



# The Doors of Time by Felisblanco



## Part 1

### Autumn 1988

Since before the forming of the first cell to the point of time he is right now, Jensen Ackles's life has been made up of coincidences and accidents.

Or so it seems. With the course of events neatly laid out a person might have detected a possible structure to everything, a subsequence at work, lead not by *misfortune*, as Jensen himself often tends to believe, but Fortune. (After all she does have a reputation of being fickle at the best of times and cruel at the worst.) Perhaps if he had studied his life from an impartial point of view, he might even have seen a purpose behind everything that happened to him. But when can a person ever look at his own life objectively?

And besides, it's not as if he was there to observe it. Not from the beginning.

In the beginning there was a wedding.

If this had been the story of any other boy it probably would have been his parents' wedding but, this being Jensen, the couple getting married wasn't even related to him and in fact he would only learn to know them as the Susan and Jimmy whose wedding brought his parents together.

It was at this wedding that things started... happening. Nothing spectacular like a meteorite hitting the Earth or the President declaring yet another war. Nothing like that. No, they were all little things, coincidences of such small proportion that no one would have found them odd (not that anyone did) if it hadn't been for the fact that they all seemed to be working toward a single goal.

First there was a young girl, barely out of high school and too sheltered to have really lived at all, who accidentally mistook a glass of champagne offered to her as containing nothing more sinister than cider. One glass led to another – because really, it was the most delicious cider she'd ever tasted – and before long she found herself on the middle of the dance floor, dancing in a way that her parents certainly wouldn't have approved of.

There she just happened to catch the eye of a young waiter, working catering and whatever odd jobs came along while he awaited his sure to be Hollywood break as the most talented actor ever to hit the silver screen, just they wait and see. He wasn't a really good waiter – his talents, he believed lay elsewhere – which was why he'd downed more than a couple of glasses of the sparkly drink himself and was, at that very moment, feeling lightheaded and daring enough to discreetly don the tray, along with the ridiculous jacket they made him wear, and catch the young girl by the waist just as she was about to crash into the nearest table.

They were both tipsy enough to assume that the soft sigh riding the gentle breeze belonged to the other, even if both of them were too busy staring into each other's eyes to really breathe at all.

Wine has a rather embarrassing effect of loosening clothes as well as inhibitions and before sobriety and sense had time to kick in, the young girl and the young man found themselves in the bride's parent's hotel room, one floor up, losing their respective virginity.

It wasn't spectacular as sex goes, first times rarely are, but it was, in lack of better words, eventful. Not only in the sense that they both did things they never had before and consequently lost things that until that moment had seemed very important (for the girl to keep and the boy to lose) but afterwards really didn't matter as much. Not in the enormity of discovering, after the deed was done, just how badly rubber endures years of waiting in the wallet of a hopeful teenage boy.

And so the goal was met, with Jensen Ross Ackles being born nine months later.

This is of course *not* the story Donna and Alan Ackles tell Jensen, once he's old enough to start asking questions. In their version of the events they had simply met, fallen in love, gotten married and then had him. If his interest in the matter had lingered beyond the age of learning how to put two and two together and not get three, he might have realized that his birthday only came six months after his parents' wedding anniversary.

But as it happens by then he has far more sinister things to worry about. Like wondering why, in a school of five hundred pupils, he doesn't have a single friend.



In contrast, Jared Tristan Padalecki's life seems to be planned down to the smallest detail.

His parents had known each other since they were children, growing up basically in each other's backyards. They had then fallen in love once puberty hit, never even glancing any other way. They dated through high school and college, got married three months after graduation, and nine months later Jared's brother, Jeff, popped out. A few years later Jared himself was born and by the time he started kindergarten a sister, Megan, was added to the mix.

It was, as family stories go, pretty ordinary. And from a narrative point of view, nothing short of boring.

Not that Jared thinks so. He knows what interesting families are like and the thought of joining them makes his stomach turn in a horribly terrifying way.

Jared's best friend Chad's parents had gotten divorced three days before his sixth birthday, after years of everyone wondering why they'd gotten married in the first place. He now has to spend every other weekend with his dad and whatever girlfriend the man happens to be dating at the time, feeling superfluous and missing his mom more than he'll ever admit, even to Jared.

And Sandy, Jared's next-door neighbor, lives with her aunt because her whole family had been killed in a plane crash when she was too young to grieve for them. To make up for it she's left with an empty space in her heart that fills with sadness every time a plane flies over her head, without her really understanding why. As trades go it's hardly a fair one but life is not fair, her aunt will tell her and then hug her tight as they stand in the cemetery, gazing at names that are written in stone but don't tell her anything.

Jared can't even begin to imagine what that is like, not having a mom or a dad or any siblings that fill the house with noise and laughter and love. He thinks he might even have preferred being the one gone and forgotten, rather than the one left behind without so much as memories.

So as far as Jared is concerned, ordinary and predictable are good things, and he makes it his goal in life to keep it and his family on the right side of boring. Maybe a strange thing for a six year old to even think about, but for all his simplicity Jared is anything but simple. In fact, where brains and intellect are concerned, he got more than his fair share.

Which is why, as early as his first day of school, it doesn't take him long to realize that things are anything but as they appear. Winslow Elementary School may give the impression of being an ordinary school with ordinary teachers and ordinary students but he knows, just from looking around, that something is very different here from life as he knows it from his mother's backyard. Something is in the air. Something so very *not* boring.

It worries and excites him at the same time. Worries, because boring is after all what he considers safe and good, but it excites him all the same because he's never felt

anything like that before in his life. This bubbly tickling feeling in his belly. This slight twitch in his nerves. His heart skips and then beats wildly like a hummingbird's wings.

He tries to tell his mother, cautiously because he's afraid she'll laugh at him and even more afraid that she'll share his worry and decide that school is not for him after all. But she just ruffles his hair and tells him it's normal first-day-of-school jitters.

"Starting school is a big thing, honey," she says affectionately, "but don't worry. I know you will do great."

He wants to tell her it's not that. He has no doubt he will do well because he knows he's smart. And he already has Chad and Sandy, even if she's in fourth grade now, so he doesn't have to worry about not making friends. This, this feeling he has, it has nothing to do with that. It's more like...

Like catching the scent of something sweet in the oven before he opens the front door. Or watching a ball fly through the air, heading for the neighbor's window. It's like sensing that something is about to happen, he just doesn't know if it will be good, like cookies, or bad, like broken glass. And uncertainty is a feeling Jared has always had trouble dealing with.

Even if the feeling doesn't go away he can't find anything that explains it so he pushes it to the back of his mind and focuses on settling in instead.

There are twenty kids in his class, nine boys, including him and Chad, and eleven girls. Jared has never been shy, not really had any reason to, but the birdlike chatter that fills the classroom is disconcerting and he feels himself pulling back, watching without participating in all that's going on around him. The boys are brazen and loud and the girls puzzle him in a way Sandy's never done. He wonders if maybe his big brother is right, maybe they are a whole different species altogether.

As days and weeks go by the feeling of 'strangeness' lingers. It's nothing he can put his finger on, just a sense of something *different* that makes him stop in his step or cock his head, feeling like he's missing something.

Speaking of missing, he kinda misses Sandy. The four-year difference has never really mattered before but now it's like a wall between them. Not intentionally, Sandy's not like that, but it's still there. He'd been looking forward to finally being able to see her all day, every day, and not just in the afternoon when she got home from school. He hadn't really considered that they wouldn't be sharing the same classroom or even the same social circles. Something that had become painfully clear when he'd hurried to meet her at their first recess and realized there was no place for him or Chad in her group.

She apologizes later that same day when they're sitting on the swings, kicking up dirt and watching Jared's little sister eat handfuls of sand.

“It’s just different there from here,” Sandy says softly and once again Jared’s reminded of how much he dislikes change. “It’s not that we’re not friends there, it’s just that we’re better friends *here*.”

Jared’s not sure what to say to that. He always thought being friends meant being friends everywhere, not just in some places.

“Oh Jared,” she sighs, sounding way older than her ten years. “You’re too young to understand. They are my *school* friends, but you are my *home* friend.”

“Home is where the heart is,” he quotes his mother hopefully and Sandy gives him a relieved smile.

“Yes,” she says. “You are in my heart, Jared, they’re just in my class.”

Jared thinks he can live with that. He’s got Chad to be with anyway and Chad needs him way more than Sandy does. Despite Sandy being the one with no parents, Chad has always seemed the more orphaned one. He gets lost when Jared’s not around, like without him there’s no wind to hold his wings up. When alone he’s quiet, brows drawn together and eyes sliding to the side, his head tucked in between his shoulders and teeth gnawing at his lips. It’s like he’s in a different place and he doesn’t know who he is there. He makes up for it by being loud and obnoxious when they’re together, causing mayhem and getting the both of them into the kind of trouble that Jared would never even think of on his own.

Honestly, with both Chad *and* Sandy by his side he would probably see way more of the principal office than his mother could forgive him for, so maybe it’s all for the best.

That still doesn’t keep him from watching Sandy across the playground or walking innocently by her group of friends, pretending he’s going somewhere terribly important. Sandy has so many friends (just *school* friends, he has to remind himself when his stomach clenches from seeing her smiling so much at people who aren’t *him*) it seems like her whole class gathers around her every time the bell rings. Which is probably why he notices the only one who doesn’t.

“Who’s that?” Jared asks Sandy one warm and stuffy Saturday in September when they’re getting ice cream at the stand in the park.

Sandy looks where he’s pointing (discreetly, because his mom taught him it’s not nice to point or stare or in any way make people feel self-conscious) at a small boy sitting under a tree, solemnly watching the other children play. Her eyes widen and then she looks away, this odd expression on her face that Jared’s never seen before.

“That’s just Jensen,” she says but the strain in her voice and the tension riding her shoulders tells Jared there is no such thing as ‘just Jensen’.

“He’s in your class, right?” he asks and she nods reluctantly, nose slightly scrunched up as if she’d rather not think about that.

Jared glances at the boy, Jensen, again. He's playing with the leaves on the ground, throwing them in the air and watching them twist and twirl in the warm autumn breeze. He's got dirt blond hair and is wearing cut off jeans and a t-shirt. He looks lonely.

"He looks lonely," Jared says hesitantly. "Maybe we should talk to him. Ask him if he wants to play."

"No!"

He looks at her, startled. Her cheeks are flushed and she's biting her lip as if she's embarrassed but she's still shaking her head.

"No one talks to Jensen," she says. "He's... weird."

Jared blinks. "Weird? Weird how?"

"I don't know," she says, looking genuinely puzzled. "He just is. He makes everyone feel uncomfortable."

That seems like a lousy reason for not talking to someone, Jared thinks.

