting you to nurture my babies, here, not put them to bed early so you can watch porn and gorge yourself on my food.”

“Jared, they’re dogs,” Jensen says dryly. “And if you’re not going to pay me, then accept that I will eat all your ice cream and watch Pamela Anderson jiggle in revenge.”

Jared kneels down to rub the dogs’ heads. “Okay, guys, remember to drool all over Jensen anytime he even thinks about food or red swimsuits.”

They butt their heads against his chest, and Jared laughs at the expression on Jensen’s face. “Just kidding. Be good for Uncle Jensen, and Daddy will be home soon.”

Jensen shakes his head, but stands up when Jared does. “Good luck,” he says, brushing dog hair off the front of Jared’s shirt.

“Thanks. See you later.” Jared gives the dogs one last pat, smiles at Jensen, and grabs his keys.

* * *

The date, overall, is not a disaster, which relieves Jared to an almost embarrassing degree. He was seriously starting to think that his karma was fucked to hell, what with all the weird stuff that kept happening around Sandy, and he had no idea why, which was kind of alarming. It made

him wonder if he'd done something really terrible in a past life and didn't know it, which led to wondering if he was a bad person and just didn't know it, which led to the kind of deep soul-searching that Jared normally reserved for the existential crises he never got around to having. It was worrying.

Anyway, things actually go pretty well. Jared's extremely nervous, which he's sure is totally obvious by the way he babbles all through the drive to the restaurant, but Sandy just seems glad he's actually awake this time, and only smiles when he rambles about some totally random pet ferret a kid brought into the clinic the other day who swallowed thirty-seven cents in change.

She looks gorgeous, hair up like he'd imagined and a dress the color of red wine that's clingy in all the right places and flowy in the others, and Jared's ridiculously thankful for Jensen when Sandy's eyes flick over his outfit and her smile is approving, not strained.

He's doubly grateful when they get to the restaurant, because everyone around them is dressed just as neatly, and even if Jared feels a little uncomfortable in clothes that aren't exactly him, he's glad he doesn't stand out as the awkward example of what not to wear.

The restaurant is a lot fancier than he's used to, though, and there are a few moments where Jared's totally clueless how to proceed. He can order food and select wine, even if he's not sure what makes one choice more expensive than the other, but when a waiter brings a little tray of sorbet cones to the table between the appetizers, Jared eats his in one gulp - it's about the size of his pinky, after all - before he sees that Sandy's licking delicately at hers, looking a little embarrassed.

But other than that, and a few conversational mishaps, things go pretty well. Sandy's still kind of quiet, but Jared remembers the conversational suggestions Jensen gave him, and asks her about school and future plans. She talks excitedly about getting her degree, the research she's hoping to do with a professor over the summer, a case study she's working on with some undergrads. It's kind of hard to relate to that, since Jared was more than happy to be done with school when he got his vet tech certification, but he thinks it's awesome that she's so passionate about what she's doing.

He's so happy that the date is going well that he can't resist texting Jensen when she excuses herself to go to the restroom, just to let him know things are good.

awesome, Jensen texts back a second later. *p.s. you didnt tell me you had cheesecake in the freezer.*

eat that and die, Jared sends, because that cheesecake is heaven on a plate and ridiculously expensive, for special occasions and not bad babysitters possibly neglecting his children. *you'd better be taking good care of my dogs.*

Jared's phone vibrates a second later, making his silverware jump, and he flips it open to see a grainy picture of a pair of legs stretched out on the floor, with Sadie asleep across Jensen's lap and Harley sacked out on his feet. The text accompanying it says, *relax, theyre fine, and so is your damn cheesecake. now talk to your girl, not me.*

Jared's grinning down at his phone when Sandy comes back, and she raises her eyebrows a little when she sits down across from him.

"Jensen's watching my dogs tonight," Jared explains. "And I was worried that he was eating all my food and watching porn and ignoring them, but he just sent a picture of the dogs sleeping on his lap."

“Oh,” Sandy says, and she kind of looks like she’s not sure if there’s a joke there that she’s missing or Jared’s being totally serious.

Jared quickly changes the subject to their food, which was pretty awesome, and Sandy starts talking about how she and her friends like to cook together and take turns hosting dinner parties. She mentions that they keep trying to find men to join the group, but as soon as they can find a guy who cooks, he’s snapped up by one of the available women and they never see him again.

Then she asks, “Do you cook?”

And Jared’s a lot of things, but stupid is not one of them. Sandy just said (without actually saying it) that she thinks the ability to cook is attractive in a man, and he’d be a complete idiot to say no, even if that’s the truth. He’ll just tweak the truth a little. “Yeah, I love to,” he says. “Cooking is great.”

She perks up at that, and Jared wishes his mouth wouldn’t just spit out things without his brain’s prior approval. “Um, well, I’m not great at it, or anything,” he amends quickly. “You know, I just have a few things I can make.” And by that he really means things like grilled cheese and frozen pizza and maybe French toast, if he’s feeling really adventurous, but Sandy looks so pleased to find they share an interest that he can’t bear to say that part aloud.

“What kinds of food do you like to cook?”

“Um,” Jared says, trying desperately to think of something he’s successfully made. “Well, I’m pretty good at Italian food.” Okay, so he’s only ever made frozen lasagna, but she’ll never know that.

“Oh, really?” Sandy asks, leaning an elbow on the table.

“Yeah, it’s kind of my specialty,” Jared says, unable to stop himself. If he’s going to invent himself a culinary whiz, he’s sure as hell not going to sell himself short. “You know that kind with the spinach that comes in those little pasta rolls?”

“Cannelloni?” Sandy asks, eyes lighting up.

“Yeah, that,” Jared says. “I make awesome cannelloni.”

“That’s so great. I love Italian food,” Sandy enthuses. “There used to be this great little restaurant a few blocks away from my apartment, but it closed this summer, and I’ve been craving good Italian ever since.”

“You should come over, and I’ll cook for you,” Jared finds himself saying, then promptly wanting to kick himself, because on a scale of bad ideas, that would be right at the top, next to spontaneously proposing or reading Sandy an excerpt from the pathetic ode he wrote to her shiny hair.

But she smiles and says, “I’d love to,” and when she suggests next Friday night, Jared agrees without a second thought, because this is the most genuinely interested she’s ever been in spending time with him, and there’s no way he’s going to let something insignificant like his total inability to cook actual food stand in the way. Jensen’s going to kill him when he finds out, but Jared really doesn’t care. He just smiles back at Sandy and trusts fate to make things okay, because after all the bad karma, he really deserves something good.

* * *

When Jared gets home, he's expecting to be met by Jensen and a hundred questions on how the night went, ranging from clothing to conversation to chemistry, but instead, he's met with possibly the most adorable scene ever. Jensen, who's never caught with a hair or thread out of place - and who claims not to be a dog person - is sprawled on the floor next to the couch, head pillowed on his arms, with both dogs asleep on top of him, Sadie resting her head on the small of his back and Harley spread out across the backs of his thighs. It looks like they spent the whole night playing and then dropped in exhaustion for a nap.

Jared only has a second to take it all in, grinning like crazy, before the dogs lift their heads and come over to greet him. The weight lifting wakes Jensen up, and he groans, squinting at Jared, before sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "You're home," he says muzzily.

"Yep," Jared says, giving him a hand up and pulling Jensen down to sit on the couch.

"How'd it go?" Jensen asks, rubbing a hand through sleep-tousled hair.

"Really good," Jared says, still riding the high of a reasonably successful date and barely able to keep his grin under control.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And she agreed to another date, next week."

"Mm."

"You're going to kill me when I tell you what it is, because I'm going to make you help me, but I'll tell you later," Jared says. "Right now we should just be happy this date was a success."

"Mmkay," Jensen says. "Sorry, I'm really tired."

"Really? I couldn't tell."

Jensen's not fuzzy enough to miss the sarcasm, and he gives Jared a cranky shove. "Jerk."

"Yeah, I know."

"Kay. I should go," Jensen says, standing up. "M'glad your date was good."

"Thanks." Jared stands, too. "You sure you're okay to drive? It's no problem if you want to stay here."

"Nah, I'm good."

"You sure? You looked pretty comfortable on the floor there, and I'm sure the dogs would love to have a human pillow."

Jensen shakes his head, patting his pocket for his keys. "Nah. You might enjoy wearing more animal hair than actual clothing, but I've been shed on enough for one night."

Jared laughs and lets it go, because insults are a sure sign Jensen is waking up. "Okay. I'll call you tomorrow, man."

"Is that when I'm going to get mad at you?"

“Yep. I’m going to wait until you’re a few miles away before I tell you what I got us into, so you can’t kill me immediately.”

Jensen shrugs. “Whatever. As long as it doesn’t have anything to do with a Vegas wedding or crossdressing, I can deal with it. It can’t be worse than Tom making me pick out lingerie for Jamie.”

Jared raises his eyebrows. “How did you get roped into that?”

“Tom was stuck in traffic and left his Valentine’s Day present until the last minute.” Jensen shudders. “I love Jamie, but there are things I never wanted to know about her, and that includes her fondness for edible panties and bras with the nipple parts cut out.”

“Wow,” Jared says. “Well, it’s definitely nothing like that. Sandy hasn’t shared her lingerie preferences with me yet, and even if she did, I don’t think I’d tell you. That’s a little awkward.”

“Then I shouldn’t have to kill you,” Jensen says. “But if you wake me up before noon, I reserve the right to maim.”

“Understood,” Jared says.

* * *

Jensen’s phone rings at exactly 10:23 the next morning. It buzzes on his nightstand for a few minutes before he’s awake enough to answer, and when he finally picks it up, blinking at the display, he groans.

“What did I say about maiming?” he demands.

“Sorry,” Jared says. “But I couldn’t wait any longer. I’ve been up since dawn worrying about my next date with Sandy.”

“And waking me up to tell me that is going to make you feel better?”

“No. But I won’t be able to stop worrying until I have a plan, and you’re really good at making plans.”

“You could make a plan yourself, you know,” Jensen points out.

“I like yours better. You’re good at all that detail stuff.”

Jensen is good with details and planning, it’s true, and right now he’s trying to figure out if there’s a feasible way for him to end this conversation and get back to sleeping in. But even turning off his phone and locking his door isn’t foolproof, because if Jared’s proved anything on his quest for Sandy’s heart, it’s that he’s a persistent bastard. He sighs. “Fine. What do you need my help with?”

“Thank God. I was going to start begging if you said no, and then send you a dozen pictures of my pathetic face and maybe camp out outside your apartment with sad music,” Jared says.

Jensen isn’t sure whether he should laugh or be a little worried, because he’s pretty sure Jared’s telling the truth. “Sad music?” he asks. “Why would that sway me?”

“You know, it would be something about broken hearts or love lost or friends deserting people to guilt you into helping,” Jared explains. “But I couldn’t think of a good song that would convey

that. See? I suck at details. This is why I need you.”

Jensen sighs. “Just tell me what you need help with.”

“Okay,” Jared says. “But just keep in mind that being around Sandy is like downing half a bottle of tequila for me, and I shouldn’t be held responsible for questionable judgment or bad decision-making in her presence.”

“I really hope you don’t say things like that to her face,” Jensen says. “And just tell me what the damned problem is already.”

“Okay, so I maybe, possibly, might have promised her that I’d cook for her next Friday.”

Jensen groans.

“And that I’d make cannelloni,” Jared adds.

“Oh, fuck,” Jensen says with feeling.

“Yeah.”

“Do you even know how to cook?”

“Not really. You?”

“No fucking idea,” Jensen says morosely. “And there’s no way you can just call Sandy and tell her she hallucinated that invitation?”

“Nope. She was totally psyched about homemade Italian. It was probably the most enthusiastic she got the whole night.”

Jensen curses again. “Jared, what the hell possessed you to offer to cook when you don’t even own the ingredients for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?”

“She came right out and said she thinks it’s hot when men can cook! I had to say it!” Jared pauses. “And how do you know that?”

“I looked through your fridge last night. And she might think guys who can cook are hot, but I really doubt she thinks guys who lie are attractive.”

“I know,” Jared moans. “And that’s why you and I need to figure out how to make cannelloni in the next six days, so that it’s not a lie. Or at least not such a big one.”

Jensen sighs. “Fuck. So not only do we have to learn how to make edible pasta in less than a week, but we also have to fix up your apartment.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. “Wait, what’s wrong with my apartment?”

“Well, for one thing, you seem to be laboring under the delusion that cardboard boxes are furniture.”

“I only have a couple,” Jared says defensively. “And they’re just temporary.”

“Great. Now would be a fabulous time to replace them with grownup furniture. And while we’re on the subject of trash masquerading as interior decorating, that tower of beer cans really needs

to go.”

“Dude, that’s our beeramid!” Jared protests. “Do you know how long it took Chad and I to make that thing?”

“How long do you think Sandy will stay after she sees it?” Jensen counters.

Jared makes a frustrated noise, but gives in. “Fine. We’ll work on my apartment, too. But first, we need to do something about this cannelloni mess. Come on, make me one of your awesome plans.”

Jensen sighs again. “All right. Here’s what we’re going to do. You get ahold of a recipe - something that looks pretty easy. Then we’ll hit the grocery store, get five times the amount of all the ingredients, and practice making the stuff until you’ve got it down.”

“We’re going to make five batches of cannelloni?”

“As many as it takes,” Jensen says grimly.

* * *

As it turns out, five isn’t nearly enough. The first batch is ruined within minutes, after Jared overboils the pasta shells and they fall apart when he tries to plop them in the pan for stuffing. The second time he burns himself draining the pasta without a colander and drops the whole pot, and they have to pick the shells out of the sink and throw them away.

Jensen, who thought it would be a good idea to assign Jared to the relatively simple task of boiling pasta, nearly reconsiders the whole thing.

After the third and fourth attempts go completely wrong (Jensen burns the sausage mix trying to patch up Jared’s burn, and then one of them leaves a fork in the microwave with the defrosting spinach, which a) nearly causes a fire, and b) burns the crap out of the spinach, which smells to high heaven), Jensen really does reconsider.

“There’s got to be an Italian restaurant somewhere in this town that will deliver,” he says, scraping the frying pan into the garbage. “Toss it in the oven before she gets here, leave a few dirty pans by the sink, and spill some sauce on your shirt. She’ll never know.”

But Jared refuses. “I can’t, Jensen. I promised her I’d cook, and I have to.” He folds his arms stubbornly. “And you promised to help.”

“That was before I knew things would be burning and lighting and fire and possibly exploding,” Jensen points out.

Jared grins. “Come on, you afraid to get a little dirty?”