At the look on Jared's face Sandy's lips set in a thin stubborn line. "I'm not being mean to him. He just... He makes me feel weird inside. Like... seeing planes." She looks away, lower lip trembling.

Oh.

She looks so sad Jared hastily offers her a lick of his ice cream and then bumps it into her nose, giving it a white topping. She yelps but then she's laughing and everything is good again. They walk back to join Jared's mom and little sister on the playground, smiling and bumping into each other playfully. When Jared finally looks over to the tree, a whole ice cream and three rides on the slide later, the boy is gone, leaving only twirling leaves in his wake.



Jensen's first years at school are a roller coaster of hopeful expectations and tearful letdowns.

Academically he didn't really expect much, he already knew how to read and write and he finished his math book within the first week. His grandmother says he's too smart for his own good, which has his mom glaring at the old woman and telling Jensen he can never be too smart but maybe he should try to pace himself.

"Why?" he asks, confused. He thought the whole point of school was to learn stuff. The more the better.

His mother sighs and lays a gentle hand on his head. “Because children can be cruel, Jensen. And they don’t like it when someone is better than them.”

Jensen doesn’t think he’s better than anybody. He doesn’t even think he’s good. But his mom is still right about one thing and that’s where his biggest disappointment lies. The other kids, they really don’t like him. At all.

It’s not like he doesn’t *try* to fit in and make friends, he really does. It just seems like nothing he does is good enough for them. If he smiles they blink. If he speaks they stare. And whenever they see him coming they get this panicked look in their eyes like they want to run away and they don’t even know why.

Jensen knows why. It’s the same thing that makes his dad worry and his mom cry. That makes Nana tell his parents he’s going to Hell, not even caring that he can hear her.

It’s what makes him ‘weird’.

That’s what they call him, the kids at school. Weird. They don’t say it to his face – apparently he’s too weird for them to chance *that* – but he hears their whispers sneak through the halls until they tickle the back of his neck, making him flush red with shame.

Thing is he gets lost in his own head a lot and sometimes he forgets the rules, the ones that are supposed to make him seem ‘normal’. The rules about what to think and what to say and, above all, what *not* to do. Because there are some things he just shouldn’t meddle with, however nice it may seem.

“If God wants it to rain, it should rain,” his mom says. “The weather’s not anyone’s to interfere with.”

That’s the word *she* likes to use, ‘interfere’, to explain why what he’s doing is wrong. Like he’s treading on someone else’s turf, messing with their work. God is mentioned most frequently as the supposed ruler of things Jensen is not to ‘interfere’ with. Nature comes only second, because in Jensen’s home everything comes second to God. Even Jensen. Especially Jensen, he sometimes can’t help thinking. It’s not that they don’t care, it’s just that they care more about being what his Nana likes to call ‘good people’. And ‘good people’ don’t do the kind of things Jensen does.

Not that he really *does* anything, not on purpose. Like that time he just happened to think, ‘I wish it would stop raining’, because his sneakers were getting wet, and just like that it did. And while everyone else looked up at the sudden blue sky with puzzlement, his mother gave Jensen that tired look that told him he’d done something wrong again, without really meaning to.

His parents never really believe that he isn’t responsible for what he’s doing. According to them it’s all a matter of control. But it’s hard to control something he’s not even aware of doing, let alone *how* he’s doing it. Sometimes he looks up to find leaves twirling around him or a sunbeam following him on a cloudy day and his heart jumps up in his throat, knowing that he’s being bad again.



Most times though it's not something as obvious. No one really questions lights suddenly turning green or the biggest slice of cake landing on his plate. People don't notice shoelaces that never accidentally come undone or pencils that don't break. There is nothing 'weird' about not being picked when you haven't done your homework. (Not that that happens often. After all he has plenty of time to study since he doesn't have anyone to play with. And most of the stuff is so boringly simple anyway he could do it in his sleep. Actually has a couple of times.)

Still somehow they know. Well, they don't *really* know but they feel it. That something isn't as it should be. Jensen wonders if maybe he gives off some kind of vibe or an aura. Or, even worse, a smell. Maybe every time he does something he shouldn't he stinks, like he's been farting. The thought makes him sweat and his heart speed up like a train hurrying down a hill. God, what if he really stinks?

For a whole day he tries to sniff the air around him but he can't smell anything different. Mostly he smells like loneliness. It's a hollow scent, sort of like a deep cold lake. Occasionally he thinks he smells faintly of sunshine. It's possible that's a 'real' scent though. He sometimes has trouble telling the difference between 'his' scents and what other people smell.

In fact he has trouble knowing a lot of the time what is real and what is only real to him. The kitten that sometimes wanders into the classroom and rubs against his shins, isn't really there, he knows that now. And he learns quickly not to try and catch the colorful notes that dance in the air around him during music class since all it will do is make everyone stop playing or singing and stare at him until the notes dull to grey wisps. His mother tells him he has to be careful, has to try and work harder at acting 'normal', but it's not exactly easy when he can't really tell the difference. In the end the only solution he finds is just to stop. Everything.

Stops talking to the children that might or might not be there, stops playing with toys that maybe don't exist, stops doing anything that might possibly make people stare at him with that odd look in their eyes that says they might not know what is wrong with him but they do know he's not right.

He gets pretty good at doing nothing. So good in fact that as time goes by the other kids forget why they don't like him. Not that it matters, the damage is already done.

He just started his fourth year at school and he is still alone. He only gets invited to birthday parties if the whole class is included and even then he usually sits alone in a corner, reading a book, forgotten until everyone's gone and the parents accidentally stumble upon him. He doesn't mind, most of the time he's not really there. That's the wonder and danger about books, they pull him in so deep he disappears.

Jensen saw a movie on TV once, about a boy who got pulled into the book he was reading. But when he'd called out to his mom, excited and relieved, "Look! Just like me!" she'd just laughed and shaken her head.

"It's not real, Jensen, it's just a story. Like a fairytale," she'd explained which didn't make much sense because the fairies that lived in the woods behind the house were just as real as him. Weren't they? He'd asked them and they'd assured him that they

were indeed very real but fairies are renowned liars and can't be trusted, everyone knows that. They're also petty and easily insulted so Jensen had just smiled and nodded and given them one of his Oreos, just in case.

There are safe books and then there are dangerous books. With safe books he doesn't have to hold back because there are no wars or villains or anything that can hurt or even kill him. He can allow himself to get lost in them, knowing that he can pull out any time. Only trouble is that safe books are, to put it mildly, pretty boring. And mostly written for girls. Why girls would want to read boring books is beyond his comprehension.

Dangerous books on the other hand are... well, dangerous. The trick when reading books like that is to find a place where he knows he will get constantly interrupted. Like at the kitchen table or by the edge of the football field. Flying balls and his mother's voice have practically the same disrupting effect of kicking him out of the story at an irregular interval.

His parents have only tried to make him read the Good Book once. Jensen thinks the Bible can be called many things but good isn't one of them. He had nightmares for weeks after only reading the Genesis. He tells his mom the words are still too big for him. He can see she doesn't believe him but she doesn't push it. It's only a temporary solution but maybe he'll grow out of his 'overactive imagination' as his parents like to call it. How he imagined the heat from the brimstone and fire curling his eyelashes he'd like to know.

Jensen has a little sister, Mackenzie. She's three years old now, almost four, and even if he likes her well enough she kinda sucks as a playmate. She can't really *do* anything, not fun things anyway. And she starts screaming every time she doesn't get exactly what she wants. Their mom calls it the terrible threes, just like she used to call it the terrible twos and will probably rename it the ferocious fours and so on as Mac gets older. Jensen's pretty sure his sister will be screaming her way to everything she wants until she's as old as Grandma. Sometimes he thinks that his parents are just so relieved that Mackenzie is 'normal' that they spoil her rotten for it. So not fair.

Still, she's alright if he just keeps her happy. Even if his parents don't really trust him alone with his sister, sometimes he has to babysit her if no one else is available. Mom wants them to stay in the house ("In her room and don't open the window or let in strangers, Jensen. And don't *think!*") but Mac isn't satisfied with that anymore. She wants to go out, she wants to play with her friends, she wants so many things he doesn't know how to get her, including a rainbow colored pony. He takes her to the park instead, finds a secluded place under a tree where he can keep an eye on her while allowing his thoughts to drift and stumble.

Jensen thinks a lot. It's not always a good thing but it's hard not to when you're alone and have nothing else to distract you. When his thoughts turn 'weird' he pulls out of them and watches the other kids for a while, their colors and shapes jumping along as they play. Most of them are happy but there's always someone that's got a dark cloud or a black shadow following them. It makes Jensen feel uncomfortable, almost guilty. Like there's something he's supposed to do, he just doesn't know what.

Most of the kids in the park go to his school, some are even in his class. Like Sandy, the girl with the dark hair who smiles all the time. Unless she happens to look at Jensen. Then she goes all quiet and the colorful peacock sitting on her shoulders turns into a firebird, flames licking her neck. All of the kids do that, change their shapes and colors when they look at him. Even the ones that don't know who he is, it doesn't matter, they can still sense that there's something 'wrong' with him.

Today there's a boy with her who Jensen vaguely remember seeing before. He has a golden puppy running around his ankles. Its coat reflects the sun, shining like treasure. The boy is unremarkable really, short and pudgy with a big nose and floppy hair, and the only reason Jensen notices him is that when he catches the boy staring the puppy doesn't change.

It confuses him and for a moment he thinks maybe he got it wrong again, maybe it's a real dog. But then Sandy says something to the boy and the puppy's coat darkens with grey spots. Jensen sighs. It's the same old story, every time.

Except when the boy looks over at Jensen again the puppy turns as golden as before.

Jensen blinks. That's... different.

He sits under the tree, still as a shadow, watching them tease and laugh as they walk back to the playground. Like they're each other's best friends even if the boy looks barely six. Jensen wouldn't mind having a friend that young. He'd be friends with anyone who wanted him.

He watches the boy give a little girl the rest of his ice cream. She doesn't look more than a year old, with sand in her wispy hair and a big smile on her face that matches the boy's. A tiny white bunny rubs its face unnoticed against her elbow.

Sandy and the boy run out into the playground just as Mac stomps up to Jensen on her short legs and demands they go home so she can watch her My Little Pony tape for what must be the tenth time that week. Jensen sighs and stands up. He doesn't really want to, thinks it's about time someone told her no, but it's not his job to teach her anything. Mom has told him so many times.



## Fall 1992

Jared forgets about Jensen. It's not a conscious effort, forgetting rarely is. It just happens. Jensen doesn't exactly scream out his presence so it's not as if Jared's being rude on purpose. And to be fair they don't even know each other. They've never talked, they're not in the same class, in fact they're miles apart in all sense of the word except distance.