Jensen’s more afraid for his life, actually, but before he can say that Jared dips a finger into the spinach mess on the counter and comes at him. Jensen has to duck his arm and twist away, but even then he only makes it a few steps before Jared’s got him pinned up against the counter, waving his goopy finger menacingly. Jensen gets his hands up in front of him, ready to deflect, but it’s hard to concentrate on defending himself when he’s got all six and a half feet of Jared pressed up against him, especially wearing a devious smile.

“You wouldn’t,” he says, but he’s a little breathless and it comes out kind of weak and unsure. That just makes Jared’s eyes light up with evil glee, though, and Jensen senses he might really

do it, which is just not okay. “Jared, don’t. That stuff is disgusting, I don’t want it on me. And I really like this shirt, and it looks a lot better without food all over it. Seriously, man, don’t.”

Jared just shakes his head. “Jen,” he says pityingly, “You really need to loosen up.” And then, grinning malevolently, he smears a stripe of spinach right down the middle of Jensen’s face.

Jensen gasps and shoves back, outraged, but it’s too late, and Jared’s already pushed away and out of reach, laughing his ass off. “You fucking bastard,” Jensen curses, looking around for something suitable to retaliate with. “You’re going to regret that so much when I’m done with you.”

“Ooh, big talk,” Jared teases, backing away. “You got something to back that up?”

“Oh, I’ve got something, all right,” Jensen threatens. “And it’s going all over your smug face.” He circles Jared carefully, picking up a potholder to use as a shield, then darts for the tub of cottage cheese sitting on the counter. Jared’s eyes go wide, but he only has time to turn his head before Jensen’s mashing a handful of the stuff into his neck.

After that, it’s all-out war. Jared stuffs a handful of cheese down the front of Jensen’s shirt, then nearly falls over laughing when Jensen shimmies around the kitchen trying to get it out. Jensen shuts him up by flicking a spoonful of sauce at Jared, marinara splotching his chest like a gunshot wound, and then they give up on actual calculated attacks and just fight it out down and dirty.

The battle rages on until Jared slips on a pasta shell on the floor and takes Jensen down with him, and they end up splayed out on the linoleum, exhausted and breathing hard and laughing their asses off. The dogs run in from the next room at the noise and try to lick the mess off, and Jensen has to push a slobbery Sadie off him before he can sit up and assess the damage.

The kitchen is a mess, food everywhere, and Jensen’s not much better - his shirt is completely ruined, stained red, green and white like the Italian flag, and his skin is sticky with spinach and sauce and god knows what.

Jared sits up across from him, shaking cheese out of his hair, and sees him mourning his shirt. “I told you to wear an apron.”

Jensen glares at him. “And I told you, aprons are for women.”

Jared looks down at the frilly, flowery travesty he’s got on, then his mostly clean clothes. “And the winners of food fights.”

“Shut up, you didn’t win,” Jensen grumbles. “And I can’t believe you actually did that. What are you, twelve?” But he’s grinning, and for some reason he can’t make himself stop. His shirt is a total loss and he’s going to smell like scorched spinach until he gets a shower, but it’s kind of funny, and this was the most fun he’s had in a long time, maybe forever.

Jared grins right back. “Better twelve than eighty.”

“What? I don’t act eighty.”

Jared looks up from wetting paper towels at the sink. “Okay, maybe not, but you do kind of take things seriously.” He hands Jensen the damp towel. “You are allowed to have fun sometimes, you know.”

Jensen makes a face and starts mopping himself off. “Am I allowed to borrow a shirt? Because I

think this one's beyond help."

"Yeah, of co -" Jared starts to say, then an evil grin lights up his face.

"Oh, God," Jensen moans. "What?"

"You're allowed to borrow a shirt," Jared says slyly. "But only if you let me choose which one."

"No, Jared," Jensen says desperately. "No, there's no way. I'd rather wear an apron."

"That can be arranged," Jared says craftily, undoing the ties of his blue flowery apron. "Your choice."

Five minutes later, Jensen is rolling up the sleeves of the ugliest shirt he's ever seen, and Jared is struggling not to laugh. He's starting to wish he'd chosen the apron, because even that would be better than a shirt covered in giant, obnoxious palm trees. Seriously, palm trees? Jared is so weird.

"I wish I had a picture," Jared says. "Nobody is going to believe me when I tell them."

"And nobody's going to blame me when I kill you," Jensen replies, shoving him back into the kitchen.

* * *

By the end of the night, they haven't really accomplished much. They're better at getting all the ingredients ready for cooking, which Jared thinks is definitely something, but so far they haven't produced anything that actually looks or tastes like cannelloni should. He promises to look up a new recipe with more detailed instructions (something from *Cooking for Complete Idiots*, Jensen suggests), and they make a plan to meet up the next night and try again. Jared even promises not to start another food fight, in the interest of wasting less time and food.

Jensen nods and starts undoing the buttons of Jared's shirt, clearly meaning to give it back before he leaves.

"No, no," Jared protests. "You keep that. I'll wash your shirt and give it back to you tomorrow. It was my fault you got dirty, so I'll take care of it."

Jensen looks pleasantly surprised, but then his eyes narrow. "Wait. You just want me to have to wear this ugly thing home."

Jared doesn't bother denying it, just grinning.

Jensen shakes his head. "Fine. Serves you right when I burn it in sacrifice to the gods of bad taste."

"You can't burn my shirt!"

"Watch me," Jensen threatens.

Jared meets his glare for a second, then smiles smugly. "Nah, you won't."

"Oh really?" Jensen asks incredulously. "And why not?"

"'Cause you love me," Jared says, giving Jensen his sunniest smile.

Jensen's mouth twitches like he wants to smile back, then he looks horrified.

Jared laughs, and Jensen shakes his head and says, "Dude, shut up."

He doesn't make any more threats toward the shirt, though, doing up the buttons again and unrolling the sleeves. Jared watches and thinks it's kind of weird, seeing someone else in his clothes, especially when it's another guy and they almost fit. What's even weirder is that seeing Jensen in his shirt earlier had hit him with the same flare of heat in his gut he gets seeing a girl in one of his shirts, even though Jensen looked a lot different than a girl. For one thing, he wasn't swamped by it, and for another, he wasn't barelegged under it - although, Jared thinks, Jensen would probably look good like that. He probably has nice legs. He has nice everything else, after all. Which Jared's not really sure why he's noticed, but whatever. Maybe it's his new appreciation of fashion. Jensen's jeans are cut just exactly right to pull tight against his ass when he's leaning over, so Jared knows for a fact that that part of him, at least, is very nice. It's not that different from a girl, especially a tomboyish one - less curves, but a tight, firm ass that's appealing all the same.

It isn't until Jensen's snapping in his face, saying, "Jared? Hello?" that he realizes his mind's gone off on a bit of a tangent. "Um. What?"

Jensen gives him a weird look. "You totally zoned out there. Daydreaming about Sandy and cannelloni?"

Jared laughs, relieved for an excuse that's not a little pervy. "Yeah. Specifically, what canoodling might come after the cannelloni." He wiggles his eyebrows, and Jensen makes a face.

"Dude, I don't want to know."

"Yeah," Jared agrees. "Okay. See you tomorrow, then?"

"Unfortunately."

"Have fun with my shirt."

"Bite me."

Jared closes the door behind Jensen with a grin.

* * *

Sunday goes better than Saturday, since they actually manage to get the sausage mix into the manicotti shells, but then they get distracted with the dogs, because Jared has to show Jensen this amazingly hilarious thing he discovered where Harley will chase a flashlight beam all around the room and even jump to get it on the wall, and the cannelloni dehydrates into a crunchy mess. On Monday they actually make a presentable version of the dish that survives baking, but then when they sit down to take their first tentative taste, Jared remembers something really, really bad. "Oh, shit."

At Jensen's inquiring look, he says, "Um, you haven't seen any leaves lying around, have you?"

Jensen gives him that *you might be crazy, but I'm humoring you* eyebrow, complete with head tilt. "Uh, no. We're indoors, Jared."

Jared makes a face at him. “Thanks, Einstein. Seriously, do you remember me taking any leaves out of the sauce?”

“No,” Jensen says, bewildered. “Why the hell would there be leaves in the sauce? Were you stirring it with a branch, or something?”

“It was a bay leaf,” Jared says, poking at the stuffed manicotti on his plate. “The recipe said you could put a bay leaf in the sauce mix if you wanted, and I think I did, this time. But I don’t think I took it out, and um.” He swallows. “I think they’re kind of...”

“Kind of what?” Jensen asks.

Jared winces. “Poisonous?”

Jensen looks down at his plate like it’s been infected with ebola. “And it’s somewhere in our food?”

“I think so,” Jared says. “I didn’t see it when I was spooning out the sauce, but it might have gotten all ground up or disintegrated.”

“So we have no way of finding this possibly poisonous leaf,” Jensen surmises. “Great.”

“I might have taken it out,” Jared says. “Maybe.”

“I’m not going to stake my life on *maybe*,” Jensen says, pushing his plate away.

“It’s not going to kill you,” Jared argues. “Probably.” At Jensen’s glare, he says, “Come on, this is the only good version we’ve got. We have to at least taste it so we know if we’re on the right track.”

Jensen looks pained and on the verge of refusal, but Jared’s spent way too much time around adorable little puppies, and he has the soft, pleading eyes down pat. Jensen looks back down at his plate and sighs. “Fine. If I die, I’m haunting you.”

“Fair enough,” Jared says, picking up his fork. “Oh, wait. Is there anything you want to say, in case it’s our last meal?”

Jensen just stares at him.

“Okay, I’ll go first,” Jared says. “I’m really glad I met you, Jensen. You’ve been a really good friend.”

“Um, you too, I guess,” Jensen says. “Thanks for...making my life interesting.”

“You’re welcome,” Jared says. “And just so you know, you have a nice ass. I don’t know why I noticed that, but I did, and I thought you should know, just in case I never get another chance to tell you.”

Jensen blinks. “Uh. What?”

But Jared just stuffs a huge bite of cannelloni into his mouth, and after a second, Jensen shrugs and does the same.

The cannelloni’s not actually that bad. A little soggy, and the sauce is too runny, but overall, it’s not terrible. A few more times, and it should actually be something approaching good. And

neither of them expire during the meal, which is always a plus in Jared's book.

They do the dishes together, and Jared can't help but laugh when he rinses out the saucepan and finds a bay leaf clinging to the edge. He pulls it out and sticks it on Jensen's arm. "Guess we're not going to die."

"Thank God," Jensen says. "I've had food that's to die for, but that cannelloni was definitely not it."

"Hey," Jared says, punching him with a soapy hand.

Jensen splashes him back with cold water, then busies himself with some silverware before casually asking, "So, you want to retract anything you said when you thought death was imminent?"

Jared thinks it over for a second, then shrugs. "Nah. I didn't say anything I didn't mean."

Jensen looks at him for a long second, then starts to laugh.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just...you're so weird."

Jared's not sure what inspired that observation, but he's got a comeback anyway. "Whatever. You love it."

Jensen frowns and splashes him with more water, but he doesn't deny it.

* * *

Jensen's actually really not sure how to react to Jared complimenting his ass, and he spends a lot of time thinking about that one random statement in the next few days when he should be doing things like working or driving or actually listening to what Tom is saying on the phone. He can't help it. He's got a crush on Jared, he can admit that, but it's one thing to lust after someone you know is totally straight and unattainable. It's another when they casually mention they've been checking your ass out.

But it's also Jared, who is quite possibly the most random person Jensen's ever met, so it could mean nothing. Jared says weird things all the time. And from what Jensen's seen of Jared's thought processes, even something that highly questionable might seem like a friendly compliment. Jared's brain kind of frightens Jensen.

And Jared's still pretty straight and unattainable, if his pursuit and hopes of marrying Sandy are anything to go by. After thinking about it way too much, Jensen puts it down to random happenstance and lets it go.

But then they're in the middle of IKEA on Wednesday, scoping out some furniture for Jared's apartment, and Jared does it again. He's been bitching the whole trip about the store layout, how they're being herded along the little path like cattle, and it's stupid that you can't just pick a bookshelf off a shelf, you have to fill out a little card and go hunt through a warehouse to get it, and how the hell is he supposed to know what stuff is when it's all labeled in Swedish anyway?

Jensen's mostly tuning him out, mentally comparing the finish of one bookshelf to the coffee table Jared already has, when Jared says, out of the blue, "What about you?"

Jensen glances up. “Huh?”

“You’ve been giving me all kinds of relationship advice to get Sandy,” Jared points out. “But what about you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Uh. No.”

“Why not?”

There’s never really any good answer to a question like that, and the closest thing to an honest reply is way more complicated than Jensen really wants to get into at the moment, so he just shrugs.

“Come on,” Jared says, leaning against the partition next to him. “I feel like we talk about me all the time, and I want to know about you.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Jensen says, running a finger along the shelves, brushing titles he can’t translate. He can feel Jared’s eyes on him, but he doesn’t look up, tracing the letters on an umlaut-laden spine.

“Okay,” Jared says finally. “Well, I know it’s not about anything physical, ‘cause I’ve seen you, and I’m pretty sure you could have anyone you wanted.”

Jensen closes his eyes and takes a slow breath, because seriously. How is he supposed to react when Jared comes out with stuff like that? Is that just another friendly observation?

“And you know everything there is to know about relationships,” Jared goes on. “So it’s not that. So unless you’re hiding a huge doll collection in your basement or you’re secretly a furry, I don’t see why you’d be single.”

“It’s not anything,” Jensen says, trying to end the conversation. “I’m just...not really looking right now, that’s all.”

But Jared looks even more interested at that. “Why not?”

“It’s complicated. And yeah, I’m good at giving advice on relationships, but I really suck at taking advice, especially my own.” There’s more to it than that, but Jensen doesn’t really want to go into it with Jared, especially not when his stupid little high school crush on Jared is what’s currently preventing him from noticing any other eligible men. It’s not that he thinks he’s got a shot with Jared or anything, he just spends so much time with him and thinking about him that it makes it nearly impossible to focus on anything else, including dating.

Jared quirks an eyebrow. “So you give other people advice on making their romantic dreams come true, but you can’t do the same for yourself?”

“Pretty much,” Jensen says shortly. “I think this bookshelf will fit best in your living room. Do you like it?”

Jared doesn’t answer at first, still looking at Jensen with a perplexed, almost sad look on his face, but then he nods. “Sure.”

* * *

It takes them three hours to put the stupid thing together, and by the end of it Jensen’s swearing

IKEA is possibly demonic in origin, because there's no logical way one of the stupid things that holds up a shelf could go missing for a horribly frustrating half hour and then turn up only a foot away, where they looked at least fifty times. It's the work of the devil.

Jared agrees, but he has to admit the bookshelf looks pretty nice when they finally get it set up. It definitely beats a cardboard box, as far as organization of his DVDs goes, and Jensen even rearranges some framed pictures between stuff and makes it all look neat and intentionally visually pleasing. With the addition of an end table and a framed print on the wall where his Star Wars poster used to be, the living room suddenly stops looking like a college dorm room and like an adult lives there. It kind of freaks Jared out at first, but he has to admit it looks good. His bedroom is another matter, but since he isn't expecting Sandy to see it on this date, that's okay.

Jared sweeps through the apartment one more time, obsessively checking to make sure everything's clean and in the right place, but when he surveys the living room again, Jensen is half-asleep on the couch, both dogs snuggled as close to him as they can get. They're not allowed on the furniture, but they make do - Harley's spread across Jensen's feet, and Sadie's leaning up against the cushions, her head nestled on Jensen's knee. Jared shakes his head. Jensen might actually be right about the dogs liking him better.

Then again, they might just be after the half-eaten container of pad thai in Jensen's lap. They'd gotten takeout on the way home, since neither of them could stand another night of Italian, but Jensen had only been halfway through his when Jared was finished and too excited about the new furniture to wait.

Jared takes the pad thai away, placing it up on the end table where the dogs can't reach it, and Jensen cracks one eye open to look at him. "What's up?"

"Everything looks really good," Jared tells him. "I really like the bookshelf."

"Good," Jensen says, yawning. "So, you ready for tomorrow night, then?"

"Not sure."

Jensen blinks. "What do you mean?"

Jared wrinkles his nose. "Well, there's this one thing that would make me feel better about everything, but you won't want to do it."

Jensen sighs. "What is it?"

"It would just be really helpful if you could, you know..."

"Jared."

"...maybe act like Sandy?"

Jensen sits up. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"I just want to run through it," Jared explains. "Like a dress rehearsal. So I know what to expect."

"So now I'm Sandy's understudy?"

"No, you're kind of like a stand-in," Jared says. "Not really her, but a person who can sort of take her place. Like a cardboard cut-out or a blow-up doll or something."

“You say the sweetest things,” Jensen deadpans. “Well, you’re right, I don’t want to do it.”

Jared starts to put on the pleading look, but Jensen smacks him. “Stop that. I didn’t say I wouldn’t, just that I don’t want to.”

“I can work with that,” Jared says.

As it turns out, Jensen’s not very good at imitating Sandy. When he first knocks on the door he pretends to swoon all over Jared and says ridiculous, flowery things about the furniture and the “flow” of the room, whatever the hell that means, and then he keeps slipping out of character and saying things like, “Offer me a drink, you dick,” and “Dude, if you don’t take my coat soon I’m going to get heatstroke,” even though the coat is purely imaginary. But it calms Jared’s nerves to have a plan, and he can put up with Jensen bitching him out for staring at his (again, imaginary) cleavage and slapping him for “getting handsy” if it means things will go more smoothly with the real Sandy.

When he finally feels comfortable, he drags Jensen into the kitchen and breaks out the hideously-expensive-yet-divinely-good cheesecake from his freezer in thanks. Jensen polishes off two pieces and declares it orgasmic, but then reminds Jared he’s not that kind of girl and he’s still not putting out until the fifth date.

Jared isn’t sure if this is Sandy-Jensen or Jensen-Jensen talking, but either way, they’re both overtired and stressed, so he just rolls his eyes and pushes Jensen toward the door, promising to call after his date. Jensen waves to the dogs and wishes him luck.

Part 3

Jared makes good on his promise and calls literally the minute Sandy leaves Friday night. Jensen knows the news is good as soon as he hears Jared’s voice, and he grins as Jared describes the absolutely perfect cannelloni he made and recounts every single thing Sandy said in praise of his cooking.

“It was so amazingly awesome, Jensen,” Jared gushes. “I had it timed *just* right, so she had just enough time to finish her first glass of wine and then the oven timer went off and I was whipping out cannelloni and warmed bread and a salad and more wine. It was like magic.”

Or good planning, but Jensen lets Jared have his moment. He’s glad things went well with Sandy, obviously, and it’s awesome that she suggested another date, both because it seems like she’s really interested and things are progressing nicely.

But somehow Jensen can’t manage to be very enthusiastic about anything, and he finds himself just wanting the conversation to be over, which isn’t something he normally thinks when he’s talking to Jared. It’s just - he was overtired last night, he knows that, and he’d had a bit to drink, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that he was blatantly *flirting* with Jared last night. There’s no other word for it - when he was pretending to be Sandy and coyly fingering the buttons of his shirt and then reminding Jared saucily that his face was several inches north, he sure as hell wasn’t acting like a friend or relationship adviser. And then he went and made a comment about *putting out*, for God’s sake, when he wasn’t even pretending to be Sandy anymore, and Jensen cringes at the memory. Yeah, he wasn’t at the top of his game - working all day, shopping with Jared, putting together the bookshelf from hell and downing several beers on a few bites of takeout left him a little out of it - but that’s no excuse for letting his guard down

and practically throwing himself at Jared. He doesn't think Jared really noticed, beyond a little bemusement, but still. Jensen isn't the kind of person that just waltzes over boundaries like that, and the only thing he can think to blame is the fact that he and Jared have spent practically all their free time this week together.

And that's the only thing he can come up with that could possibly help - a little time apart. It shouldn't be too hard. Jared's well on his way with Sandy, and he shouldn't need too much more advice. Maybe the occasional phone call or shopping trip or whatever, but not this every night of the week stuff they've been doing. Jensen's laid down the basics, and Jared's a smart guy - he can figure out the rest. Jensen'll just back off a little, have a few excuses handy to turn down invitations, and let this stupid thing he has for Jared work itself out of his system.

Then, when he's finally over his crush or whatever, they can just be friends, and Jensen won't have to worry about saying suggestive things or Jared catching a lustful gaze here or there. It's a good plan.

But Jared's never been too great at the plan thing, especially when it's a secret plan Jensen hasn't even told him, and in the middle of a long rambling sentence, he suddenly says, "Hey, that reminds me. Are you doing anything on Sunday? I was thinking you should come over."

Jensen hesitates. "Oh. You were?"

"Yeah," Jared says, the *that's why I asked you, duh* clear in his tone. "But if you're busy, that's cool."

Jensen reaches for one of those handy excuses he planned out, but none come to mind. "Uh, no, it's just - you don't really need any advice on how to go watch a movie at Sandy's place, right?"

"Well, not really," Jared says, sounding a little confused. "I just thought - there's a game on, and I thought you might want to watch. You know, just to hang out and relax, since this week was so hectic." He pauses. "But it's fine if you don't want to, I just thought I'd ask."

And now he sounds uncertain, and Jensen feels like a total ass for making it sound like he only endures Jared's company for the sake of business. But if he lets himself go over there for no reason other than to hang out, he'll totally be screwing his plan.

"No, I'd like to," he says, and the reluctance there is genuine, "But I already have plans. Sorry, man."

"No, hey, that's cool," Jared says. "Maybe some other time, then."

"Yeah," Jensen says, and he means that too. "Okay. Well, I'm glad your date went well, and good luck with the movie."

"Yeah, thanks," Jared says. "Uh, I guess I'll just see you around, then."

"Call if you need anything," Jensen says automatically, then amends, "If you need any help with Sandy."

"Yeah."

Jared's unusually quiet as they say goodbye, and Jensen wants more than anything to just call back and say he'd love to hang out, that he'll be there with beer and Jared better get some decent salsa, anything to erase that uncertainty from Jared's voice. But he's already proven that his likelihood to do stupid things increases exponentially with the amount of time he spends with

Jared, and the only way to fix that is a little separation, no matter how it makes him feel. Jensen flips his phone shut, sighing, and resolves himself to some quality Jared-free time.

* * *

It works for a few days. Jensen fills his newly free time with all kinds of things he's been meaning to do and never had time for, and it's actually kind of nice. Well, until he realizes that alphabetizing his DVD collection and defrosting his freezer and organizing all his socks by color and function were things he never got around to for a reason - namely because they're pointless and boring as all hell - and that his other friends, while nice to hang out with, kind of pale in comparison to Jared. Tom's a good guy, but he's not nearly as much fun since he got married and started worrying about college funds for nonexistent kids, and Chris and Steve are always up for a good time, but they also have an annoying habit of sliding into conversations in a language only they understand, comprised of half-sentences and expressive "hmm"s, and none of them want to watch reality TV or cheesy movies (purportedly to mock, but secretly because they love it) or laugh until banana milkshake shoots out their noses.

But whatever. Jensen will just have to get used to an existence free of bad entertainment and drinks shot out someone's nose, that's all. He'll find some new hobbies or get all his Christmas shopping done early or something. It's fine.

Well, it would be, except then Jared goes and totally fucks up Jensen's plans by calling out of the blue on Wednesday and asking, "How do you feel about cats?"

Jensen blinks. "Uh, I don't know. They're okay, I guess?"

"Just okay?"

"Well, yeah. I'm more of a dog person."

"Maybe you just haven't given cats a chance," Jared says. "I mean, have you ever actually owned a cat, or spent a lot of time around one?"

"Well, no," Jensen admits. "Not really."

"See? I think you're judging unfairly, here. Cats are smart and playful and intuitive and amazing. You should be more open-minded."

"Um, okay. I'll...work on that," Jensen says. "In the meantime, is there an actual reason you called? Like, something other than my heinous animal prejudices?"

"Yeah, there is."

Jensen waits a beat. "Am I supposed to start guessing?"

Jared sighs. "No. It's just - I kind of need a favor. A big one."

This can't possibly end well, but Jensen did say Jared should call him if he needs help, so he's kind of screwed either way. "So tell me what it is."

"Okay. Well, sometimes at the clinic we take in animals that get left places. They're hurt or malnourished or whatever and people bring them in, and then we take care of them until we can find them a new home."

Jensen is only vaguely familiar with what goes on at a vet clinic, but even he had that much

figured out. “Uh-huh.”

“That’s how I ended up with Sadie and Harley,” Jared goes on. “Someone had abandoned them and no one else wanted them, so I took them home.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jensen says. “What does that have to do with me doing you a favor?” Then it hits him. “Wait. Oh, *fuck* no. Jared, are you trying to make me adopt a *cat*?”

“Jensen, this cat has nowhere else to go! The shelters are all full, and I’ve tried everyone I know. You’re my last hope!”

“No, I’m not, because there is no way in hell I’m taking the thing.” Jensen needs a cat like he needs herpes, which is to say, not at all and fuck you very much for asking.

“It’s not a *thing*, it’s a living breathing animal, and if you don’t adopt him, he’s going to get put down!” Jared sounds really worked up. “You’re just okay with that?”

Okay, innocent animals dying isn’t Jensen’s idea of a good time, but still. “No, but there has to be someone else who can take him. I don’t know anything about cats. I don’t even know if my building allows pets, for Christ’s sake.”

“So sneak him in, they’ll never know,” Jared says, an impatient edge audible in his voice.

“Oh, yeah, and then just lose my apartment and live on the street? Awesome plan!”

“Jensen, come on. I’m serious,” Jared says, like Jensen can’t tell from how not fun this conversation has been. “This cat is going to be *killed* if you don’t take him in. And you’d love him, I know it. He’s adorable and tiny and bitchy, just like you.”

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Wow, thanks. If you love the thing so much, why don’t *you* adopt him?”

“I would, but I’ve got two huge, rambunctious dogs, and it’s just a kitten. He needs a quieter place and more attention.”

“Give him to Sandy.”

“She’s allergic.”

Jensen does a double take. “Wait, what?”

“Yeah, she figured it out after she was at my place. All the pet dander kept making her sneeze.”

“Oh. Dude, that sucks.” Jensen knows more than anyone how much Jared’s dogs mean to him, and the fact that they’re not compatible with the other most important thing in his life must be hard to handle. Sandy’s allergies are no fault of Jensen’s, but the fact that he didn’t even know about it and that Jared’s probably been worrying about it all week is, and he feels like a jerk for pushing Jared away. “So...the *Miami Vice* dogs from your fantasy life?”

Jared’s quiet for a moment. “Guess it’s not going to happen.” He sighs. “Can’t have her sneezing every second, and hairless animals wig me out, so I guess we’ll just have to have a lot of fish or something.”

“You could still name your fish Sonny and Rico,” Jensen says helpfully, trying to lighten the tone a little. “And you could even have a Starsky and Hutch set to go along with them. It’d be a whole crime-fighting legion of fish.”

Jared laughs a little. “Yeah, maybe.” He sighs again. “So, should I give you the innocent little animal spiel again, or should I start calling random people from the phonebook?”

Jensen takes a deep breath, then thunks his head back against the wall. It would really be nice if all his reasonable objections could stand up to Jared’s pleading, but the fact of the matter is, there was never any question of the outcome. Jensen was never going to say no, not when Jared needed something and he could give it. He might not want to do it, but he can’t refuse, especially when Jared goes all mopey and depressed on him. “Neither,” he says. “Just tell me what I have to do to make the little hairball mine.”

“Oh, my God, Jensen, I love you so much,” Jared gushes, mood doing a complete 180 so fast it leaves Jensen dizzy. “You’re the best person in the entire world. And I’ll pay for his shots and the adoption fee and I’ll get you food and a carrier and a litter box and everything, you don’t have to worry about any of it. And I promise to keep looking for somebody, so you won’t have to have him forever.”

“Yeah, all right,” Jensen says, like hearing a certain three words come out of Jared’s mouth didn’t affect him in any way. “Take it easy.”

“You’re seriously amazing. If there was any way to hug you through the phone right now, I would.”

“I believe you,” Jensen says dryly. “You’ll just have to molest a pillow and pretend it’s me, or something.”

“No way, I’m saving all this up for the next time I see you,” Jared promises. “Prepare to be hugged to within an inch of your life. And then I’ll tell you again how awesome a friend you are. There might even be worshiping involved.”

“Dude, it’s just a cat.”

“I know,” Jared says. “But I really, really appreciate it. It breaks my heart when we have to put them down, you know? They’re like helpless little kids.”

Yeah, Jensen knows. He learned early on how to separate himself from things - work, clients, relationships, people - but Jared’s not the type of person who can do that. He throws himself into everything, *feels* everything, puts his entire self into every little thing he does because he doesn’t know any other way. His work and his life are tangled together - he turned two of his clients into his family, and he cries at the end of *Homeward Bound* every damn time, and he actually keeps pictures of Sadie and Harley in his wallet, to show off to friends like a proud dad - but, the bitch of the thing is, he doesn’t want it any other way.