So when Jensen disappears one day, Jared doesn't even notice.

He probably should have noticed what disappeared *with* Jensen but it's easy to miss something fading away that was never supposed to be there in the first place. If he sometimes feels a little empty, like a few colors are missing from the world, he doesn't dwell on it. Everyone feels that way from time to time.

Days turn into weeks that turn into months and years. Jared is growing. It's a very slow progress, so slow it doesn't feel like it's happening at all. Like it's his clothes shrinking with himself staying the same. His brother Jeff is really tall, just like his dad but Jared... Jared's just short. Short and kinda chubby. It's not fair. He's ten now, he should be at least as tall as Sandy. Sandy who's suddenly got... curves. In very interesting places. That's what Chad says anyway. Jared doesn't feel comfortable talking about Sandy like that. Especially since, curves or not, she can still kick his ass from here to Sunday.

She's changed so much though, sometimes he feels like he doesn't know her at all anymore. She wears clothes that make her seem almost grown up and she talks about things he doesn't understand the appeal of. Movies he's too young to watch, with actors that apparently are 'dreamy' or 'hot' but to him just look old. She listens to music he thinks sounds dumb, about love and dying inside and no one understanding what it's like to be different. Sure Jared understands. He's plenty different. Most people are, to some degree. Singing about it seems pretty redundant. Like singing about the sun shining or water being wet.

"Oh Jared," she says and sighs dramatically. "One day you'll understand. One day you'll fall in love with a girl and then it all becomes clear."

"Yeah, maybe," he says, feeling doubtful. How do you fall in love anyway? Like falling through an open and dark pothole maybe. That would explain all the depressing love songs.

Sandy looks at him and smirks. "You're not interested in anyone in your class? Sophia, she's kinda cute. You don't like her?"

Jared frowns. Sophia has dark hair and dimples. She wears jeans and t-shirts. She looks like every other girl he knows. She doesn't even have 'curves' yet. What's he supposed to be interested in?

"She's okay, I guess," he says and Sandy giggles.

"If you want her to be your girlfriend you gotta do better than that."

"Girlfriend?" Jared looks at her, confused. "Why would I want her to be my girlfriend?"

"Because you like her?" She sighs when he just stares at her. "Don't you wanna kiss a girl, Jared?"

"I'm not sure you're supposed to be kissing girls when you're only ten," he says, feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing. Sandy tilts her head, thoughtful.

“No, maybe not. Not with tongue anyway.”

“*Tongue?*” Eww, that’s just gross. Why would he want someone else’s tongue in his mouth? The whole thing is just stupid.

“Can I tell you something?” she whispers. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“Ok.”

“Brian kissed me with his tongue.” She giggles, her cheeks red like apples. “It was kinda hot.”

Jared stares at her. Brian? But he’s so old. Like, a sophomore in high school. But then he remembers Sandy will be in high school soon too. She’s fourteen and a half and the realization makes Jared suddenly feel very small.

“I gotta go,” he says hurriedly and slips off the bench. “Chad and I are gonna build a tree house.”

She blinks, looking hurt and confused. “Ok,” she says slowly. “Are you mad at me or something?”

“Mad? Why should I be mad?” he says stiffly but he doesn’t look her in the eye because he kinda is.

Everything’s changing, slipping through his fingers like sand, and he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like it one bit. And he knows it’s not her fault but that doesn’t make him feel any better. She’s the one changing the most so she’s the one he’s irrationally angry with.

“See ya later,” he says and runs away before she has time to ask him what’s wrong. He wouldn’t know what to tell her without making them both cry.



Puberty hits Jensen like a sledgehammer. All the control he’s worked so hard at building up crumbles like dried mud as hormones attack his body and mind from all angles. He hardly notices the physical changes – voice breaking, hair sprouting in embarrassing places, all the other things that regular boys have to deal with – because he’s too busy trying to keep everything else from exploding. He wakes up in the morning with his dick stiff and his bones aching and his mother banging on the door because somehow he’s turned on all the electric appliances in the house in his sleep. Or flooded the bathroom with water. Or made it snow. In July. Inside the house.

The empty loneliness inside him is replaced with so many emotions he doesn’t know how to handle them. Fear, frustration, misery... but most of all anger. It’s like a ball of fire in his chest with the flames licking his heart and the smoke choking his lungs. He can’t breathe, can’t see through the haze of heat and smoke. He wants to scream but he’s so used to being silent he doesn’t even know how. Picture frames rattle on

the walls when he walks by and water starts sizzling in the sink. The whole house is so tense cracks are beginning to show in the walls. It feels like everyone is holding their breath. Like the pre-tremors of an earthquake or the ominous rumble of an avalanche hopelessly clinging to the side of a mountain.

“Goddammit, Jensen!” his dad finally explodes and it’s so shocking to hear his father curse Jensen freezes instantly. Everything goes absolutely silent. “You’re not even trying! If you can’t control yourself, that’s it. We have to...”

He abruptly stops, looking flushed and almost frightened, but it’s too late. Jensen stares at him then looks at his mom who stands wide-eyed and frozen by the kitchen sink.

“What?” Jensen asks, fear squeezing his heart. “You have to what?”

“Jensen, sweetheart...” his mother starts but that’s as far as she gets before his dad answers, “Send you away,” in a carefully cool voice.

Jensen stares at him until his eyes start burning, then he blinks, once.

All the lights go out.

He hears his grandma shout, “Did that boy blow a fuse again?” from the living room but for once everyone ignores her.

“Where?” he whispers, the glasses in the cupboard trembling along with his voice. “Send me away where?”

“No one is sending anyone anywhere. Alan, tell him,” his mother pleads. He can hear the tears in her voice.

“We haven’t decided,” his dad says instead. “Some kind of home where...where you can be... be safe.” His voice falters, as if he can hear the tears tripping over Jensen’s eyelashes. “I’m sorry, kiddo. Believe me, I don’t want to do this. But we have to think of your sister. And everyone else.”

Everyone that isn’t Jensen.

“I would never hurt Mac,” he chokes out. “I would never hurt anyone.”

His dad sighs and even if Jensen can’t see him in the dark he knows the anger is gone from his eyes. He smells grey, like age and regret.

“Not on purpose, I know that. Jensen, I *know* that. But sometimes you make things happen that *are* dangerous. To her, to everyone.” He sighs again, like he’s trying to breathe himself brave. “Look, you threw all the books out of the shelves yesterday. We were lucky none of them hit your sister in the head. And last week you froze the porch and I only just managed to catch your grandma as she slipped on the ice. For Christ’s sake, Jensen, you set your room on fire! It’s dangerous, Jensen. *You’re* dangerous.”

“I don’t... mean... to-to be,” Jensen hiccups, the words stumbling over the fear in his throat. “I di-didn’t... even know... I was... do-oiing it, daddy.”

The darkness is clawing at him, ripping away months and years of his age. He can feel himself shrinking inside, the small part of him that’s strong and brave and ‘Jensen’ getting smaller and smaller. Suddenly he’s pulled in close by strong arms and pressed against his father’s broad chest. His dad hasn’t hugged him since he was six. If anything, him doing it now, scares Jensen even more.

“That’s my point,” Alan says shakily. “You don’t know what you’re doing. Which means you could do anything. You could burn this place down for real, you could kill us all in our sleep. For all I know you could bring on the apocalypse without blinking an eye.”

“Alan!” his mother cries but she doesn’t sound angry, she sounds scared. Like his dad is voicing the fears she’s had herself and now she’s terrified that will make them come true.

It’s what finally breaks Jensen, his mother’s fear. This is really happening. They’re going to lock him up somewhere, like some animal because... because they’re *scared* of him. But he’s just him, just Jensen! How can mom and dad be scared of *him*? He’s just a boy. He’s not some monster. He’s not, he’s *not*! How can they think of him like that?

He clings to his dad, crying so hard he can hardly get the words out. “Don’t send me away. Please. Please, dad. I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna be locked up. I’ll be good, I promise. I’ll be good. I’ll be good. Please, daddy. Please.” He feels so small and scared and so, so ashamed. “Don’t send me away. I’ll do whatever you want. Please, please. Mom, please tell him. Mama, *help* me. Don’t let him send me away, mama, *please!*”

“Oh Jesus. Alan, please. He’s just a boy. We can’t...”

“What’s going on?” Mac’s voice suddenly says in the darkness. “Dad? Where’s Jensen going?”

Jensen’s staccato struggle to breathe echoes in the silence that follows.

“Dad?” she repeats weakly, and Jensen can’t help it, he starts shaking, curling in on himself in his dad’s rigid grip, as if making himself small enough will make them stop fearing him.

“Nowhere,” Alan finally says, voice breaking. “He ain’t going anywhere.”

Jensen feels his knees crumble but his dad holds him up, clutching him tight in his arms, not letting him fall. “It’s alright,” Dad says, relief and self-loathing in his voice. “We’ll figure something out. You don’t have to go. It’s alright, son.”

“Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I’ll be good, I promise. I promise, daddy.”

“I know. I know, kiddo,” his dad sighs and clutches him tighter. The lights suddenly switch back on, startling them all and Alan laughs tiredly. “There you go. Now I need you to calm down. Can you do that for me?”

“Ye-eah,” he sniffs and rubs his wet face with closed fists to hide how much his hands are trembling. “I’m okay now.” He’s not, he will never be okay, but that’s not what his dad wants to hear.

“Maybe we can try hypnosis or something,” his mom says awkwardly but when he chances a glance at her she’s smiling, looking relieved. “Or yoga.”

His dad starts laughing and she looks sheepish for a moment, then starts laughing as well. Suddenly they’re all laughing, almost hysterically, and they don’t stop until his grandma shuffles into the kitchen, asking them if they’ve all gone insane.

Hypnosis doesn’t work, it only makes him lose control completely and the harried woman hardly takes the time to snap him out of it before running for the door, not even waiting for Alan to retrieve his wallet from the ceiling so he can pay her.

Yoga is boring. Horribly, horribly boring. The whiny music annoys him, the names of the different positions make him roll his eyes and by the end of the first lesson he’s itching with so much repressed energy he thinks he can see it crawling under his skin. Within minutes of the second lesson he’s fried the CD player – *not* on purpose, he swears! – and his mother slips the bewildered teacher an extra fifty before pulling Jensen out of the class.

After that it’s therapy on his mother’s insistence despite his dad’s trepidations. “Be careful what you say,” he warns and Jensen nods, tense and terrified. He really doesn’t want to risk being put in a straightjacket and force-fed drugs for the rest of his life.

“Imagine a place where you feel completely at peace,” Dr. Brewer says and Jensen stands at the edge of a cliff, gazing down into an abyss of emptiness. He has one foot over the edge, ready to step off, when Dr. Brewer’s secretary accidentally pulls him back by knocking on the door.

“Draw me a picture,” Dr. Brewer says and he spends an hour drawing the shapes and colors surrounding him. She looks at the paper but all she can see are a mess of doodles that don’t make any sense to her. “What is it?” she asks and he says, “Me.” She sighs and writes something in her notebook. He feels like he’s failed the test without even knowing the question.

“What kind of person do you want to be?” she wants to know and he says, “Right,” without even thinking. “What is right?” “Not me,” he says. “I don’t want to be me.” “What is wrong with being you?” she asks. He doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know, he’s never known what it is that is wrong. And it’s not true anyway, he *does* want to be him. He likes Jensen. He just wishes Jensen was a person other people liked.



“Lay back and listen,” she says and he does. Closes his eyes and lets the music flow into him and all around him. Jazz makes him twitchy, blues makes him cry. He likes rock and certain kind of pop music but it doesn’t exactly relax him. They try classical music and it seems to be working well until she puts on Mozart’s Requiem. He doesn’t know what happened, he was actually enjoying it, in a rather morbid kinda way, but suddenly it gets cut off and when he opens his eyes she’s hitching her breath and refuses to look at him.

She calls his mother in and tells her they should take a break, that too much at once might do more bad than good. His mother sighs but she pays the bill and they leave. Dr. Brewer still won’t look Jensen in the eye when they say goodbye but he doesn’t care. He thought she was finally beginning to understand him and turns out she’s just the same as the rest.

“Jensen,” his mother starts as soon as they’re sitting safely in the car and he stiffens.

“I didn’t do anything!”

She obviously doesn’t believe him and fear slinks down his throat.

“I’m being good, I’m trying. Mom, I’m trying as hard as I can.”

“I know,” she sighs and starts the car. “And you are good... Well, better. Much better. But...”

“I don’t wanna go away,” he whispers. “Mom, please. Don’t let him send me away.”

“Your dad is not the enemy,” she snaps at him, lips thin. He shrinks back and she relaxes a little and gives him a tired smile. “Jensen, sweetie, your dad loves you. We both do. We’re not out to get you, either of us. We’re just trying to find a way to control this... to help you control yourself.”

It doesn’t have a name, *this*, whatever this is that is wrong with him. It’s like they’re afraid putting a term on it will make it more real. But he’s heard his grandma hissing ‘Devil’s child!’ as she watches him from the corner of the room. Maybe he is. If he is though, the Devil doesn’t take much interest in him. Not that God does either.

“Ok, so therapy was a bust. I guess your dad was right. So now what?” his mother finally asks when he keeps silent. “What do *you* think will help?”

He stares out the window, trying not to feel like a failure and failing at that as well. “I liked the music, some at least. I mean, some of it was just too...” He grimaces, not really able to explain it. “But the stuff I did like, it helped me relax. To keep focus.”

She nods, thoughtful. “Ok, music. We can try that. So what, we buy some CDs and experiment? Think that will work?”

He shrugs then risks a glance at her. “Maybe...” he tries, butterflies tickling his stomach, “I can do it myself? Play, I mean. I think I would like that. To learn to play something.”

She lifts an eyebrow, looking pleasantly surprised. “Alright. That sounds good. What instrument are you interested in?”

He looks away, staring out the window again. “Dunno.”

“Jensen...”

He gnaws at his lips, hands twitching in his lap.

She sighs. “You want to play the piano, is that it?”

He looks up, surprised, then follows her pointed stare and blushes. His fingers are tapping his thighs like they’re running over tangents. He slams his palms flat on his thighs, rubbing them back and forth to keep his fingers still. It’s true, he does want to learn to play the piano. Of all the music Dr. Brewer made him listen to, the beauty of the piano touched him more than anything. But he knows they cost a lot and take up way more room than they have to spare.

“It’s okay, I don’t have to,” he mumbles, trying to think of something else that doesn’t cost too much money. Maybe a guitar.

“Hmmm.” She doesn’t sound angry, just slightly worried. “I’ll talk to your dad but I can’t promise anything.”

He nods, too hopeful to speak.

“Your dad used to play the guitar,” she says wistfully as if she’d been reading his thoughts. “If the piano proves too expensive maybe we can try that.” She smiles again and reaches over to ruffle his hair. “I don’t know why we haven’t thought of this before.”

Maybe because they’ve always been looking for a way to control *him* instead of finding something *he* can control. He doesn’t tell her that though. Instead he smiles and nods and listens to the music playing in his head.

That night he hears his parents’ muffled voices coming from downstairs and tries his best not to get his hopes up. Neither of them say anything the next morning but when he comes down for a lunch break from studying in his room two days later, there’s an old upright piano standing in the living room, right where his mom’s ancient sewing machine used to stand. The one thing she inherited from her grandmother and loves almost as much as her children. Jensen stands frozen, staring at the rows of tangents, scratched ebony straddling yellowed ivory. This is too much. He stumbles into the kitchen where his mother is washing the dishes and wraps his arms around her waist, forehead resting between her shoulder blades. She smells of lemon and hope.

“Mom...” he whispers, gratitude and fear clogging his throat. What if it’s all for nothing? What if it’s just one more thing he’s bound to fail at?

“Not like I was using it,” she says as she turns around and pulls him in tighter. “Just gathering dust for no one’s benefit. Do you really see Mac as the sewing type?”

He laughs shakily. “No. But...”

“Jensen, it’s okay. This is for you,” she says gently and kisses him on the forehead before letting him go.

He nods, heart stuck in his throat. “But what if... what if it doesn’t work? What if I fail, again?”

She shakes her head. “You won’t. But Jensen,” she adds, fixing him with a serious gaze that offers no doubt, “even if it doesn’t work, it’s still worth it. You’re worth it.”

He doesn’t know what to say. All the times he was sure they felt he wasn’t worth anything come back to him in a rush of shame. “Thank you,” he whispers finally. “I won’t fail. I won’t. I’ll make you proud.”

Her eyes soften and she gives him a smile. “I know you will. Now, I called around and there are a few options for tutors. We’re too late to sign up at the music school this fall, not that I think that would be a good idea anyway, but there are plenty of young people looking for extra money. At least to get you started but I don’t know how long... Jensen, you know...”

“I know,” he hurries to assure her. “I’ll be careful.”

She smiles. “Alright. Now go try it out before everyone else comes home. It’s all tuned and ready for you. Practice scales or something.”

He breaks into a smile and gives her a quick extra hug. “Ok! I’ll practice real hard all the time, I promise.”

She laughs. “God, your grandma is going to kill us.”

Jensen only feels a little bit guilty for laughing too.

He runs into the living room, slowing down as he approaches the instrument. He stands for a moment, just running his fingers lightly over the row of tangents, too light to make a sound. Then he sits carefully down on the small bench in front of the piano, moving it back and forth, trying to find the right position. He puts his feet on the pedals, feeling them give in to the pressure as he steps down. He tries closing the lid then opening it again. There’s a small stand for sheet music on the underside of it. He’ll have to get some. For now it will be enough to just hear what sounds he can invoke with his fingertips.

He presses down on a white key. A note vibrates from within the piano’s belly. It’s dark green and slightly crooked. He tries another one. That one is deep blue and

smells like the ocean. He feels bolder and stretches out all his fingers, bending them slightly at the fingertips and then lets them fall. A jungle of sounds jumps up towards him and he can't help laughing. They kinda tickle, like running his fingers through high grass. He lifts his hand and then reaches over to his far left and slides his finger all the way over to his far right. The notes run like mice up a ladder, their tiny claws tickling their way up his spine.

“Having fun?” his mother shouts from the kitchen, the smile evident in her voice, and he yells back, “Yeah!” watching the mice run back and forth on the keyboard as he laughs out loud.

The whole house smells of lemons and music and it's the best thing ever.



## Summer 1995

“How’s learning to play the piano gonna help you become a rock star?” Chad says, his voice filled with disdain. “Who’s ever heard of anyone famous banging away on a stupid piano?”

Jared shrugs. The rock star dream isn’t his anyway. That’s all Chad, already practicing poses for the poster he says are gonna end up in every teenage girl’s bedroom once he hits the charts. Jared think Chad needs to bulk up a lot more before anyone will even want to take a picture like that of him. And preferably learn to sing. And, you know, be older than thirteen.

“I told mom I wanted to learn to play drums and she said I’d have to move to dad if I do. So not fair.” Chad throws the basketball against the wall, catching it as it bounces back.

“I thought you were gonna be a singer.”

“I can do both, dude. I’ll be like the best drummer slash singer ever.” He hits the air with imaginary drumsticks and howls into the wind.

Jared grins. He’s pretty sure Chad just likes to make noise.

“You could maybe come to the piano lesson with me,” he suggests casually, like he doesn’t care one way or the other. Truth is he’s kinda nervous about going to someone he doesn’t even know and who will probably tell him he has no talent and should just stick to the colorful plastic toy pianos, like the one he got when he was two.

“Nah,” Chad says, oblivious as always. “I have basketball practice anyway.”

The chances of Chad’s basketball practice being at the exact same time as Jared’s piano lessons seem pretty slim but Jared doesn’t say anything. Even if he’s gone with Chad to every single one of his practices and seen every game he’s played and lost. To be fair he didn’t sign up for basketball with Chad when Chad asked him to. He hadn’t seen much point in it, seeing as he’s so short and chubby. He’s kinda resigned himself to his fate as a fat midget even if his mom says it’s only a matter of time before his growth spurt kicks in. Yeah, right. She’s been saying that for the last two years and so far nothing is happening.

He looks up when he hears his mom calling to him from the driveway. Guess it’s time.

“See you later,” he mutters nervously as he stands up and swats the dust from his pants.

“Good luck with your pansy piano,” Chad snorts and for a moment Jared can’t remember why they’re still friends. But then Chad turns his head and looks up and says, “Wanna meet up after and play Nintendo?” and everything’s back to normal.

“Yeah, sure,” he says. “I’ll come over.”

Chad nods and Jared runs up the driveway to where his mom is standing by the car, waiting for him.

“Ready?” she asks and he nods, even if he’s not. He slides into the back seat and fastens his seatbelt. Mom still won’t let him ride in the front, even if he’s twelve – almost thirteen! – because it’s got an airbag and apparently he’s still too short. Jeff got to sit in the front seat when he was eleven. Life is so not fair.

“Nervous?”

He looks up and meets his mom’s eyes in the mirror. “A little,” he admits. “What if I suck?”