Jensen’s made an art of compartmentalizing, shoving pieces of himself in dark corners so they don’t touch, don’t rub up against anything else, don’t mix or blend or get messy, but even if Jared could do that, he wouldn’t. He’s honest down to his bones, and he’d see holding part of himself back as an untruth, a lack of faith. Jensen sees it as necessary to his survival, but he’s noticed that lately, around Jared, some of his boundaries are starting to crumble. Things that should stay separate are mixing, and what was supposed to be strictly business has crossed over into a mix of friendship and fun that leaves Jensen confused and off-balance. He thought some time apart from Jared would help, but as soon as he picked up the phone and settled into their normal banter without thinking, the rush of feeling he likes to pretend is just friendly affection came back at full force, and that whole thing about absence and fondness? Might just be true. Either way, spending time away from Jared now just leaves Jensen feeling disconnected and off-kilter, missing something fundamental. It felt wrong.

“Anyway, I’ll bring the little guy over tomorrow after work,” Jared says. “You’re going to love him. And thanks for doing this. It really means a lot to me.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jensen says, still trying to sort through what he’s feeling. “I’ll see you then.”

He flips his phone shut, but it’s a long time before he actually makes himself get up and make some dinner, caught up in questions that circle endlessly with no answer in sight.

* * *

Jared brings the cat over the next day, and stays just long enough to tell Jensen the cat’s name is Oscar, he bit Jared three times when he tried to get the cat into his carrier, and his main hobby (besides biting) seems to be glaring suspiciously.

“Great,” Jensen says, peering in through the bars at the small form huddled in the back corner. “Is there some reason you gave me the most antisocial cat you could find? Are you trying to tell me something?”

Jared laughs, unpacking a bag of food and toys onto the counter. “Yes, Jensen, I couldn’t think of another way to bring this up, but that habit you have of biting me needs to stop. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Wait until I start licking myself all over,” Jensen says without thinking, still focused on the cat, then wants to smack his head on the counter.

Jared just laughs, though. “We’ll have the hygiene talk later.”

He gives Jensen a sheaf of papers with instructions for feeding and care. “He’s already got all his shots, and it’ll be awhile before he’s old enough to need fixing, so for now he should be good. Don’t worry if he wants to stay in the carrier for a bit or hide under the couch - cats need to get used to bigger spaces. And call me if you have any questions or whatever.” Jared surveys the kitchen like he’s trying to remember what he forgot, then pats his pockets to reassure himself his keys and wallet are where he left them.

“In a hurry?” Jensen asks, bemused. He’s never seen Jared this businesslike before, but something tells him there’s more to it than that. He’s never seen Jared this harried before, either.

“Yeah, sorry,” Jared says, checking his watch. “I’ve got to get to an appointment. Sorry about leaving you the cat like this - I’ll stop by tomorrow and see how you’re doing, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Don’t worry.” Jensen stares at the bit of fur visible through the carrier sides. “We’ll be fine.”

Jared rushes out. Jensen sighs, then goes to stand in front of the carrier. He opens the little door, bends down to eye level, and takes a good look at the cat crouched in the shadows. “Well,” he says to it. “Looks like it’s just you and me.” The cat makes a noise, half-mew and half-growl.

“Okay, let’s just get something straight,” Jensen says. “I’m sure you’d rather be somewhere else, and quite frankly, I feel the same way about you. But that dork that brought you here has magical powers of persuasion, so we’re just going to have to make the best of the situation for now.” He pauses, and the cat just watches him, golden eyes wide. “You don’t have to like me,” Jensen tells it. “We’ll just have an understanding between us, okay? I’ll feed you and clean your

litterbox, you refrain from mutilating me, my furniture, or my belongings, and we'll just cohabit with as little interference as possible. Deal?"

When he's finished talking, the cat pauses for a long second, as if deep in thought, then comes forward. He comes out of the carrier, paws silent on the counter, and lifts his head to Jensen's fingers, which are still extended. Jensen tenses, wondering if the start to their relationship is going to involve blood, but the cat just sniffs his hand delicately, then pushes his head up, rubbing along Jensen's hand. Jensen catches on after a second, and realizes that the cat - the terror of a cat that bit Jared three times and has a nasty habit of glaring - is arching up into his hand eagerly, petting itself on his fingers, and purring like an outboard motor.

Jensen raises an eyebrow. "Not such a little monster after all, huh?" The cat just chirrups, eyes squinting shut in pleasure, and butts against Jensen's stomach.

* * *

By the time Jared rings the buzzer the next day, Jensen has figured out that Jared was totally, completely wrong about the cat - he's not an antisocial, biting little terror. In fact, Jensen's pretty sure Oscar's the most lovable little ball of fur to ever exist.

He follows Jensen around all day, trotting after him with his little tail held high, and he cuddles at any opportunity, even if Jensen's just standing still for a second - he'll dive at Jensen's feet if they stop moving and try to crawl in his lap if Jensen so much as moves to sit. He purrs hard enough to shake his little frame if Jensen so much as lays a hand on him, and if he picks Oscar up, he'll nuzzle right into a spot under Jensen's chin, inside his shirt collar, and be perfectly content to curl up there as long as he can.

They've only spent one day together, but already Jensen knows that he can pick Oscar up with one hand curving under his ribcage, and that his fingertips fit just right under Oscar's ears, where the fur is impossibly soft, while his thumbs stroke along his face as the little thing stands on his chest or lap. Oscar's a talkative little thing, all chirps and meows and rumbling little grunts, and he'll squawk indignantly if he's hungry or Jensen's hand slows its petting. The little furball's also frisky as all hell, and he zooms up and down the hallways at the slightest suggestion of play. Jensen actually catches himself hiding in his bedroom, peeking out around the corners before ducking back in, teasing him with any spare string or shoelaces around the house, and he's already thought more than once about picking up some jingling balls or furry toys on his way home from work. It's just too adorable when Oscar ducks down, tail lashing behind him, eyes bright and that ready-to-pounce look in his eyes, Jensen can't help but smile back. It's kind of like when Jared gives him that playful smile of his, mischief in his eyes, and Jensen knows he's in for something messy or crazy or embarrassing, but he knows it'll be fun.

Actually, Oscar reminds him a lot of Jared, what with the constant chirruping and demanding attention and insatiable attitude for troublemaking. One time the cat even gives him a slant-eyed look that's so Jared that Jensen's actually kind of freaked out.

He doesn't tell Jared that, though. Oscar ducks under the couch when Jared comes in, and Jensen shrugs and says the cat's a little shy. Jared laughs. "That's an understatement. He makes Scrooge look like a social butterfly and a nice guy."

"Really?" Jensen asks. "He seems pretty friendly to me."

Jared blinks. "He does?"

"Well, yeah," Jensen says. "it took a couple minutes for him to come out of the carrier, but then he was all purring and rubbing. I can't get him to stop following me around."

Jared just stares at him. “Jensen, we named him Oscar because he reminded us of Oscar the Grouch.”

“Oh, come on, he’s not that bad,” Jensen says, reaching under the couch to shoo Oscar out. “Here, you’ll see. He loves to pet himself on peoples’ feet.”

Sure enough, Oscar heads straight for Jared’s feet. But instead of rubbing his face on them as Jensen expects, he bats at one for a second before grabbing Jared’s big toe between both sets of front claws and sinking his teeth in.

“Ow, *fuck*,” Jared yells, and their hands collide as they both reach down to disentangle teeth and claws.

Jensen ends up with Oscar in his lap, and the cat curls up there, purring loudly, watching Jared with a satisfied look. “Okay, that’s weird,” Jensen observes.

“Yeah,” Jared says, eyeing Oscar with mistrust.

Jensen finds it really weird to be in the middle of a staring contest involving a cat, so he tries changing the subject. “So, your date with Sandy is tomorrow, right?” Jensen asks. “Friday night?”

Jared nods.

“And you’re watching a movie?”

“Yeah, something one of her friends recommended.”

“Sounds good,” Jensen says cautiously.

Jared just nods again, and Jensen’s about to ask him what’s up, because Jared only gets this quiet when something’s wrong, but then Jared bursts out, “I’m really nervous.”

“About what?”

“Everything! What I’m wearing, what I should bring, if I should leave my shoes on or take them off, if I’m going to be able to stay awake this time - “

“Okay, okay,” Jensen says, laughing a little. “Relax. Why didn’t you say something earlier? Or call?”

“I didn’t want to bug you,” Jared says, a little hesitant, and Jensen realizes that’s what’s been off this whole week, that Jared’s been acting like he’s not sure he’s welcome or that Jensen wants him around.

“Don’t be stupid,” Jensen chides him, letting genuine warmth seep into his voice. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Jared smiles then, big and bright and real, and Jensen feels it as much as he sees it, like a physical touch, tugging at something deep in his chest. But he only has a second to contemplate what that means before Jared’s launching into a thousand questions, and Jensen falls into his role, calming Jared’s panic with advice.

* * *

An hour later, Jared has exhausted all his what if's, and Jensen's making them some coffee to reenergize

Jared stands next to him. "There's - there's just one more thing I wanted to ask you," he says, and he's acting shy and hesitant like before.

"Okay," Jensen says, handing Jared his mug.

"This is - God. Okay." Jared's actually blushing, and Jensen forgets his coffee. "So, I've been trying to take things slow with Sandy, because I really want to do this right, and things have been - there hasn't really been an opportunity to - "

"To...?" Jensen prods.

"To kiss her," Jared blurts out. "I mean, I gave her a peck on the cheek after the date at the restaurant, but she didn't go for anything more, and then when she left my house she was sneezing a lot and it was kind of gross. But then when she asked me over to watch a movie, I kind of got the feeling that was maybe implied."

Before Jensen can reply, he goes on, "I don't want to assume anything, obviously, but any way you slice it it's still two people in a dark room together, and she did tease me about staying awake - I promised her I'd be wide awake for the whole thing, and she did this - this thing, with her eyes. Like a little sly look-thing. And then she smiled a little, and it was like - smug. Like, *oh, you'll be awake, all right*, but because of her, not the movie."

"Yeah, I got the hint, there, thanks," Jensen says. "So? What's the big deal?"

"What do you mean, what's the big deal?"

"Well, it's a good thing, right? You do want to make out with her, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course I do," Jared says. "But what if it's awful?"

"It won't be awful," Jensen says dismissively, sipping his coffee. "Don't be stupid. Your karma's fine now."

"No, I mean - what if *I'm* awful?"

Jensen blinks. "Is there some reason you would be?"

"Well, maybe!" Jared throws his hands into the air, narrowly missing spilling coffee everywhere. "It's not like I'm new at it, or anything, but it has been kind of a long time, and I've never really thought about it before. What if I've had bad technique this whole time, and no one's ever told me?"

"I think you'd know," Jensen says.

"But this is Sandy, and it has to be *perfect*. This is my chance to really show her how I feel, and I'm pretty sure she isn't going to give me a second chance if I fuck it up." Jared pauses. "Um. Bad pun. But you don't have any tips?"

Jensen clears his throat. "Uh, Jared? Most of my experience in this area isn't really going to be helpful for you."

“Oh,” Jared says, blushing a little. “Well, yeah. But kissing - that’s pretty much the same, right?” He looks hopeful. “You don’t have some handy rules for that? The 5 M’s of making out, or a some rules of tongue?”

Jensen nearly snorts hot coffee out through his nose. This nose-snorting thing is becoming commonplace around Jared, and it’s kind of troubling.

“I think it’s best if you just go with your instinct on this one,” he says. “Having a plan is good, but things like this are better if you’re not overthinking them.”

“Okay,” Jared says, licking his lips. “Help me with a plan, then.” When Jensen makes a face, he pleads, “Just an outline, okay? Just give me something to go on. I’ll feel a lot better if I have a basic idea of where I’m going.”

Jensen sighs, but caves. His inability to say no to Jared is also kind of troubling. “Okay, fine. Um. Well, just from the little I know about Sandy, I think you’re right about taking things slow. So you’d want to start with easy, gentle, getting-to-know-you kind of kisses, where she’s always got the option of stopping or letting it go further.”

Jared nods, focusing intently on Jensen’s words, and Jensen feels himself blushing a little. Talking about kissing with Jared’s a little weird, especially when it’s going to be Jared doing all the things Jensen’s saying. He can almost picture what it’ll be like, what Jared’s mouth will look like spit-slick and kiss-swollen, the soft sounds his lips will make on - on Sandy’s, Jensen reminds himself firmly, jerking his gaze away from Jared’s mouth. Jared’s looking at him expectantly, and he clears his throat.

“Right. So you’re not just going to bend her head back and stick your tongue down her throat, you’re going to ease into it. The first kiss is to make sure she’s on the same page - you pull back, leave a little space, and let her come to you if she wants to keep going. Then do it again, but with less space, and you keep doing it until there’s barely any room between you and there’s no hesitation.”

“Okay.” Jared wipes his palms on his jeans, then moves to stand in front of Jensen. “So, the first kiss is kind of like - “

Jensen leans back, away. “Dude - “

“Jensen, come on, what if I’m terrible? I just need to make sure I’m doing this right. Please.”

“And you want to practice on *me*?” Jensen puts another foot of space between them. “Bad idea, Jared.”

“Come on,” Jared repeats, moving forward again. “It’ll be like last time you pretended to be Sandy.” He smiles a little. “You can yell at me for staring at your boobs again.”

This is a bad idea. Jensen knows this is a bad idea. He hasn’t exactly labeled his feelings for Jared, but he knows they’re not what they’re supposed to be in the platonic friendship they’ve got going on. Making out with Jared - for practice or otherwise - is not going to help those feelings in the least. But Jared’s not thinking any of those things, he’s just thinking this will help him with Sandy. And maybe if Jensen just kisses Jared this once and gets it over with, he can get it out of his system. That doesn’t make very much sense, but Jensen has this problem with saying no to Jared, and he’ll take any excuse he can get.

“Yeah, well, you keep forgetting my face is up here,” he jokes, then swallows hard when Jared meets his eyes and sees his consent.

Jared's eyes flick over his face, studying him. "So, um." He licks his lips again, which is really fucking distracting, and Jensen's so caught up in watching Jared's tongue flick out to wet his lips that he almost misses Jared darting in.

He jerks back unconsciously, lower back hitting the counter's edge and his coffee sloshing, and he sets the cup on the counter before he spills hot liquid on something sensitive. "Dude, a little warning would be nice," he says, trying to play off how rattled he is.

When he turns around, Jared's right there, not touching him but holding him in place all the same, and for once, Jared doesn't have a reply or retort. He just reaches up to catch Jensen's jaw with his thumb, tilting up, and leans in again.

It's just like Jensen told him, a gentle press of lips, no pressure and no hurry, but it sends a flare of heat through Jensen, and he's responding before he even thinks about it, pushing up into Jared.

Jared exhales, like he's relieved, breath warm against Jensen's cheek, then returns the kiss. He catches Jensen's lips with his own, keeping it chaste and slow, waiting to be met halfway before continuing. Jensen figures Sandy wouldn't say no to any of this, so he keeps saying yes, moving things along, and Jared responds with gentle, exploratory kisses, learning every detail of Jensen's mouth, getting to know him like he's supposed to do to Sandy.