She laughs. “Honey, I very much doubt you’ll suck. But no one is good at their first lesson, remember that. Just listen to what your tutor says and try your best, ok?”

“Ok.”

He doesn’t know if it’s a girl or a guy who is going to tutor him. He almost hopes it’s a girl. He doesn’t really know many girls, besides Sandy who is seventeen now and only wants to hang out with him when all her other friends are busy. So getting to know another girl would be cool. And frightening. Ok, mostly frightening. Maybe it’s better if it’s a guy.

They pull up to a white house with a big garden where there are more flowers than Jared’s ever seen, sparkling with colors he couldn’t even imagine. For a moment they both sit in the car, him and his mom, and just stare in awe.

“Wow,” he finally says. “That’s... huh. Are you sure it’s here?”

His mother nods. “Yes. My, I could really use their green fingers for our garden. It’s all dried up after the summer we’ve been having. Maybe they can give me some tips.”

“Mom,” he groans. “Don’t embarrass me, ok?”

She laughs. “I won’t, I promise. C’mon, sweetie, we don’t want to be late.”

They step out of the car and walk slowly up to the house. There’s something about it that looks odd but it isn’t until they’re almost up to the front door that Jared realizes what it is. The glass in the windows is so thick it’s hardly transparent. Like the bottle thick glass they use in old churches. It looks weird on a regular house and Jared can’t help wondering if maybe they have big dogs that jump at the windows or something.

He glances at his mom but she doesn’t look worried at all but instead reaches out and pushes the doorbell. Jared hasn’t even reached counting to five when the door opens and a woman greets them, looking as nervous as he feels.

“You must be Jared,” she says with a small smile and then turns to his mother, sticking out her hand. “Mrs. Padalecki. Nice to meet you. Please come in.”

She steps back and when Jared doesn't hear anything indicating some monster of a dog on its way to eat him he follows his mother hesitantly inside.

“Welcome,” the woman says and smiles again. “To be frank I'm not sure how this is done. It's the first time we've had anyone...” She laughs tensely. “Well, you're his first student, so forgive me if I sound nervous.”

Jared looks at his mom. She's smiling as well but he can see she's looking uncertain.

The woman must notice it too because she hurries to reassure them, “Oh, I didn't mean to give the impression that he won't be a good tutor. Not at all, he's been great at teaching his little sister. It's just... Well, he's not very social. Very shy.”

She smiles and his mom relaxes. “Sounds familiar. Maybe it will be good for both of them,” she says warmly and Jared wants the floor to swallow him.

He's not shy, not with Chad or Sandy anyway. And he's plenty social. With... Chad and Sandy.

Maybe his mom has a point.

He scowls at her anyway just on principle and she offers him an apologetic shrug.

“Well, I guess you're eager to get started,” the woman continues, seeming oblivious to Jared's sour mood. “Let me just go get my son. He's probably out in the back yard, reading again. Won't you come wait in the living room?”

They follow her through the kitchen and into the living room. It's spacious with a big couch and a couple of matching easy chairs and a sofa table in one end of the room and a TV and closed bookshelves at the other. She smiles and leaves them to get seated but Jared stays standing, watching out the window as she comes through the back door. She crosses the lawn and walks up to a boy that sits under a tree, his head dropped back, resting against its thick trunk. The sight strikes a memory deep inside Jared but it isn't until he sees the leaves twirling in the air around the still form that he realizes who his tutor is.

He stands frozen as Jensen's mom shakes her son gently and for a moment all he can think about is telling his mom they got to go. Because Sandy is right, there is something about Jensen that makes him feel strange and twitchy and just... weird.

But he can't rip his eyes away from the silhouette of the boy where he sits under the tree, apparently so fast asleep his mother is having difficulty waking him. She frowns and picks up the book Jensen had obviously been reading from where it's resting across his knees. Her eyes widen and she abruptly throws the book aside and starts shaking Jensen more vigorously. Jensen's head lolls to the side and his mom pushes it upright again and then slaps him across the face, hard.

Jared steps back in shock just as Jensen jerks awake. Jared expects him to yell or even cry but all he does is shake his head as if clearing it of cobwebs and then he takes his mom's outstretched hand and allows her to pull him to his feet. She looks more angry now than scared but Jensen just shrugs and then looks over at the house, catching Jared watching them. For a moment everything's frozen but then Jensen smiles and without really wanting to Jared finds himself smiling back even if he doubts Jensen can see it through the thick glass windows.

He retreats further into the room when Jensen and his mom start walking towards the house and when they enter the living room he's standing by the bookshelves, pretending that the moment they just had didn't happen.

"Here's Jensen," Jensen's mom says, voice slightly tense, and Jared turns around just as his mom stands up from the couch.

"Nice to meet you, Jensen," Jared's mom says and smiles encouragingly at him. "I'm Sherri Padalecki and that's my son Jared."

Jensen takes her outstretched hand, his face carefully blank as he meets her smile. "Nice to meet you, ma'am." Then he turns to Jared but this time there's a slightly confused, almost disappointed, look on his face and he smiles hesitantly.

Jared feels himself blushing, feeling awkward and short and clumsy. It's weird but he suddenly realizes he's never looked straight at Jensen before, never been close enough to really see him until now. The effect is positively breathtaking.

Jensen has green eyes. It's the kind of green that makes Jared think of spring and glass marbles. They're bright and so deep, like they hold the secrets of a whole ocean within them.

His hair is light brown and sticks up in all directions. A small piece of bark is still clinging to his ear and Jared only barely keeps himself from reaching out and brushing it off.

There are freckles everywhere. On his nose, his cheeks, his ears... There's even one sitting just above the right bow of his upper lip. Jared doesn't think he's ever seen so many freckles on one person.

Jensen's cheek is still faintly pink from where his mother slapped him, a ghost print of fingers stretching toward his ear. He's watching Jared with an odd look on his face but then his eyes suddenly widen and a smile breaks out, brilliant and almost giddy. The clouds must have pulled from the sun all of a sudden because it's shining through the windows, almost uncomfortably bright, the rays tipping Jensen's hair golden.

"Hi!" he says happily.

Jared echoes, "Hi," feeling like he missed something. They gaze at each other, Jensen with a look of wonder in his eyes, Jared feeling more confused with every second.



“Well, how about you boys go upstairs?” Jensen’s mom says, breaking the moment. “Jensen can show you where he’d be teaching you, Jared, and you two can get to know each other a little.”

They both nod and Jensen gives Jared a smile before leading the way out to the hall and toward the stairs.

“Jensen...” The voice is wary, almost warning.

“Yes, mom,” he says without even looking back then heads up the stairs with a confused Jared following on his heels. He can hear their mothers talking, Jensen’s mom saying something about his grandmother passing away, leaving them a free room to make a small studio for Jensen to practice in.

Jensen stops in front of a closed door and glances over his shoulder as if to make sure Jared is still there. “In here,” he says when Jared looks at him expectantly and pushes the door open.

The room is empty except for an old piano standing against one wall with a low piano bench in front of it. There are no pictures on the walls, just a window that looks over the back yard, the glass thick and wired for extra strength. If it wasn’t for the piano and the bright green color of the walls it could just as well be a prison cell.

Jensen seems to read his thoughts because he ducks his head, rubbing one hand over his neck, and mutters something about not having expected anyone else to be there but him. “...but I’ll make it nicer. For you.”

Jared nods. He wonders why Jensen didn’t want to make it nice just for himself and Jensen says, “I don’t really notice much when I’m playing.”

Jared narrows his eyes and looks at Jensen suspiciously. Maybe Jensen *does* read thoughts. ‘There’s a piece of bark on your ear’ he thinks but Jensen only watches him, still looking kinda embarrassed and doesn’t raise his hand to brush the bark away.

“You been playing long?” Jared asks when it’s obvious Jensen is waiting for him to say something and he doesn’t really know what else they can talk about.

Jensen shrugs. “Not that long. Two years.”

Jared frowns. Two years? How much can he have learned after only two years that he feels confident teaching someone else?

“I’m kind of a genius,” Jensen adds as an explanation, all matter of fact like he’s saying, ‘I’m a fan of football’ or ‘I like ice cream’. Then he seems to realize what he said and blushes. “That sounded like bragging, didn’t it?”

“Kinda,” Jared admits, because it did.

Jensen bites his lip. “Sorry, I’m not used to talking to people.” He blushes even deeper when Jared stares at him. “I mean... Do you wanna try?” he blurts out, waving his hand toward the piano.

Jared blinks. Jensen confuses the hell out of him. “Yeah, okay,” he says because really, that’s what he’s here for, right?

He follows Jensen over to the piano, stopping a couple of steps behind him. Jensen runs his hand over the lid, moving his lips as if he’s reassuring a nervous animal. Then he pushes it open, revealing the rows of black and white keys.

“I know it looks old but it’s good,” he says and looks sharply up at Jared as if he’s expecting him to criticize its chips and scratches. “It’s got a good soul.”

Jared nods even if he doesn’t really understand what Jensen means. Maybe he meant to say that it has a good sound.

“Sit down.” Jensen moves to stand by the left side, allowing Jared to come closer. “You need to find the right height for you. See the knobs on the side? Turn them until you feel the seat fits.”

Jared feels his cheeks turn bright red. “Doubt it will fit my short legs,” he says sarcastically, trying to make his voice light but failing completely.

Jensen looks at him surprised. He tilts his head, eyes speculating as if he’s calculating Jared’s height. “You’re going to grow really tall, Jared,” he finally says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Whatever Jared was expecting it wasn’t that. He looks down at his short legs and chubby tummy, trying to imagine himself tall, maybe even taller than Jensen. It doesn’t work. He shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I think this is it.”

“Tall like a tree. Trust me.”

Jared glances up, sure that he’s being made fun of, but Jensen has turned away and is shuffling through some sheet music, apparently done with their short conversation. Jared wants to ask him how he knows but figures Jensen was only being nice. He gets to work on the seat instead, turning and twisting the knobs until he sits comfortably with his back straight and his feet touching the pedals.

“Ok?” Jensen asks from where he’s standing by the small shelf, not even looking back, and Jared nods, then says, “Yes,” out loud so Jensen will know he’s listening. He spreads out his fingers and lets them hover above the keyboard. His fingers are short and chubby, just like him, and he suddenly realizes how stupid the whole idea is, of him playing the piano. Piano players have long graceful fingers, making them reach from the high notes to the low ones without having to shuffle sideways in their seat like Jared is sure he’ll have to do.

He lets his hands fall down on his lap, heavy like two pieces of useless meat. “I don’t know why I’m doing this,” he blurts out before he can stop himself. “It’s stupid. I’m never gonna be any good at it.”

Jensen turns around and looks at him, surprised. “Why?”

“I can’t... I’m just... Look at me!” He raises his hands and then tightens them into fists. “I can’t do this.”

Jensen’s face softens. He walks over and nudges Jared’s shoulder with his hand until Jared’s turned on the bench, facing him, then takes Jared’s hands and looks at them, turning them this way and that, a frown of concentration on his face.

“Trees have branches,” he finally says, running his thumbs over Jared’s knuckles.

Jared blinks. “What?”

“Branches. Trees never grow just straight up, they reach out as well,” Jensen explains patiently and turns Jared’s palms up, nudging the clenched fingers with his thumbs urging them to uncurl. “Your fingers will grow long and strong, just like you.”

Jared frowns, doubtful. “How can you possibly know that?”

Jensen smiles and says simply, “Leaves.”

Jared thinks this must be the most bizarre conversation he’s ever had in his life and it must show on his face because Jensen adds, “In your hair,” as if that explains everything.

Jared fights the urge to reach up and pat his head, even if he’s pretty sure there aren’t any leaves there. Jensen’s the one with bits of a tree stuck to his ear, not him.

“Are you always this weird?” he asks instead and then feels like a complete jerk when Jensen lets his hands abruptly go, his face shutting down until it has the same painfully polite expression he’d given Jared’s mom.

“You should try hitting a few notes,” he says and turns away. “Get a feel for it.”

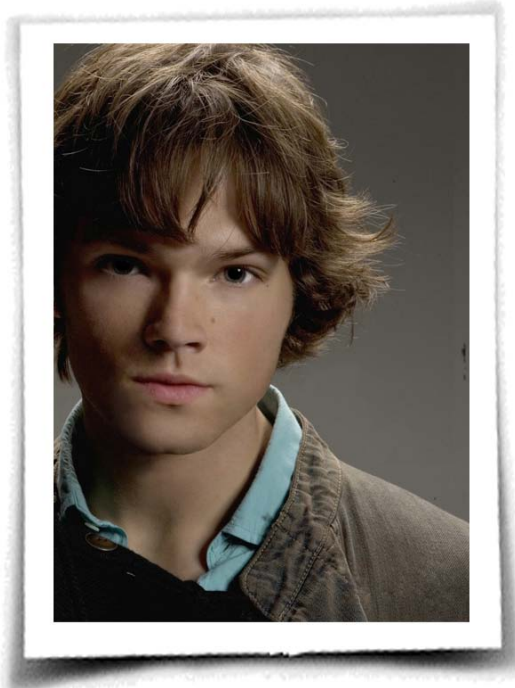
“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” Jared says quietly but Jensen doesn’t seem to hear him. He’s staring out the window, looking tense and lonely.

Jared sighs and looks down at the rows of black and white keys. He reaches out with his index finger and lets it fall on a white one, then another. Then two fingers and finally four, tapping the keys. It doesn’t sound like music, more like noise. But when he glances over at Jensen the tension is gone from his shoulders and he’s smiling softly to himself, as if what he’s hearing is something absolutely wonderful. Jared stops.

“Maybe...” he begins and then picks up his courage and says, “Maybe you could play something for me? Just so I can hear what it’s like.”

Jensen turns around, eyeing him curiously, but then he nods and walks over, sitting down on the bench that Jared hastily evacuates. He watches as Jensen closes his eyes and then lifts his hands, letting them hover in the air for a while before slowly lowering them.

*The Heart Asks Pleasure First / Michael Nyman (1:36)*



The whole teaching thing is Jensen's dad's idea. His mother doesn't like it, says it's too risky. Jensen's music does things, unexplainable things, that could scare a stranger, could let the secret out. A week with a tutor was enough to teach them that and since then he's just been teaching himself, picking up tunes and music wherever he can. The last year he's been tutoring Mac, more for the company than anything else, but she has lost all interest in playing now and that leaves Jensen, alone in his room, losing himself in his music to the extent that it's almost impossible to pull him out of it. His dad's argument is that Jensen needs to have someone else to focus on than himself. That maybe, if he's playing for other people, he can hold it back like he did with Mac.

"It's different," his mom says. "He cares about Mac. He cares enough to protect her, to keep her safe from... It's different."

Jensen closes his eyes, leaning his head against the wall in the hallway, his parent's voices dancing around him like wild fire. Why does she keep talking about him like that, like he's a loose cannon? He's not dangerous. He's never hurt anyone. Not on purpose.

"He needs to get to know other people," his dad is saying. "He needs to be able to control it out there. He's not going to stay in the house forever, Donna."

Jensen peeks around the corner to see her shaking her head, looking angry and frustrated. She always does these days, ever since grandma died. Angry with the world, angry about her life, but most of all angry at Jensen.

She's always been high-strung, something he knows is his fault. Him and his 'problem'. But it's different now. She keeps watching him, like she's expecting him to do something awful at any minute. Which stresses him out and makes him sometimes actually *do* something awful just by worrying about it. Where she used to be patient about all the accidents he caused, these days she just gets increasingly angry. He wishes he knew what he did to anger her. Maybe if he knew he could apologize and try to be better.

"This is something he needs to do," his dad is saying firmly. "We have to let him try. He's growing up. We have to prepare him for the outside world."

Jensen didn't expect the outside world to be so ... magnificent.

From the first moment he sees Jared through the thick glass window Jensen realizes something precious has just been offered to him. Jared's a giant of a man. Tall like a tree and built like a swimmer, broad shoulders and a slim waist. There's a glow about him, soft and golden, and Jensen can't help the smile slipping onto his face.

His mother says something about brushing the grass off his clothes and he looks over at her, nodding without really paying attention. When he looks back at the house the man is gone, retreated further in where Jensen can't see him.

He follows his mother into the house and enters the living room where he stops in his tracks. Instead of the tall man there's a woman sitting on the couch with a hesitant smile on her face. A sudden noise to Jensen's left makes him turn his head and he sees a red-faced boy picking up the key to the locked bookshelves that he'd obviously been fiddling with and accidentally dropped. He looks barely twelve, short and stocky, and somewhat familiar although Jensen can't place him.

No matter how used Jensen is to seeing things that aren't really there, he's never been as disappointed about it as now. Something about the tall silhouette had made him feel exuberant, his stomach tickling with expectation, and he feels almost cheated by what he's being offered instead. Pushing those thoughts aside he steps forward and takes the woman's outstretched hand before turning toward the boy. He wants to ask 'Was there someone else in here?' but just then the boy shimmers and Jensen draws in his breath.

Oh.

It's like holding an acorn in your hand and seeing the oak tree it will become. Jared is so tall his shadow reaches to the far end of the room, stretching to what seems infinity. Something flickers behind him and Jensen smiles when he sees the golden retriever sitting there, tail thudding happily against the floor. Now he remembers the small boy with the golden puppy. The puppy has grown strong and beautiful and is

now just waiting for Jared to catch up. There are tiny patches of gray in its fur but as Jensen watches they fade away and when he looks up to meet Jared's eyes again the small specks of wariness have given way to curiosity and wonder.

Seems there are some things that don't change.

He leads Jared up the stairs, barely acknowledging his mother's warning. As if he would ever hurt this boy. As if he even could. Jared's already got his future laid out before him and nothing Jensen does should change that.

It's not until he opens the door to the Spartan room that he realizes its ugliness. He's never noticed before, not when he's alone. When he's alone he sees only the piano and the music. But now...

The walls are green today, courtesy of Beethoven. Chopin is more blue while Mozart for some reason insists on being pink and sometimes sparkly. Jensen reminds himself not to play any Mozart before Jared gets here. Talk about embarrassing.

But not even sparkles could disguise the room's dreariness. He blushes, feeling ashamed and awkward. And irrationally angry with his parents. This was all their idea, the least they could have done was point this out to him. They know he doesn't see things like others do.

And to make everything even worse he can't seem to find anything to say that doesn't sound stupid or pompous. It's never really bothered him before that he doesn't know how to talk to anyone that's not his parents or Mac, (his grandma mostly talked at him or about him, never to him) but now whatever he says only makes things worse so he just stops and turns away, silently hating himself.

He's angrily watching the fairy children playing catch in the tree outside, wishing he could be as carefree (but not as mean spirited and moody) when the piano starts speaking. The note is shaky and crooked, just like his own first, but the ones that follow are brighter and colorful, full of promises. 'Oh, we like this one,' they say, laughing happily. 'Can we keep him? Can we?'

'Maybe,' Jensen thinks and allows himself a smile as the tension in his spine fades away. 'I hope so.'

It's dizzying, listening to Jared's future vibrate in the small room, the images getting clearer with every note. A wide smile, a deep dimple, soft shaggy hair being brushed back to reveal bright happy eyes looking down at him from an enormous height. Music dancing around him as he throws his arms out and laughs. Confidence in every step, kindness in his smile. Strength and safety in his arms. A man whose character matches his size, that's what he will become if he only believes in it.

Jensen wants to make Jared believe. He wants so much for Jared to realize what life has to offer, what *music* has to offer. How it can fill his world and make it his own. He wants it so much he forgets the rules and says yes when Jared asks him to play.

He chooses a soft and liquid melody that fills the room with the smell of summer and the rolling waves of the ocean. He feels warm inside, like he has sunshine in his belly, and he can feel the breeze brushing his hair, a taste of ice cream on his tongue.

‘This is what music is,’ he says with every note that flutters across the room. ‘Can you see it, Jared? Let me show it to you. Let me show you my life.’

The short hairs on his neck sway with Jared’s breathing.



Later, when Jared’s lying in his bed, staring up at the ceiling with the music still playing inside his head, Jared will think of the look on Jensen’s face. Of the peaceful, almost serene calm that settled over him as he lost himself in the music. Of his fingers, strong and steady, flying over the tangents like this was what they were made for. Of the muscles in Jensen’s shoulders moving under his thin t-shirt like waves. Of the sun, breaking through the clouds to allow a pillar of sunlight to penetrate the thick window glass, illuminating the whole scene in an almost angelical way. Of how the air seemed to vibrate and shimmer until it was like being somewhere else, far far away from the dreary room. Sand between his toes, salty breeze in the air and blue ocean as far as the eye could see.

But in that moment it’s all Jared can do just to breathe. The music is all around him and inside him. It fills every molecule in his body, making the blood rush in his veins and the air in his lungs expand until he thinks he’ll lift from the ground. He closes his eyes and fumbles behind him until he hits the wall and can lean against it, his knees barely strong enough to hold him up. He feels dizzy, his head spinning. He feels sad and happy and like all that’s wrong in the world has disappeared and left it empty. He feels ten feet tall and as small as a pebble.

“Jared? Honey? What are you doing?”