But then Jared pulls back, just enough space for a 'no' between their lips, and even though Jensen knows this is where he should stop, should joke that Jared knows him well enough by now, he doesn't. He doesn't even think about Sandy or what she'd want, he only knows that this is what he wants, that he won't and can't stop now, and he crosses the infinitesimal gap between them and seals his mouth over Jared's.

Jared makes a little noise in the back of his throat, then he's sliding his hand around the back of Jensen's neck and going for it, kissing Jensen hungrily, tipping his head back and curling his tongue against Jensen's.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Jensen recognizes that things are spiraling out of control, but he's more concerned with the way he's suddenly hot all over, prickles of heat racing across his skin, and all he can think about, besides how amazing Jared's mouth feels on his, is getting closer, having more.

But then, out of nowhere, Jared jerks back and says, "Fuck, ow!" and Jensen looks down to see Oscar sinking his teeth into Jared's foot again. The sight of the tiny cat latched onto Jared's sock, and Jared's attempts to shake him off, break the spell, and suddenly Jensen realizes just how out of control things have gotten. He's pressed up against the counter, wood digging into his back, his hands are on Jared's hips, keeping him close, and worst of all, he's half-hard. Oscar finally lets go, skittering off down the hall, and Jensen does the same, quickly, dropping his hands and turning toward the counter to hide his reaction. His coffee's sitting there, from earlier, and he takes a big gulp, hoping the hot liquid will keep him from chasing the taste of Jared around his mouth.

Jared shuffles awkwardly behind him. "Um. Was - was that okay?" he asks, a little breathless.

Jensen closes his eyes, trying to slow his heartbeat back to normal. "Yeah," he says, voice coming out rougher than he intended. "I think you've got it."

"Okay," Jared says. "Uh, good. Thanks."

There's another long moment of silence, only broken by the rustle of Jared fidgeting. After a minute, Jared says, "I should probably go, then."

Jensen turns just enough to see Jared's face, then realizes that was a mistake. Jared's flushed, lips slick and swollen, and Jensen has to clench his hands around the mug of coffee to stop himself from jumping Jared right there, pushing him down on the linoleum and taking this thing as far as it can go. But that would be a bad idea; it would fuck everything up, and Jensen doesn't even know if Jared's really reacting to him or Sandy. He just hopes like hell the coffee mug can stand the pressure of unrequited lust.

Jared interprets his silence as agreement, and nods. "Okay. I'll call you after my date tomorrow, okay?"

Jensen nods.

When Jared lets himself out, Jensen unclenches his fingers from the mug, dumps the coffee in the sink, and slides down the cupboards to sit on the floor. He leans his head forward to rest on his knees, ignoring the pressure of his cock in his jeans, and tries to figure out what the hell just happened.

Part 4

When Jared does call, a few days later, he doesn't say anything about the date, and Jensen doesn't ask. It takes them a minute to find a safe topic of conversation, but after Jensen tells Jared about Oscar's latest trick - hiding until Jensen walks down the hallway between the bedroom and the kitchen, then running full speed past with only a pause to jump and bat at Jensen's leg with his paws before he's streaking off.

"Scared the shit out of me the first time he did it," Jensen says, and Jared cracks up and makes fun of him for being scared by a seven-pound bit of fur, and then, without any fanfare or heartfelt conversations, they're back to normal. Jensen's not sure how it happened, or why, but he's not going to question it. When Jared invites him along on a Christmas shopping trip, he says yes without thinking.

* * *

Jared picks up a bright pink mixer, tilting it to see inside the bowl. "You think she'd like this?"

Jensen shrugs. "I don't know. Does your mom cook a lot?"

"Well, yeah," Jared says. "I don't know if she uses a mixer, though."

Jensen shrugs again. "She can always return it if she doesn't like it."

"No, I have to get her a really good present," Jared tells him. "Last year was the thing with the ironing board, and I have to make it up to her with something seriously amazing."

Jensen laughs. "I still can't believe you got your mom an ironing board for Christmas."

"She needed a new one," Jared says indignantly. "It was a totally practical gift. I don't know what the problem was."

“The problem isn’t the ironing board. It’s what it said.”

“It was a gift! All it said was *I love you* and *you iron a lot.*” It made sense to Jared - he figured she’d appreciate something useful rather than another knickknack or World’s Greatest Mom mug. And she does do a lot of ironing. He just wanted to make it a little easier for her.

Jensen shakes his head. “Forget about practical stuff, okay? She’s your mom. Get her something she wants, not something she needs.”

Jared’s still not sure she didn’t want the ironing board - she doesn’t hate ironing, or anything - but the glares he got from his sister were enough to convince him Jensen’s probably right. He sighs. “Fine. But no clothes. And she has enough jewelry for eight people, so that’s out, too.”

Jensen pushes him down the department store aisle. “I’m sure we’ll find something.”

Half an hour later, Jared has a scarf that Jensen promises only says complimentary things, and Jared says, “Awesome. Now I just need something that says *I’m totally devoted to you* but not in a creepy way.”

“For Sandy?”

“No, Jensen, for you,” Jared says, making moony eyes at him. “You’re the Danny Zuko to my Sandra Dee.”

“You’re really failing at the not-creepy part,” Jensen observes.

“You love it,” Jared tells him. “And yes, I’m talking about Sandy.” He pauses. “The real one, not Olivia Newton-John.”

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I got that, thanks. Do you have any idea what you want to get real-Sandy?”

Jared shrugs. “Something nice?” He picks up a candle decorated with snowmen. “Does this say *I love you, be mine?*”

Jensen looks at it. “It’s more like *I love you, Grandma.*”

Jared sighs and sets it back down. “And I suppose ironing boards and mixers are out?”

“What did I say about practical gifts?”

“Yeah, yeah. Hey, this is awesome,” Jared says, holding up a t-shirt with “Ho, Ho, Ho,” on the front.

“If you give her that, you’d better be halfway across the country before she opens it.”

Jared laughs and sets it back on the rack. “Actually, I was thinking about that.”

“Giving her a bad gift and running?”

“No, about being halfway across the country. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I was thinking about inviting her down for the holidays.” He straightens the other t-shirts on the rack. “Not for the whole time, obviously. Just a day or two, so she can meet my parents.”

Jensen doesn’t say anything, and when Jared looks up for a reply, he finds Jensen staring at him

like he just sprouted antlers and a glowing red nose. “Uh, Jensen?”

“Yeah,” Jensen says, shaking his head. “Um. Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you,” Jared points out. “I know it’s kind of a big step, but I’ve been planning to marry her since I met her, so it’s not really that sudden for me.”

“Yeah,” Jensen says, but his voice sounds a little odd, kind of tight. “But it might be for her. I don’t know, it doesn’t sound like such a good plan.”

“But maybe I could just invite her for New Year’s, or sometime after Christmas,” Jared argues. “That way it wouldn’t be so much pressure. Just dinner with my family, not all the relatives and whoever.”

“I don’t know,” Jensen says, busying himself straightening a rack of ties.

Jared frowns. Jensen’s never this indecisive about things, it’s part of the reason why he’s so good at giving advice on anything and everything. He always has a firm opinion, and it’s usually right. But maybe he does have an opinion and thinks Jared doesn’t want to hear it?

“Come on,” Jared says with a little smile, cajoling. “You can tell me if I’m way off, here. I can take it.”

Jensen shakes his head, not looking up from the ties. “It’s not - I don’t know, Jared. I don’t know Sandy or your family, so I can’t tell you what to do.”

Jared huffs a laugh. “That’s never stopped you before.”

Jensen does look up, then, but instead of a smirk to acknowledge Jared’s teasing, the look Jared gets is closer to a glare.

“Jensen? What’s - “

“I just - I can’t talk about this with you,” Jensen interrupts. His fingers are clutching the ties so tightly now that his knuckles are white.

“What do you mean?” Jared asks, totally confused. If Jensen can talk him through making out with Sandy, why wouldn’t he be able to discuss this? It doesn’t make any sense.

“I just can’t, okay? Would you fucking let it go?”

Jared recoils slightly at that, and Jensen shakes his head, letting go of the ties. “I have to go.”

“What? Is something wrong?”

Jensen’s eyes catch Jared’s for a second as his question hangs in the air, and even though Jared can’t read the mix of complicated emotions he finds there, he can tell that the answer is yes, that something’s very wrong. He reaches out for Jensen, to catch his arm or shoulder and keep him there until Jared can figure out where this conversation went so wrong and what Jensen isn’t telling him, but Jensen twists away from his hand and shakes his head again before taking off down an aisle.

Jared’s left completely confused, arm still outstretched, with no idea what just happened.

A saleslady stops next to him. “Can I help you find something, sir?”

Jared looks down at her. "Do you have anything that says, *I'm sorry, even though I don't know what the hell I did and you won't even talk to me, but if you'd just tell me what's wrong, I'll do anything I can to fix it?*"

"Jewelry," she says firmly, pointing over at the counter.

"No, it's for a guy," Jared says.

She looks a little bewildered, then. "Uh, no, sir. I'm afraid we don't sell anything like that."

Jared sighs. "Never mind."

* * *

Jensen's always been good at being detached. It wasn't something he planned, or something he wanted for himself, it's just the way he's always been. In college, he had to take plenty of humanities classes, history and sociology and literature, but he didn't like the uncertainty of it all - everything was about interpretation, perspective, theoretical approaches. Jensen didn't want to write a paper about what an author might have been trying to convey with symbolism, he wanted to *know*. He wanted facts, hard and fast, not possibilities with vague basis in fact. Leaving it up to personal interpretation was too messy, too weak, not enough to hold on to.

Math, on the other hand, he liked. Math had rules and laws, specific reasons why equations worked the way they did, and numbers didn't lie or change according to opinion. There was always an answer to be found, and a sensible way to find it. That's why he went into financial planning - money can be managed according to history and mathematical predictions, and stock and bonds and mutual funds are firm, definite. Most of all, even though Jensen has to deal with customers who have their own opinions on what would make them the most money, in the end, the only person Jensen has to trust is himself.

And that's the way Jensen likes it. He likes things that are concrete, solid and real, and he can't just put all of himself into whatever he does - he can't just take it on faith that something's going to work and risk letting it all go.

But somehow, with Jared, that's all gone to hell.

Jensen slams the door so loud that he scares Oscar, the kitten ducking behind the corner, and if that isn't a sign of how messed up things have gotten, Jensen doesn't know what is. This was just supposed to be a favor for Tom - some relationship advice for a friend, maybe a little guidance on fashion and relationships - and that was it. But somehow, a month later, Jensen's so tangled up in Jared that he can't see straight, and he's got a fucking *cat*.

Jensen slides down the wall and sits next to the door, wondering what the hell happened. At first, he let himself think it was just a crush, that it was some purely physical thing related to proximity or chance or the phase of the moon, and if he chose to ignore it, the infatuation would fade. But then, as he and Jared became friends, grew closer, spent more time together, it became clear that nothing was fading. In fact, this thing - which Jensen refused to label - just kept growing. Increasing. Strengthening. Yes, he wants Jared, recognizes that he's an attractive guy and has a mental list of inappropriate things he'd like very much to do to him, but, if Jensen is actually being honest with himself, he knows it's more than that.

It's not just lust or attraction. Because Jensen's seen more of Jared these past few weeks than any of his friends or family, and he's grown used to it - to being the center of Jared's attention, to being the recipient of his affection, to being the focus of his concentration. And somewhere

along the way, he forgot the reason for that and let himself enjoy it. It felt completely normal to lead Jared around the department store, picking out presents for his mom and family members, and it was only when Jared mentioned Sandy coming to visit him that Jensen realized how far gone he was.

Because he didn't want Sandy hanging around Jared's family, visiting Jared's hometown, staying at his house. He didn't want it to be her doing those things, because he wanted it to be him. He wanted to see Jared's favorite parts of San Antonio, to see the house he grew up in, watch his family open their presents on Christmas and exchange a grin with Jared when his mom loved the scarf. He wanted it to be him that Jared introduced to his parents, him that Jared held hands with under the table, him that Jared wanted and loved.

And that's pretty fucking scary, because Jensen's never let himself really invest in anyone. He can advise someone on how to make a relationship work, he knows the basic steps and goals, but he's never been able to fit himself into the equation. He's never been able to just throw himself into anything the way Jared does, and his inability to give all of himself pushed people away and was obvious, a lack of trust. He always kept some part of him back for himself, something he couldn't afford to give away, and at a certain point in every relationship, weeks or months or even a year in, that became a problem, that he couldn't let go of that one last bit of distance. And yet somehow, with Jared, he let go without even knowing it. He just offered everything he is like it was a gift on a silver platter, and Jared took it. He knows things about Jensen that no one else in the world does - some are stupid, inane little details, but some are things Jensen couldn't say to anyone else. Somehow, with Jared, the words just came out, without Jensen's intention or permission, and Jared, being himself, just listened, no matter if Jensen was confessing to his weird aversion to clothing with stripes on it or a childhood fear of getting lost that still leaves him a little shaky when pressed into tight crowds at a concert or fire drill.

It's like all of Jensen has been turned inside out, visible for everyone to see, nothing hidden anymore. It's terrifying. And it hurts like hell, because no one's ever done this to him before, no one's laid him open like this and really seen him, and it's all for nothing, because Jared's never going to feel the same way.

Jared doesn't even *know*. He's worked his way so deep into Jensen's life, so far under his skin, that he's literally all Jensen can think about, and yet he has no idea. He's blissfully focused on Sandy, and other than a kiss that went on a little too long and that comment about his ass, Jensen has no reason to believe Jared's anything more than a 0 on the Kinsey scale. This is the first time in Jensen's life that he's ever been able to lose that protective distance, to actually admit that he *wants* something - needs it, even - and it doesn't even matter, because he can't have it. Jared's his *friend*, nothing more, and it doesn't matter that Jensen's life has aligned with that Mariah Carey Christmas song and all he wants this year - more than anything he's ever wanted before - is Jared, because Jared is not his to have. It's all for nothing, because Jared is never going to love him back.

Oscar reappears, rubbing his silky head against Jensen's clenched fingers and purring loudly, and Jensen uncurls his fist to pick him up, tucking Oscar's little furry body against his chest. He can feel Oscar's heartbeat against his skin, small and quick, and he counts the beats, matching it with his breathing, ignoring the messy, painful rhythm in his own chest.

* * *

"Jared? Is something wrong?"

"Huh?" Jared looks up from his plate, which he's spent the last ten minutes transforming into a food forest. Stalks of broccoli are planted in mashed potatoes around a gravy lake, and Jared's in the middle of poking the last of his roast beef into a cabin-like shape. It's pretty awesome, as

far as food sculptures go, but from Sandy's tone, she's not impressed.

"I've been talking for the past five minutes, but I don't think you've heard a word I said."

"Sorry," Jared says, setting down his fork. Normally, when he's with Sandy, he's listening eagerly to every word she says, looking for an opportunity to show her how attentive and interested he is, but today it's not happening. "I'm just kind of..."

"Distracted?" Sandy fills in. "Yeah, I can tell. Also, possibly depressed to the point of dying, because I've never seen you leave food on your plate before."

Jared flushes. "That obvious, huh?"

Sandy nods sympathetically. "Did something happen with Jensen?"

Jared blinks, a little taken aback. "How did you - "

She shrugs. "Well, normally, you talk about him about the time. But you haven't mentioned him at all in the past few days. And then there's the distracted and depressed part. It seemed likely the two were related."

Jared sighs. "Yeah, we had a fight. Well, kind of. I don't even know what went wrong, but Jensen won't answer his phone and I have no idea what I did or if I even did anything at all. And I have no idea what to do about it."

Sandy blinks. "So he got mad at you and didn't say why and now he won't talk to you?"

"Pretty much."

"And you don't even know if it's because of you?"

"Nope," Jared says. "I mean, I know I can be kind of clueless sometimes, but I've gone over the whole thing a million times, and I can't think of anything I did or said that would piss him off. It was just a random conversation, and then he was yelling and storming off." He sighs. "I don't know. Maybe he's just in a bad mood, and he'll get over it on his own. I'm just not sure what to do. We've never fought before."

"Never?" Sandy asks, raising her eyebrows.

"We've only known each other for like, a month," Jared points out. "We haven't had time to get mad yet."

"A month?" Sandy repeats. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah," Jared says, unsure why that's surprising. "I met him right after you and I had our first date. Why?"

"I just thought you'd known each other for years," Sandy says. "I mean, the way you talk about him, it's like - "

"Like what?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. Never mind." She folds her arms on the table. "Anyway. Maybe it's not even you he's angry at. Or maybe he's not angry at all."

“Then what could it be about? I was just talking about going home for Christmas when it happened.”

Sandy shrugs, taking a sip of her water. “What’s Jensen doing for Christmas?”

“He’s hanging out with Tom and his wife for part of the day,” Jared says. “Other than that, I don’t know. Probably not a lot.”

“Maybe he’s a little bit jealous,” Sandy suggests. “You’re going home and seeing your family, and he’s hanging out with a friend.” She shrugs. “Holidays without your family can be hard. Nobody wants to be alone this time of year, after all. Maybe he’s lonely.”

Jared takes a moment to mull that over. It would make sense if Jensen wasn’t actually mad at him, but the more Jared thinks about it, the more he actually kind of hopes Jensen is mad at him. Because if Jensen was just upset about Jared leaving and taking Sandy and having Christmas at home with his family - if Jensen’s upset because he’s lonely - that makes Jared’s chest hurt in a way that’s completely unrelated to anger, for one thing. And for another, he has no idea how to fix that.

He doesn’t really know to fix Jensen being mad at him, either, but he hasn’t tried everything yet. He didn’t want to push, but if it came down to it, he’d be outside Jensen’s door with enough food to last him the weekend, and he wouldn’t leave until Jensen told him what was going on and how Jared could make it right.

This, on the other hand, can’t be solved by camping out or stalking. They’ve only talked about Jensen’s love life once, after all, and Jensen wasn’t exactly forthcoming, so Jared has no idea what issues Jensen might have, or what reasons for being single. As far as he can tell, from what he knows of Jensen, there really aren’t any good reasons. Jensen’s gorgeous, for one thing - it’s not hard to miss, especially the way he turns heads whenever they’re out in public - and besides that, he’s a nice person and a good friend. Jared was a little wary of him at first, the way Jensen was all no-nonsense and distantly polite, but it didn’t take long to discover that under that uptight Type A personality, Jensen’s a lot more. Smart, funny, and compassionate, for a start - for all that Jensen pretended to complain, he was there anytime Jared needed him, making endless batches of Italian food or watching Jared’s dogs or giving guidance during an early-morning freakout. If he’s willing to do all that for Jared, just for a favor, then Jared can’t imagine why people aren’t lining up to date Jensen. Plus, he’s better at cooking than Jared (or at least better at following directions) and extremely organized and really nice. What more could someone ask for? He’s even a good kisser.

And Jared probably shouldn’t be thinking about that, but the thing is, he’s kind of had trouble not thinking about it lately. He just wanted to make sure he was doing everything right, and he’s always learned better from doing, not listening, so it made sense that this could just be another thing that Jensen taught him. But then somewhere in the middle Jared forgot that he was pretending to kiss Sandy and just started to kiss Jensen. He couldn’t help it - no matter what he was telling himself in his head, his body recognized Jensen as undeniably male, strong jaw and a hint of stubble beneath his fingers, and at some point he realized that not only was that fact not impairing his enjoyment, it was sort of increasing it.

Which, awkward. It was one thing to recognize, in a sort of vague way, that Jensen’s attractive. It’s completely another to figure out he’s attracted to Jensen while sticking his tongue down his throat. Especially since they’re *friends*, for God’s sake, and Jensen was just helping him out.

And then there’s the part where Jared hasn’t quite been able to stop thinking about it, because he’d never really thought about kissing another guy before, but even if he had, he’s pretty sure it wouldn’t measure up. If the damned cat hadn’t bitten him, he’s pretty sure he would have

been perfectly content to make out with Jensen for a couple hours at least, until he was satisfied that he knew every single detail of Jensen's mouth. Actually, it's probably a good thing they stopped, because Jared was kind of unexpectedly turned on by the whole thing, and Jensen really didn't need to know that because, again, *awkward*.

And that might have even been okay - Jared had no idea he was even interested in men, but whatever, self-exploration through making out was kind of cool - except the next night, when he was supposed to be putting the moves on Sandy, he was having a little trouble concentrating. Because her lips were soft and pliant under his, and she was definitely saying yes, so he must have been doing something right, but when he swept a thumb along her jaw, it was smooth and delicate, not what he was expecting, and *shit*, he was not supposed to be thinking about someone else while making out with the woman of his dreams. She was a little miffed when he wanted to stop, actually, but Jared thought going any further while distracted was a really bad idea.

But, yeah. Jensen's awesome, that much is clear, and if someone as (apparently) clueless as Jared is can see that, he has no idea how Jensen hasn't been snatched up already. Jensen said he wasn't looking, the one time they talked about it, and Jared has no clue what that means - that Jensen's getting over a bad relationship, or he's given up on love, or whatever - but either way, it all still boils down to the same thing. Jensen's unhappy, and Jared doesn't know how to help. Inundating Jensen with his presence doesn't seem likely to help, if Jensen's not angry, so Jared just does the only thing he can think of, which is calling Jensen. Sandy's texting someone on her own phone, anyway, and she just waves him off when he tells her, so he heads outside the café and leans against the wall while he dials.

It goes straight to voicemail, no surprise, so Jared leaves a short message. He's left a dozen already, all variations of "Hey, I don't know what the hell is going on, but I'm sorry if I did something, please call me," so this time he keeps it short and sweet. "Hey, Jen. I'm going to be flying out to Texas on Friday, and I just really want to talk to you before then. We don't have to talk about what happened, okay? I just want to make sure that you're...I just don't want to leave with things like this. Okay. Talk to you soon, hopefully."

It doesn't solve anything, but somehow Jared feels a little better, just for having done something. He goes back into the restaurant. Sandy looks up when he comes in, and smiles when he sits down. "So. You said you had something to ask me?"

"Right," Jared says, and takes a deep breath. "Well, the thing is, I had this idea about you and Christmas. I know it's short notice, but..."

* * *

Jensen's at Tom's when his phone beeps with a new voicemail. He ignores it, but Tom looks up from the hockey game they're watching. "Your phone's making noise, man."

"I know."

"And you're not going to see who it is?"

"I know who it is."

"Then why aren't you answering?"

"Because it's not someone I'm interested in talking to, obviously," Jensen says irritably. "Can we be done with the interrogation now?"

Tom slants him an inscrutable look, then nods. "Fine. If you get me another beer."

Jensen sighs, but gets up. It's worth walking to the kitchen and back to avoid awkward questions about why he's not taking Jared's calls anymore. Especially because his main reason for not picking up is that he doesn't know if he can handle the awkwardness that's certain to follow.

But when he gets back with two beers, Tom's got his phone open and he's scrolling through the call logs. "Give that back," Jensen demands, putting the beers down before reaching for it.

"No," Tom replies, leaning away and pushing Jensen back. "Not until you tell me what's going on."

"Nothing's going on," Jensen replies, lunging for the phone again.

"Right," Tom says, standing to move away. "That's why Jared's called you thirty-two times over the past week and left you ten voicemails. Nothing."

"Fine, it's not nothing," Jensen admits. "But whatever's going on between Jared and me is none of your business." He knows he's being an asshole, but he can't help it.

Tom stops him with a hand on his chest. "Jen, you come over here looking like shit and acting like you want to roll over and die, whatever's going on is sure as hell my business." His face softens a little, concern replacing seriousness. "You look like you haven't slept or eaten in a week, man, and I just want to help."

Jensen sighs, anger draining away as quickly as it appeared, and drops back onto the couch. "I know. And I appreciate it, but you can't help with this."

"Maybe not," Tom admits. "But keeping it all to yourself isn't helping, either."

Jensen sighs again. "Fine. It's just - I made a stupid mistake. I mean, I knew Jared was totally gone for Sandy from the very beginning. I knew it before I even met him, for Christ's sake. And I helped him get a date with her, and gave him advice on how to get her to love him back." He pauses, staring down at his socks. "But we were spending all this time together, and we got to be friends, and I - I let him get to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's got this totally perfect girlfriend he wants to fly home for Christmas, to meet his family, and I should be happy for him."

"But you're not," Tom finishes for him. "You're miserable."

"It was just a crush," Jensen says. "Just one of those stupid, pointless infatuations that're there and gone in a couple days. But it didn't go away; it just kept getting worse. And then he kissed me, and I realized I didn't want Sandy to meet his family, because I don't want him to be with her at all, because I want - I'm - "

"You're - oh," Tom says, his voice changing completely. "Oh. Fuck, Jen."

"Yeah," Jensen agrees, dropping his head into his hands.

"Sorry, man. That's...that really sucks."

There's a long minute where the only sounds are the screech of the ref's whistle on the TV and

Jamie humming in another room.

Finally, Tom sighs. "So you're just going to ignore him forever?"

"Not forever," Jensen says. "Just...for now."

Tom snorts. "That's mature."

"I can't talk to him right now," Jensen says. "He's all happy about Sandy, and I can't pretend that I am, too."

"Jensen, the guy has called you thirty times in the past week," Tom says. "I think it's safe to say he's worried about you, not looking for an opportunity to gush about his girlfriend."

Jensen shrugs.

"You can't just pretend he doesn't exist," Tom says, exasperated. "That's not fair to him, Jensen."

"None of this is fair!" Jensen explodes. "You think it's fair that I fell for the guy I was supposed to be getting some other girl to fall for?" He sighs, shaking his head. "This is why I don't get involved, because it always ends up being one huge fucking mess."

"You can't choose who you care about," Tom says. "But what you do about it is your choice. You're the one who told me that."

Any reply Jensen might have had is interrupted by his phone ringing. Tom's still got it in his hand, and he glances down at the display before looking up at Jensen. "It's Jared."

Jensen closes his eyes, but after a second he reaches out to take the phone, standing to move away from Tom. "Hey, Jared."

"Hey," Jared replies, sounding surprised. "I didn't think you were going to answer."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Jensen says. "I, uh - I haven't really been feeling that great lately, so I had my phone off for a while."

"Oh, no. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I could come over, if you need some company. Or I could bring you some soup, or something. I know I suck at cooking, but I'm really good with can openers and microwaves."

Jensen closes his eyes as Jared talks. He's not really lying - he's felt like crap the whole week - but the genuine concern in Jared's voice is just making things worse, increasing the ache in his chest. "No, I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm actually over at Tom's right now, so he's making sure I don't die of dehydration or whatever."

"Oh," Jared says. "Okay. Well, he's probably better at the whole nourishment thing than me, anyway, but just let me know if you need anything, all right? I don't leave until Friday afternoon,

so you've got three days to change your mind."

"Okay."

"And - Jensen." Jared pauses for a second. "Just in case I don't see you before then, Merry Christmas. Have a good time with Tom, okay?"

"Yeah, you too," Jensen replies. He wants to just leave it at that, but some perverse instinct prevents him from just hanging up. He has to know. "So, is Sandy coming out there with you?"

"Yeah," Jared says, and Jensen can hear the smile in his voice, bright and wide. "I asked her earlier today, and she said yes."

Jensen bites his lip until he can trust himself to speak. "Hey, that's great."

"Well, it's all thanks to you," Jared says. "If you'd left it up to me I'dve probably serenaded her from outside her window, and she'd have thought I was a creepy stalker and gotten a restraining order."

Jensen winces at the reminder that this is all his fault. "Yeah, no problem. Look, I should probably go."

"Okay," Jared says. "Just...Jensen?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure you're okay? You sound funny. Upset, kind of."

Jensen lets out a breath. "I'm fine. Just not feeling great."

"Sorry, I should let you go. Call me if you need anything, okay? Anytime."

Jensen swallows hard. "Okay. See you."

When he hangs up and turns around, Tom's not even pretending not to listen. He takes one look at Jensen's face and holds out the beer Jensen brought him.

* * *

Two days later, Jared can't get his conversation with Jensen out of his head. He should be thinking about things like flights and getting the dogs ready for the kennel and how the hell he's going to fit all the gifts he bought into his suitcase without spending all of Christmas naked, but instead, all he can think about is Jensen.

Their conversation was supposed to reassure Jared - he'd been worried about Jensen, after all, since he had no idea what was going on or why Jensen was even upset - but while Jensen said all the right things, including several times that he was fine, Jared can't shake the feeling that something's wrong. Jensen wasn't himself on the phone. He didn't respond to any of Jared's attempts at humor or sarcasm, and there was something in his voice - something that was just *off* - that sparked a flare of worry deep in the pit of Jared's stomach. Jensen didn't sound sick, no scratchy voice or congestion, he just seemed tired and - well, the only word Jared can think of to describe it is *resigned*. Like people are sometimes when he has to tell them that their elderly pets probably won't be around much longer, or that there's not much he can do to help an older pet's failing health. There's hurt there, and sometimes fear, but not surprise. They know, deep down, that it's inevitable.

But Jared has absolutely no idea why Jensen would be feeling like that, since he's young and healthy and not a pet, and trying to figure it out is driving him crazy. Jensen hasn't called him since they talked, and Jared's had to stop himself more than once from just picking up his keys and going over to Jensen's apartment to check up on him.