Jared blinks his eyes open. He’s lying on the floor with his mother leaning over him, worried eyes gazing down at him. It’s not until he sees Jensen hovering behind her, looking nervous and guilty, that Jared realizes the music he’s hearing is just in his head now. Jensen has stopped playing.

“Are you okay?” his mom asks just as Jensen’s mother comes into the room, stopping dead in her tracks and then glaring over at her son.

“Jensen!” she hisses and the boy flinches. “What did you do?”

“He didn’t do nothing, I just fell asleep,” Jared explains groggily before Jensen gets a word in. “I guess I was tired.”

“You fell asleep? On the floor?” His mother looks skeptic.

Jared looks around, disoriented. He doesn't remember lying down but he must have. If he'd fallen his head and back would surely hurt and they don't. In fact he feels amazing.

"There's no chair," he points out and out of the corner of his eye he sees Jensen blush and look away as if he's ashamed. 'Sorry,' Jared thinks. 'I didn't mean it like that.'

"I'm sorry about that," Jensen's mother says quickly, the anxiety gone from her voice and she gives them all an apologetic smile, even Jensen. "We've been planning to... Well, it's been a busy summer."

"It's okay," Jared assures her, more to make Jensen feel better than her. He fakes a yawn as he sits up. "Sorry for falling asleep on you, Jensen. You play really well, I was just tired."

Jensen gives him a shy smile and Jared feels dizzy all over again. "Don't worry about it," Jensen says casually but his eyes shine a brilliant, 'Thank you'.

Jared wishes he knew what he did to deserve that.

"So you think this is something you want to do?" Jared's mom asks as she straightens up and offers him a hand, tugging him to his feet. "Let Jensen teach you?"

He looks up at Jensen and tense green eyes gaze back at him, looking almost terrified with hope.

"Yes, definitely," Jared says.

Jensen's smile is so bright Jared has to grab his mother's elbow for support.

Jensen follows Jared to the car and they stand smiling awkwardly at each other while their mothers have a last minute talk in the doorway. Jared wants to apologize again, even if he's not sure what happened, he just knows that he almost got Jensen in trouble.

But before he can say anything Jensen suddenly asks, "Do you have a puppy?"

Jared frowns at the abruptness of the question. "Uh, no. Why?"

"Nothing." Jensen bites his lip but after a moment he asks, "You like dogs though?"

Jared glances up at the strengthened windows and then back at Jensen, wondering where he's going with this. "Yeah. Do *you* have a dog?"

Jensen looks puzzled. "No. My little sister's scared of them. I have a cat though. I think," he adds with a frown.

"Oh. Ok." He thinks? How can he not know?

"But you'd rather have a dog, right?"



This is getting more and more confusing. “Yeah. I’ve asked mom many times but she says having the three of us is enough. Me and my sister and my brother, I mean.”

“You’ll get one when you grow up,” Jensen tells him, like it’s a fact, not a possibility. He looks away at something behind Jared’s back, and smiles, but when Jared glances over his shoulder he doesn’t see anything.

As his mother drives them off Jared turns around in his seat to watch Jensen walk through the jungle of colorful flowers, up to his mother where she still stands in the doorway. She ushers him inside and closes the door firmly behind them.

“Everything alright?” his mother asks and he turns forward again, meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror. “You look worried.”

“Just thinking,” he says then adds, “Did you hear the music? When Jensen was playing, I mean.”

Her face lightens up, looking awed. “Oh yes. He’s an amazing pianist, don’t you think? His mother says he’s quite the prodigy.”

“Yeah.” Jared doesn’t really think ‘amazing’ covers it. “Did you know he’s only been playing for two years?”

“That is extraordinary.” She glances back at him. “You think you’ll get along? I know he’s a bit shy... I probably shouldn’t be telling you this but I got the feeling from his mother that he’s very lonely. I think this could be good for both of you. You need to open up, Jared, get to know more people.”

“Mom...”

“Sorry. Just... Try, honey. For me?”

He nods since he was going to anyway. He wants very much to get to know Jensen. It’s all he can think about.

“So how was it?” Chad asks him when they’re slouching on his bed, playing Nintendo and munching on popcorn. “You gonna be the next Beethoven or something?” He pronounces it like ‘Baithauven’ and Jared can’t help cringing.

“No,” he snorts. When Chad looks up at him, he says as casually as he can, “It was okay.”

“Huh.” Chad turns back to the game and Jared is about to breathe out when Chad says, “So, it’s a girl?”

Jared freezes. “What?”

“Your teacher, it’s a girl, right?” Chad’s grinning now, shooting him looks that have Jared squirming uncomfortably.

“Nah. It’s some dude. But he’s cool.”

“Yeah?” Chad looks disappointed, like he had anticipated getting sordid stories from Jared about making out with some girl on top of a grand piano. “You’re still gonna come to my games, right?” he asks after a while, voice too casual.

“Well, duh,” Jared says. He wants to ask if Chad would come listen to him play, granted he actually learns to, but he doesn’t. Chad’s an awful liar anyway.



Jensen knows his mother doesn’t believe he had nothing to do with Jared’s little ‘nap’. She doesn’t say it though just keeps watching him, giving him glances of worry and disapproval. In the end he looks back, challenging her to just say it. For a moment they stare at each other, a whole conversation of warnings and defiance in the silence between them, but in the end she sighs and looks away.

“Just be careful,” she says tiredly. “I know you want this, I can see it. Don’t ruin it.”

He doesn’t answer since there’s nothing he can say without admitting his guilt and he won’t, not this time. Admitting means risking his mother calling the whole thing off and that would mean no more Jared. And then he would be alone again with no one to talk to or play for.

He hasn’t really talked to anyone his own age since fifth grade. That’s when his mom started homeschooling him because his teacher had an emotional breakdown in class. Doesn’t matter that Jensen swears he had nothing to do with it. (He thinks. Pretty sure.) She says it’s better this way. Safer. He wants to believe she means it’s safer *for* him but he knows that’s not it. She means it keeps everyone else safe *from* him.

He hasn’t really left the house much since, except to go to the library or, lately, to buy sheet music at the music store by the river.

It’s practically his whole life now, music. Especially since he got his own room to play in after his grandma died some months ago. His parents love his music, they really do, they just dislike what comes with it. Glasses shattering, walls changing color, birds smashing into the windows in their eagerness to get inside. Not to mention bursting into tears or hysterical laughter at the most inappropriate moments.

It’s better now. The added insulation of the walls keeps the music from swallowing the whole house and as long as they make sure to interrupt Jensen regularly it works out fine. And once they pretty the room up for Jared it will be even better.

On Saturday Jensen and his parents go shopping, buying a couch for the piano room, plus a table and a cupboard with lockable drawers for his sheet music. He wants pictures on the wall but frames aren’t safe and posters will just fly off no matter how many thumbtacks they use. After some search they find huge music notation stickers he can put directly on the wall. The day before Jared’s first lesson Jensen spends

three hours arranging them to play out the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight sonata. Hopefully it will help keep the walls green.

Waiting for Jared to arrive Saturday morning, Jensen is so nervous and jittery it starts raining in the kitchen. His mother snaps at him but seeing as she's not much better off herself she can't really blame him for being nervous. Instead she tells him to go upstairs, lie down, and practice his breathing.

"You need to be calm when he comes, Jensen. I can give you a pill if you want?"

He shakes his head. He hates the pills. They turn everything grey and if he falls asleep he has nightmares he can't wake up from.

Instead he goes upstairs and lies down on the couch in the piano room, closing his eyes. The cat jumps up and curls up on his stomach and he pets it absentmindedly, smiling when it starts purring and kneading his sweater, its claws occasionally getting caught in the cotton threads.

"Are you real?" he asks quietly, rubbing one paper-thin ear between his fingers. The cat turns its head and licks his finger. It tickles, making him smile. "If I name you, will you be real then?" A wet nose nudges his chin and he laughs softly, lifting his head and burying his face in the soft warm fur. "Minnaloushe. How's that sound? 'Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance?'" He laughs again when the cat meows, sounding indignant. "No dancing, alright. Minna then. For short."



“Who’re you talking to?”

Jensen sits up so fast the cat hisses and skitters to the floor where it starts licking its glossy coat in protest. He stares up at Jared who is watching him warily, a basket of cinnamon buns in his hand.

“Depends,” Jensen says cautiously. “Is there a cat in here?”

Minnalousse throws him an insulted glare and jumps up on the piano where she sits eyeing Jared suspiciously.

“Should there be?” Jared asks back and looks around in confusion. “I can help you look for it if you want.”

Jensen sighs and shakes his head. “Nah, that’s alright.” He stands up and points to the basket. “That for me?”

Jared looks down surprised, like he’d forgotten what he was carrying. “Oh. Yeah. Or, you know, us. My mom made them.”

“Cool.” Jensen smiles and indicates the small table. “You can put them there.”

Jared does and then looks around, eyes glittering. “The room looks amazing. You didn’t have to do that,” he adds, looking slightly guilty. “I mean, unless you wanted to.”

“I wanted to,” Jensen assures him and smiles again so Jared knows he means it.

Smiles are important when talking to people, his mom keeps telling him. “But you have to be careful,” she warns him and he nods. Can’t have sunshine inside the house. Or outside when it’s supposed to be raining, he knows that. He’s been practicing the right kind of smiles in front of the mirror. Not too wide or people will think he’s crazy. Not too small or he looks constipated.

“Thank you for making me want to,” he says when Jared still seems uncertain.

Jared looks embarrassed. “Uh, you’re welcome.” He bites his lip, shifting awkwardly from one foot to another. “So how do I...? I mean, was I supposed to practice something? Like scales or... I don’t know.”

He blushes and Jensen suddenly remembers Jared’s not tall and confident yet. He keeps forgetting that he’s the only one who sees him like that.

“We didn’t really get that far,” he says and smiles softly when Jared relaxes. “Do you have a piano at home? To practice on, I mean.”

“Yeah. My uncle gave it to me. Or no,” Jared corrects himself awkwardly. “He died and apparently wanted me to have it. So mom thought I should learn to play.” He shrugs, like he doesn’t know if that’s good or bad that he didn’t make the decision on his own.

“And do you want to?” Jensen asks, just to be certain. “I mean really and not just because your mom said you should.”

“I wasn’t sure but now I am.” Jared blushes again, looking embarrassed but eager. “I know I’ll never be as good as you but that’s okay.”

The polite thing would be to tell Jared that of course he will be as good, even better, if he really wants to and practices hard enough. But Jared isn’t like Jensen. No one is like Jensen. This is the only thing where that is *not* a curse and Jensen needs to hold on to that, his uniqueness being good for one thing. Even if it breaks windows and makes small boys faint.