Because if Jensen's hurt or sick or needs something, then Jared should be there. He wants to be there. He wants to do whatever it takes to make Jensen feel better, and even if he can't help or fix anything, he just wants to be there, anyway, because anything's better than sitting here worrying.

He's eyeing his keys again, trying to remind himself of all his reasons not to drive to Jensen's (like a) he hasn't been invited, b) Jensen could be sleeping or not want company, and c) it borders dangerously close on stalking) and completely failing (because a and b have never stopped him before, and he's not going to peep in any windows or anything, at least not unless Jensen doesn't open the door) when his phone rings.

It's Sandy, and she sounds irritated. "Jared, you promised to email me that travel info yesterday."

Oh, yeah. Oops. "Sorry. I was going to do it right after work, but then I got kind of distracted." For a second there, he'd totally forgotten that Sandy was even coming with him to San Antonio.

"Okay, but now I have no idea if we're even on the same plane or not. The flights are all really crowded, so I had to take the first open seat I found."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Jared says. "We'll work something out." Maybe he can stop by Jensen's on the way to the airport, and ask him to check up on the dogs while Jared's gone. They're crazy about him, after all, so it wouldn't be a weird request. And then Jared can make sure Jensen was okay, and it won't be as creepy as just showing up.

"Jared? Hello?"

"Oh, sorry," Jared says, realizing Sandy's been talking this whole time. "I didn't hear you. What were you saying?"

"Is something going on?" Sandy asks. "You seem really preoccupied."

"I'm just kind of worried about Jensen," Jared admits. "I talked to him a couple days ago, but he didn't sound good."

Sandy sighs. "Jared? I'm - I don't think this is a good idea."

Jared blinks. "What, talking about Jensen?"

She huffs. "Well - never mind. No, I mean me going home with you."

"Oh," Jared says, after a second.

"It just seems a little fast," Sandy continues. "I really like you, Jared, but I'm not sure we should be doing this right now. Maybe we should just...slow things down a little."

From the tone of her voice, Jared gets the feeling that by 'things,' Sandy means their entire relationship. And that 'slow' is more a really nice way to say 'end.'

He waits for the panic and hurt to hit, for that heart-sinking, soul-crushing despair and devastation that's bound to follow the woman of his dreams walking all over said dreams and dumping him five days before Christmas, but...it doesn't. Strangely enough, Jared doesn't feel much of anything at the moment. He supposes it could be shock, but he's not particularly surprised by the announcement. Mostly, he just feels like he knew this was going to have to happen sometime.

And maybe he did. He and Sandy do have some things in common, but for the most part, they're very different people. Their senses of humor are miles apart - Sandy never laughs at Jared's lame jokes and he misses her more subtle ones - and she gets embarrassed much more easily than him, preferring to ignore something going wrong rather than laugh at her own mistakes the way Jared does. Their friends are different, their hobbies are different, their career paths are different, and sometimes it feels like they spend more time trying to find commonalities than they do enjoying each other's company.

She's a wonderful girl - she's everything he thought she was at the beginning, smart and funny and beautiful and nice - but the two of them just don't fit the way Jared desperately wanted them to. He's always questioning himself around her, trying to be what he thinks she wants him to be, and he's never really sure if he lives up to her standards or not. Sandy never seems quite comfortable around Jared, like she's a perpetual visitor to his life, and he feels the same in hers - he doesn't fit. He doesn't mesh. And they could work on that, but the only solution Jared sees is for one of them to change, to reshape themselves to match the other's expectations, and Jared has to wonder if the time and effort would even be worth it.

Because the thing is, there's a place he does fit. There's a person who shares his sense of humor, his friends, his interests, and slid into Jared's life like there was a place just waiting for him to fill it. It took him a while to wear down the walls Jensen has - they weren't immediate friends, and it still took a while before Jensen would just relax and be himself around Jared - but now he feels like they've known each other forever, that they could talk about anything. They're comfortable in each other's lives, like they were meant to be there.

And Jensen's given him all kinds of advice on how to change - how to be the boyfriend Sandy wanted, the person he thought he should be - but Jensen doesn't care if Jared can't cook to save his life. He might roll his eyes at one of Jared's *unique* shirts or tease him for considering sandals an all-purpose shoe, but he'd never expect Jared to dress or act a certain way around him.

Sandy clears her throat, and Jared realizes his little epiphany must have taken up a good amount of awkward silence. "Oh. Sorry," he says. "Um, I think you're right about the slowing down thing."

"You do?" she asks, sounding a little shocked.

"Yeah," Jared says. "There's some stuff I need to think about, and some time apart would probably be good."

"Oh. Okay. Well, do you want to call me after the holidays, then?"

"Sure," Jared says. "Have a great Christmas, okay? Talk to you later."

"You too," Sandy says, still sounding bewildered. "Bye."

But Jared's already onto the thinking part. Because the thing is, a month ago, he would have been ecstatic about Sandy coming home to meet his family. He'd probably have been calling her five times a day to remind her, and calling his mom another five to make sure everything was

perfect at home, and being so nervous and excited that he couldn't sleep. Instead, he forgot he was even going to ask her until she reminded him, and then it slipped his mind that she was even coming.

And the reason for that is that he was thinking about Jensen. Jensen, who he kissed. Who he was thinking about when kissing Sandy. Who mocks him for bad fashion choices and his devotion to his dogs, but spends an hour on the phone or three nights trying to make the perfect cannelloni if Jared needs it. Jensen, who looks at him sometimes like he can't believe Jared is really that weird, but always with a hint of a smile behind his scornful look, like he just doesn't want to admit that he likes it. Jensen, who will sometimes, if you catch him off-guard, smile without any cynicism or sarcasm, just a genuine, bright grin that crinkles his eyes at the corners and causes something warm stir in Jared's stomach, making it impossible not to smile back. Jensen, who's gorgeous and a good kisser and a good friend and *gets* Jared, better than Sandy, through no fault of her own, ever will.

So Jared's feeling pretty good about Jensen, after the thinking led him to that conclusion, but the problem is, he has almost no idea if Jensen feels the same about him. He knows Jensen looks at him sometimes, eyes catching on his hands or mouth like he doesn't even notice he's doing it, and there have been a few times when Jensen's gazed at him for just a second too long, like time skipped a beat, and there was a hint of something in his eyes - a nameless something that was more than just friendship or affection.

And then there's the time they kissed. Jared's pretty sure he wasn't the only one affected by that little moment - Jensen started out barely responding, but by the time they were interrupted, he was arching up into Jared, pulling him closer at the hips, and when he pulled away, he was flushed and breathing just as hard as Jared.

Remembering that moment is what seals the deal for Jared. A few looks and a maybe-practice kiss aren't a lot to go by, but Jared's not Jensen - he doesn't need a detailed plan and diagrams to do something. All he needs is a gut feeling and a healthy dose of hope, and he's got both of those in spades right now. So he doesn't think about it, he just moves. His every instinct is telling him to get to Jensen, to find out if there's any chance the feeling might be mutual, so he grabs his keys, gets in his car, and goes.

Part 5

The door buzzer wakes Jensen from a nap, and he only pauses to grab his glasses before rolling off the couch and stumbling blearily to the door.

He's still waking up, so it takes him longer than it should to realize exactly who the person standing outside his door is. When it finally does sink in, he blinks. "Jared? What are you doing here?"

Jared smiles a little. "Talking to you, obviously."

Jensen rolls his eyes. "No, I mean, shouldn't you be packing or planning or something? Don't you leave for Texas soon?"

Jared rubs the back of his neck, looking away. "Actually, no. Change of plans." He takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly like he's working up his courage, then meets Jensen's eyes. "Sandy's not coming to Texas. We broke up."

Jensen stares for a second, barely able to comprehend something so surprising, before his brain flips on and he realizes just how bad this is. “Jared, fuck.” He pulls the door all the way open, dragging Jared inside. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay, man?”

Jared comes easily, trailing Jensen into his living room. “I don’t...I’m not really sure.”

Of course he isn’t, what a stupid question. The guy’s clearly heartbroken. Jensen pushes his shoulder, urging Jared to sit on the couch, and settles cross-legged on the cushion next to him. “What happened?”

Jared shrugs, picking at the loose threads at the edge of the cushion. “Nothing, really. We just both realized it wasn’t really working. She thought things were going too fast, so we agreed that we should take some time off to figure out if this is what we really want.”

“Wait, what?” Jensen asks, frowning. “You agreed to take some time off? Jared, you’re in so in love with this woman that you’d have already proposed if I hadn’t banned you from jewelry stores. You didn’t even try to change her mind?” Jensen’s still kind of fuzzy from his nap, but even he can see the total disconnect between what Jared’s saying and his obvious devotion to Sandy. And Jensen can’t say that he’s really sad that Jared and Sandy broke up, because he’s never thought they were that great together, but that doesn’t matter now. Jared is head over heels for Sandy, and Jensen has to suck it up and help him get her back.

“Yeah, that’s kind of the other part,” Jared says, looking up at Jensen from under his eyelashes.

Jensen sighs and leans back a little, scrubbing his hand through tousled hair. “What other part?”

Jared doesn’t answer right away, eyes cutting away again, and Jensen’s about to ask him again when he realizes exactly where Jared’s looking. Because Jensen’s in casual clothes, a pair of baggy sweats and an old t-shirt that shrunk in the wash a while back, and when he reached up, his shirt rose accordingly, leaving a few inches of his stomach above his pants bare. And Jared’s gaze is fixed on that small strip of skin.

Jensen shifts hastily, letting his shirt fall back down, because that’s not what’s supposed to happen. Jared isn’t supposed to look when he inadvertently shows a little skin - Jared’s not even supposed to blink, because he’s straight and in love with another woman, even if that relationship’s a little...complicated...at the moment. And he’s sure as hell not supposed to look up at Jensen like that, heat and want in his eyes.

“I’ve kind of been thinking about someone else,” Jared confesses, his eyes not leaving Jensen’s.

Jensen’s mouth is suddenly very dry. “You...you have?”

“Yeah,” Jared says softly. He laughs a little. “It’s stupid, but I didn’t notice at first, because I’d never felt anything like that about a guy before. But when you’re kissing the girl who’s supposed to be the woman of your dreams and all you can think about is kissing another guy, you have to admit something’s not right.”

Hope blossoms in Jensen’s chest, easing the dull ache that’s taken up residence since he last saw Jared, but he reins it in, making sure it doesn’t show on his face, because this is his heart on the line here, and he has to be sure. “Jared, what are you saying?”

Jared swallows nervously, clenching his hands together in front of him, but his gaze stays steady on Jensen. “I’m saying that I’m attracted to you. I have been for a while. And I like you, really a lot, and I think that we could be more than just friends.” He swallows again. “I want us to be more than friends.” He bites his lip. “And I’m wondering if there’s any possibility that you feel

the same. If there's any chance you're willing to try."

Jensen realizes that he should probably think that over, consider the risks to admitting his feelings, give it a moment to settle so his thoughts are clear and he can make a rational, logical decision. But he's never been good at following his own advice, so instead he kisses Jared.

Jared makes a startled noise at suddenly having Jensen so near, mouth pressed against his and glasses brushing his nose as Jensen pushes closer, but it shifts lower into a moan when Jensen nips lightly at his lower lip. Jared's mouth slips open on a gasp, and then their tongues are touching cautiously, meeting and sliding against each other as Jensen gently explores Jared's mouth, learning him like he advised Jared what feels like a million years ago.

Jared makes another little noise at the back of his throat when Jensen coaxes his tongue into his mouth and sucks, but then he's pulling back, taking a harsh breath. Jensen follows him unconsciously, but Jared leans back. "Um," he says. "Should I take that as a yes?"

Jensen blinks. "You seriously have to ask me that?"

Jared grins, dimples flashing. "Just wanted to be sure," he says, sliding a hand around the back of Jensen's head and dragging him back to his mouth.

That's more than fine with Jensen, who's pretty sure kissing Jared just became his favorite activity in the entire world, even surpassing necessary things like eating or sleeping or breathing. He knew Jared was a good kisser from that other time, but they'd barely gotten started then when they were interrupted, and Jensen wasn't exactly in the right state of mind to enjoy it. Now, though, when he doesn't have to worry about Sandy or Jared inadvertently finding out how he feels, he can relax and enjoy the experience, and *fuck*, he's really enjoying it. Jared keeps making those little noises every time Jensen does something he likes, whether it's a rough swipe of tongue along his teeth or a thumb brushing the hollow under his jaw, and Jensen quickly addicted, seeking out hot spots to earn another sound.

Jared, for his part, cups the back of Jensen's head with warm palms, rubbing thumbs behind his ears, pausing for a second to slide Jensen's glasses up to rest on the crown of his head before making an impatient noise, sliding his hands to Jensen's biceps and growling, "Come closer."

He pulls hard, and Jensen has to plant a knee on either side of Jared's hips to avoid completely overbalancing and ending up on the floor. The movement leaves him straddling Jared's lap, and the worn sweats he's wearing provide only the thinnest barrier against the heat and rough material of Jared's jeans. Jensen shifts experimentally, sliding a little closer, and even if Jared's hands hadn't clamped tight on his shoulders at the movement, the hard heat against Jensen's thigh makes it pretty clear just how much he's also enjoying their makeout session.

Jared's hands slide down to span Jensen's lower back, holding him in place, then they slip under the hem of his t-shirt, brushing bare skin as they glide up. Jensen's responding before he can think, arms going over his head, realizing half a second too late that he forgot about his glasses. They go flying along with the shirt, and Jensen should probably worry about where and how they landed, but Jared's hands are all over him, stroking up and down his back and chest like Jared wants to touch every inch of him, and all Jensen can think is that he should return the favor. He's got his fingers tangled in the buttons of Jared's shirt when Jared's hands land on his ass, aligning Jensen just right across his lap and rocking them together.

The sudden rush of pleasure is a shock to Jensen's system, and the sharp breath he takes suddenly brings into clear focus exactly what they're doing. Or, more specifically, where they're heading, at roughly the speed of a runaway locomotive.

“Jared,” he says breathlessly. “Hey, Jared.”

“Mm,” Jared replies, lining kisses down Jensen’s jaw and neck.

“Hold - uh, hold on a sec,” Jensen says, pushing at Jared’s chest.

Jared leans back obediently, and Jensen almost forgets what he’s supposed to say when he takes in the sight, Jared’s hair tousled around his flushed face and his lips pink and slick with spit. He swallows hard. “Um. We should slow down.”

It comes out more like a question than a statement, and Jared raises his eyebrows. “We should?”

“Yeah,” Jensen says, more firmly this time. “You just broke up with Sandy and figured out you’re attracted to a guy. We should just...take it easy.” He rubs his thumb along his bottom lip, which is still wet and tingling.

Jared’s eyes track the movement, and he looks up at Jensen with a hint of incredulity. “Take it easy? I haven’t gotten laid in months and you’re sitting on my lap and you want me to take it easy?”

Jensen knows what he means, because sitting in Jared’s lap is making it difficult for Jensen to remember why they’re even having this conversation. His downstairs brain knows exactly what it wants to be doing right now, and it sure as hell doesn’t involve talking. But Jensen has to say something, because he’s done with assumptions and misunderstandings. “I know. But just a few days ago you were straight and in love with Sandy, and - “

“I thought I was totally straight and in love with Sandy,” Jared corrects.

“Fine,” Jensen says. “But this - you and me - I can’t just be casual about it. This last week, not seeing you or talking to you, it was - “ He shakes his head. “I can’t just be an experiment or your rebound fuck.”

Jared’s eyes soften, and he rubs a thumb gently along Jensen’s hipbone. “I know. And you’re not. I don’t want something casual, or a rebound or experiment.” He sighs. “And I know you - I know that you want some kind of proof or a guarantee - but I can’t give you any. You’re just going to have to trust me on this, okay?” His voice drops an octave, and he pins Jensen with his gaze. “I know what I want.”

Desire is plain in his eyes, heated enough to make Jensen shiver, but there’s something else there, something steady and solid behind it, and it’s that unnamed reassurance that makes Jensen nod and say, “Okay.”

“Good. Can we please have sex now?” Jared asks. “Because I think I might die if we don’t.”

Jensen laughs. “Well, I don’t want to be responsible for your death. I guess we’re just going to have to.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jared says, pulling Jensen down for a kiss.

Jensen finishes what he started earlier with Jared’s shirt, urging him forward to pull it off, then slides his hands down to the front of Jared’s jeans. He wants to explore all the newly-bared skin in front of him, to learn every inch of it and map the spots that are ticklish or sensitive, but right now he agrees with Jared - they need to take the edge off. Besides, there’ll be more time for exploration later. Just knowing that this won’t be the only time, knowing that Jared wants this and the two of them can (theoretically) have all the sex they want, floods Jensen with heat,

and he makes quick work of the button and zipper, pushing denim and cotton aside so he can take Jared's cock in his hand.

Jared moans and bucks up beneath him, encouragements and exclamations falling from his mouth as Jensen experiments with pressure and speed.

It's intoxicating, and when an idea comes to Jensen, he doesn't even think about it, just backs off the couch onto the floor and pulls Jared forward to the edge of the cushion, dragging his jeans and boxers down to his ankles before sliding his lips over Jared's cock.

Jared says, "Oh, *Jesus*," and Jensen barely has time to get comfortable, slipping lips and tongue around the head and sliding down farther to suck, before Jared's jerking his hips and coming.

Jensen swallows as best he can without much warning, wiping the excess from his mouth with his hand.

Jared sprawls back on the couch. "I thought you said you *didn't* want to kill me," he says breathlessly.

Jensen climbs back on top of him and gives him a short, smacking kiss. "I lied."

He doesn't take it any further, not sure if Jared really wants a mouthful of come on his first try at this, but Jared makes a protesting noise, drawing him back in, and kisses Jensen thoroughly, tasting Jensen and himself eagerly.

Then he's sliding a cautious hand down Jensen's stomach and under the waistband of his sweatpants, wrapping around his cock, and Jensen reaches down to help, shoving the pants down over his hips. Jared's hands are huge, all wide palms and long fingers, and Jensen's had more than one impure thought about how they'd feel on certain parts of his anatomy. This feels even better than he imagined, though, and it's not long before he's arching into Jared's hand and coming over their stomachs.

After a few minutes of silence where they both catch their breaths and process what just happened, Jensen says, "We should move soon, before we get even more gross."

Jared squirms a little beneath him. "Yeah. I can't actually feel my legs right now. I think all circulation below my waist has been cut off."

"Dude, why didn't you say something?" Jensen asks, starting to shift his weight.

"Because I don't care," Jared says, keeping him in place with firm hands at his hips. "Besides, it could just be because this was the hottest thing to ever happen to me. Maybe your blowjobs are just so awesome they blew all the fuses in my brain."

Jensen snorts into Jared's neck. "I'm trying really hard not to make the obvious joke here."

"I'm going to have to check out that book from the library - what was it called again? Something about blowing his mind in bed? - so I can return the favor."

"Or we could just have a lot of sex," Jensen suggests. "I'll let you practice on me whenever you want."

"Mm, generous."

"That's me." Jensen stretches, groaning a little at the pull of tight muscles. "Come on, I need to

clean up.”

He stands, yanking up his sweats, and heads for the bathroom. Jared appears in the doorway a few seconds later, and Jensen tosses him a damp washcloth before pushing him toward the bedroom.

His bed’s messy and unmade, pillows scattered from a sleepless night, but Jensen doesn’t care. He flops down on the mattress and stretches out, watching out of the corner of his eye as Jared strips down to boxers. Jared’s just climbing on the bed when there’s an irritated squawk and Oscar’s head pokes up from behind a pillow, where he’s apparently been napping.

“Shit,” Jared says, backing away. “I don’t need another bite from you, dude.”

Jensen tries to pick the kitten up and move him to the floor, but Oscar squirms out of his hands and makes a beeline for Jared, tail waving high behind him.

Jared pulls his feet back and covers his crotch protectively, making Jensen snicker, but Oscar only sniffs at his knee delicately before looking up at Jared.

Jared looks back, raising his eyebrows, and Oscar, apparently satisfied, squints his eyes and rubs his head against Jared’s knee, purring loudly.

“What the hell?” Jared asks, offering a tentative hand and watching Oscar arch into it like it’s an amazing massage.

Jensen yawns, turning his face into the pillow. “Guess he likes you now. Or he’s happy I got laid.”

Jared laughs. “What a good little kitty.” Then the bed dips, and he’s stretched out behind Jensen, warm and solid, and Jensen relaxes into sleep without a second thought.

* * *

When Jensen wakes up a few hours later, it’s dark outside, and Jared’s licking along his spine. The first observation is just a meaningless detail, but the second one has him half-hard already, Jared kissing and sucking each knob of bone from his shoulders to the back of his neck, and Jensen quickly turns over to cover that mouth with his own.

Jared kisses him lazily, hands roaming over Jensen’s back, before laying on his back and pulling Jensen on top of him. He tugs Jensen’s sweatpants down, shucking his own boxers, and then they’re naked against each other for the first time, and it’s pretty damn awesome.

Jensen rocks down with his hips, drawing an appreciative groan from Jared when their cocks slide together, and he’s totally on board with this plan, happy to get off like this, pressed skin-to-skin, but then Jared pulls back for a second and murmurs, “You should fuck me.”

Jensen nearly bites his tongue in surprise. “What?”

“I want you to,” Jared says, shifting beneath him and spreading his legs wider.

“Jesus,” Jensen says, then, “I don’t know. Maybe we should wait.”

Jared makes an impatient noise. “Didn’t we already talk about taking it easy? And how that’s not what either of us want?”

“Yeah, but this is a little different than getting each other off on the couch,” Jensen points out. “For one thing, you’ve never done it before.”

“Yeah,” Jared admits. “But I’ve got the best life coach in the world right here to get me through it.”

Jensen’s still not convinced, but Jared just says, “I want to do this with you. I trust you,” looking up at him with those wide, earnest eyes, and Jensen’s powerless to resist.

Besides, he can’t deny that he wants to do this. He’s in love with Jared, after all, and the idea that Jared can be his - all of him, from head to toe, his first time doing this - it’s a heady, intoxicating feeling. “Okay,” he says, kissing Jared hard. “Okay.”

First things first. Jensen climbs over Jared to get at his bedside table, fumbling through the drawer for supplies. It’s lucky he even has them, given how long it’s been since he’s brought anyone here with the intention of doing this.

Jared’s eyes land on the lube and condom when Jensen sets them on the bed, and he watches as Jensen opens the bottle and slicks fingers, following Jensen’s hand warily. When Jensen kneels between his legs, gently pushing his thighs apart, Jared’s chest is rising and falling a little faster than normal. Jensen runs a reassuring hand down Jared’s stomach, rubbing for a second, then strokes his cock slowly. He meets Jared’s eyes. “Just relax, okay?”

Jared nods, and Jensen lets his other hand drift lower to circle his opening before pushing one finger inside. Jared tenses a little at the intrusion, but Jensen keeps a steady rhythm on his cock and murmurs meaningless praise and reassurance as he works the finger deeper. Jared’s eyes widen suddenly when Jensen finds the spot inside of him, his breath coming shorter again, but in a good way this time, and when Jensen rubs against it, Jared relaxes enough for a second finger.

From there it’s not far to a third, and by the time Jensen’s got him comfortable with three, hips pushing down to meet his hand, Jared’s flushed and panting. His voice is gravelly when he says, “Now, Jensen.”

And there’s no way Jensen’s going to refuse an order like that, not when he can feel how hot and tight Jared is around his fingers. He pulls back, wiping his hand on the sheets, and reaches for the condom.

Jared sits up then, batting Jensen’s hand away. “Let me.” He rolls it down carefully, squeezing a little at the base and grinning at Jensen’s gasp. He takes the lube and coats his fingers, stroking until Jensen has to stop him before he forgets what he’s actually supposed to be doing here. Jared lays back, pulling Jensen down with him, and Jensen settles between his thighs, pressing Jared’s knees up. He pauses for a second, because he feels like he should say something here - something reassuring, or some helpful advice, or even a sappy declaration - but Jared just grins and raises an eyebrow, like *sometime today?* and Jensen is totally unsurprised that his inability to refuse Jared anything transfers right over into sex. He growls and pushes in, sheathing himself in tight heat.

Jared goes quiet then, breath catching and fingers clenching on Jensen’s shoulders, and Jensen stays still, giving him time to adjust. He busies himself sucking kisses down the side of Jared’s arched neck, one hand going back to stroking his cock between them, and after a few moments Jared says, “Okay, you can - I’m good.”

He still sounds a little unsure, though, so Jensen goes slow, even though it’s killing him, and starts talking again, just repeating nonsense like *that’s it, yeah* and *so good, just like that*, just talking him through the whole thing. He doesn’t know if Jared even hears, but it seems to help,

and it's not long before Jared's rocking up into him, meeting his thrusts, and making some noise of his own. When Jensen shifts a little, finding just the right angle to brush against his prostate on every stroke, Jared goes still and tense again, but this time it's not discomfort. He arches up, moaning loudly, and it only takes a few seconds before he's coming over Jensen's hand, and God, Jensen is just never going to get used to watching that. Seeing Jared come apart, right in front of him, and knowing that it's because of him, because of his hands and mouth and cock, and because Jared wants him just as much as he wants Jared - it's pretty much the best thing in the world, and Jensen's following almost immediately, world going blurry around the edges as he comes.

* * *

They clean up again a bit before settling down, but this time Jared's not tired. Instead of dozing off, like Jensen is beside him, Jared's wide awake, mind going a million miles a minute.

Because, for one thing, he just had sex with Jensen. *Sex. With Jensen.* It's hard enough to believe that he just slept with the guy who's been his friend for a month and only something more than that for a few hours, because Jared really didn't see this one coming. He didn't come over to Jensen's apartment intending to offer himself up like this. He was thinking they'd be able to talk, hoping that maybe Jensen would be amenable to his more-than-friends plan, and not even considering - well, not much, anyway - that they'd do much more. He's still kind of shocked that Jensen agreed, much less that Jensen kissed him and sucked him off and fucked him, and he's still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Jensen feels the same about him.

Actually, judging by the way Jensen was during sex (and the possessive hand that's currently resting over Jared's heart), he's pretty sure this goes a little deeper for Jensen, and that he's been wanting it longer. It makes sense, now - if Jensen wanted Jared, it's not surprising hearing about Jared's Christmas plans with Sandy upset him. Jared just wishes he'd figured things out sooner, both because he could have spared Jensen the misery, and he could have had this - had Jensen - sooner.

Because that's the other thing - not only did Jared have sex with Jensen, he also enjoyed it. Like, really a lot. And that's kind of surprising. Not because he thought it'd be bad, or anything - he's seen the way Jensen is, careful and precise in every area of his life, and it only made sense that he'd be good at sex, too, would know exactly what to do and how to make it amazing.

No, it's more because Jared really liked it - he's pretty sure he's going to want to do it again as soon as he's a little less sore, and then as many times as they can fit in before he absolutely has to fly home (he's thinking late Christmas Eve, so he can fly back early the day after Christmas and be here to have lots of celebratory holiday sex with Jensen) - and he came scarily close to missing it completely.

He spent his whole life not knowing he wanted this, after all, having no idea how good it would be, and if things had been even the slightest bit different, he might be on a plane with Sandy right now, flying to San Antonio blissfully unaware what he was leaving behind. And that's a chilling thought, because while Jared only has a few minutes of cautious kissing with Sandy to compare to, everything about being with Jensen is ridiculously, exponentially better. And knowing that he might have left Jensen here, miserable, and enjoyed himself at home, almost makes him sick.

He can't suppress a little shudder, and Jensen must feel it, because he lifts his head off Jared's shoulder and says, "You okay?"

He looks like the definition of well-fucked, hair sticking every which way and mouth bruised, eyes dark and face completely relaxed, and when Jared grins and replies, "I'm awesome," it's

the God's honest truth.

Jensen nods, but he doesn't lay back down, looking thoughtful.

"What about you?" Jared asks.

"I'm good," Jensen says automatically, but then he ducks his head a little. "I'm just - are we - ? Is this - "

"I can't really answer until there's a question in there," Jared says, but he keeps his tone light to let Jensen know he's teasing.

Jensen sighs. "I know. I don't even know what I'm really asking. I just - I want to be sure. About you. About us."

"I know," Jared replies, lifting a hand to stroke along the back of Jensen's neck. "And I know you're the expert life coach, but maybe it's time for me to give you a little advice." He rubs his thumb under Jensen's jaw, catching on stubble. "Because you know all about planning and perfect relationships, but I know a thing or two about following your heart, even when you know it's going to be a crazy ride and you're not sure where you'll end up."

Jensen smiles a little at that, and Jared returns it. "Just trust me, okay? I can't promise you things will be perfect or we'll know exactly what to do, but I can promise you one thing - you can trust me."

"I do," Jensen says, and he looks a little surprised himself that he's saying it. But then he grins, and it's that no-holds-barred happy grin that Jared loves so much, and as always, he's helpless not to grin back.

Because they're going to be okay. They're going to be fine. He doesn't know exactly how it's going to go, or what he's going to tell Sandy or his family, or even what they're going to do tomorrow. But he knows he's going to wake up next to Jensen, and they'll work it out together, and that's good enough for him.

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