So Jensen just smiles again, encouraging this time, and says, “You never know,” because that’s not a lie. He will never know because Jensen can’t tell him. Not without explaining why and... Yeah, that’s not possible.

They walk over to the piano and Jensen makes Jared adjust the bench again until he’s sitting comfortably, if looking slightly nervous. He stands behind Jared, puts his hands on Jared’s shoulders and pushes them down while pressing his hip into Jared’s spine until he’s sitting with his back straight and his shoulders relaxed.

“Raise your hands,” Jensen says and Jared holds his hands above the tangents, his spread out fingers casting short and stubby shadows over the keys.

“Close your eyes and imagine your fingers growing until they’re as long as you want them to be.” He grins when the shadows lengthen until their pinkies are touching the highest and lowest keys. “Not quite that long,” he chuckles and he feels Jared laughing nervously underneath his palms.

“Now, without opening your eyes, play the first song that comes into your head.”

Jared startles and shakes his head. “What? I can’t do that. I don’t know how to...”

“Just listen to the music in your head, imagine it in your fingers and then play like you think it should be.”

Jared swallows. He breathes in and out a few times and then lowers his fingers.

Noise fills the room and Jensen can feel Jared cringing under his hands, shoulders tense and rigid in embarrassment.

“It’s okay, the door is closed. No one can hear you but me.” That’s not quite true but his mother is used to sudden outbursts of clanging notes that make no sense to her. “Now go on. Just listen and make the music come to you.”

Jared nods, hair falling down from behind his ears and covering his eyes that are still squeezed shut. He continues tapping the keys with his fingers, finding one note and then another and suddenly he’s got the first line of “Here Comes The Sun” playing shakily beneath his fingertips.

He stops, laughing nervously in surprise. “It was on the radio on the way over,” he explains as he glances shyly up at Jensen. “It got stuck on my brain, I guess.”

Jensen smiles. It’s getting easier and easier. In fact it’s impossible *not* to smile with Jared in the room. He’s got to keep it in check or Jared might be in for a surprise. “It’s good. I like The Beatles.”

“Really?” Jared says, looking surprised that Jensen even knows what song it is. “I thought you only played classical music.”

“I just play music,” Jensen says. “I don’t really care what kind as long as it has something to tell me.”

“Oh. And what does this song tell you?” Jared asks innocently and Jensen realizes with a bang that he’s being teased. It’s so weird. No one but Mac has ever teased him before. He kinda likes it.

“That the sun is coming? And apparently that’s alright.”

He grins when Jared giggles, mesmerized by the dimples that show in his round cheeks and the flush that travels all the way up to his ears. It’s ridiculously adorable.

“Would you like to try again?”

Jared nods and closes his eyes obediently. It’s just as noisy and jumbled this time but now he knows what he’s looking for and he doesn’t stop until he has the three first lines of the song. By that time he’s sweaty, hair clinging to his damp forehead and t-shirt sticking to his back. He smells like chocolate and Jensen’s stomach growls, loud in the fading echo of the last notes.

“Buns!” Jared laughs and points at the basket on the table while pushing the fingers of his other hand through his hair, making his bangs stand up like wings. “Have some.”

The buns are sticky with butter and sugar and taste delicious. They sit on opposite ends of the couch facing each other, both with one leg drawn up and folded, the other dangling over the edge, the basket nested between them.

“Can I ask you something?” Jared suddenly says, hurried like he’s afraid the words will catch in his throat.

Jensen pauses and pulls back his hand from the basket where he was reaching for his third bun. He figures if it’s something he has to talk his way out of, not having his mouth full will probably help. “Ok.”

“Last week, I saw... I wasn’t spying, just looking out the window when your mom went to get you and...” Jared’s getting redder and redder in the face and finally breaks off, seeming horrified by his own forwardness. “I’m sorry, it’s none of my business.”

Jensen frowns but then it dawns on him what Jared is asking and he wonders how he can answer without actually telling. “I sometimes get lost,” he finally says. “In my head. It can be hard to shake me out of it.”

“Oh.” Jared glances at him curious. “Is it like being stuck in a nightmare?”

“Yes,” Jensen says relieved. “Just like that.”

Jared nods.

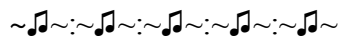
“I’m not crazy,” Jensen hurries to add, suddenly realizing what it sounds like. “Or, you know, autistic or anything. I think.” He frowns. “I’m just weird, I guess.”

Jared blushes again and shakes his head. “You’re not weird. I’m sorry I said that. You’re just... different.” He ducks his head, embarrassed. “I like different.”

To his horror Jensen can feel himself lifting off the couch until he’s hovering three inches above the pillows.

“You want some milk?” he blurts out and jumps up. “I’ll go get some.”

His feet don’t even touch the steps on their way down the stairs.



It takes Jared three weeks to realize that his Wednesday afternoon piano lessons are becoming the heart of his universe. Tuesdays are spent giddy and sparkling with energy, watching the seconds trick by, wishing for the next day to come. Thursdays on the other hand he lays around, gloomy and brooding because the days until his next lesson seem endless.

Chad says he’s becoming a boring bore that bores him to death. “Can you get your mind off that damn piano for just one minute and concentrate?” he asks, voice disgusted, then throws the controls on the floor when Jared dies yet again. “What’s the fun in kicking your ass if you’re not even trying?” he says sulkily and kicks Jared not too gently in the shin instead.

“Ok, first? Ow! Don’t kick me! And second, I am trying, I’m just a bit... distracted.”

“That’s one word for it. Dude, are you sure it’s not a girl? Cause you’re acting retarded.”

“It’s not a girl. Shut up. I’m just... I think maybe I could actually learn this. Be good at something, you know.”

Chad gives him a look like he’s crazy. “What you on about? You’re good at everything. You’re the teacher’s pet, dude. ‘Jared, won’t you please solve this problem for us?’ ‘Jared, perfect score. Again!’ ‘Jared, please come here so I can give

you a big hug!” Chad singsongs with an annoying voice that makes Jared want to hit him.

“That’s school! School doesn’t count.”

Chad rolls his eyes. “Yeah, you tell my mom that. I make captain of the team and all she can say is, ‘But what about your grades?’ like that’s all that matters. Who needs grades in the NBA?”

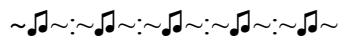
“I thought you were gonna be a rock star?” Jared asks with a frown.

“Me? Nah, that’s old. Basketball’s the future, man.” He glances over at Jared. “You’re coming to my game on Saturday, right?”

“Dude, don’t I come to every single one of your games?” Jared sighs. He’s getting damn tired of their friendly support system being entirely one sided.

“Yeah.” Chad shifts in his seat. “Just…”

“I’m gonna be there. Relax!”



“So I was thinking…” Jensen stands by the window, careful not to look back at Jared who’s busy reading through the sheet music of ABBA’s Waterloo. “Would you maybe want to, I don’t know, do something? I mean, like this Saturday?”

There is a long silence and he’d think Jared hadn’t heard him except he can feel the air shift, vibrating the short hairs at the back of his neck. When he finally chances a glance back he finds Jared staring at him, wide-eyed and flushed.

“With you?” the boy asks incredulous.

Jensen bites his lip. What the hell was he thinking? “It’s okay,” he hurries to say. “Forget it. I’m sure you have plans.”

“No!” Jared shakes his head and for a moment Jensen’s not sure what he’s saying no to. “I… I’d love to. Do something. With you.” He blushes and looks down, missing Jensen’s relieved smile. A butterfly pops out of thin air, fluttering its wings around Jared’s head and Jensen shoos it nervously away in case it’s actually visible.

“Great! We can…” He stops and frowns. He hadn’t really thought this out beyond hoping that Jared would say yes. “Uh, what do you like to do?”

“Whatever you want,” Jared says in a rush as if he’s worried that Jensen might change his mind. “I mean, what do you usually do when you’re not, you know, playing?”

“Read.”



Jared continues to look at him expectantly like he's waiting for him to add to the list and Jensen hates having to admit, "That's pretty much it."

Jared only nods, still waiting. After a while of awkward silence he blinks and says, "Ok. But when you're not in here?"

Jensen frowns. "Uh...what do you mean?"

Jared's eyes change from curious to slow understanding and then that makes way for something that almost looks like pity. Jensen shifts under the look, not sure why it bothers him so. He's got nothing to be pitied for.

"I meant outside," Jared says slowly. "Like... walking or riding a bike or... sports? Do you...?" He stops, his eyes widening and then he squeezes them shut and groans, "Damn!" head dropping down to his chest as if he's in pain.

Jensen reaches out in alarm and puts a hand on Jared's shoulder, his fingers clutching air until he remembers to curl them. It surprises him every time how small the person is that he's touching, compared to the one he's seeing. He keeps having to remind himself that Jared's still only thirteen. It's a weird thought that even when Jared's grown into the man he's to become, he will still always be younger than Jensen himself.

"You okay?" he asks. Maybe Jared's changed his mind. Not that he would blame him. Who'd want to be seen with someone as weird as Jensen?

Jared looks up at him, eyes shadowed with regret. "Chad has a game on Saturday. I kinda promised I'd be there for him. But hey," he adds and his eyes brighten, "maybe you could come with me?"

"To a game?" Just going outside with Jared and keeping things 'normal' is a scary enough thought but to be in a place with lots of people and Jared's friends? That's downright terrifying. "No, that's okay," he says hastily. "We can do something some other time."

Jared's face falls and he looks down. "You can sit with Sandy if you want," he mumbles. "We're kinda friends so I can ask her. You remember Sandy, right? She was in your class."

"Firebird," Jensen says before he can catch himself. "I mean, yeah. I remember. Jared, I don't..."

"She's your age and all so it won't be as embarrassing. That's why you don't wanna go, right? Because I'm just a kid and you're almost grown up and that's embarrassing, being seen with me. But if she's with us no one will find it weird because they're used to me hanging around with her. She's my neighbor, that's why she doesn't mind. We've known each other since ever and..."

Jensen doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Jared thinks Jensen's ashamed of *him* when it's so obvious it should be the other way around.

“Jared, no. That’s not... I would never feel embarrassed about you.” He doesn’t know how to make Jared realize how much it means to him, Jared being willing to spend some time with him outside the lessons. “Jared, I have no friends. At all. Who would I feel embarrassed for?”

Jared looks up at him. There’s a glint of guilt in his eyes that Jensen doesn’t understand. “You have no friends?” he asks hesitantly. “Just now or have you never...?”

Jensen shakes his head. He’s long past the point where it bothers him, being so pathetically lonely. He’s just happy Jared’s still here. “No. No one ever...” He shrugs. “And then I stopped going to school and I’ve just been here. There is no one here but me. And my sister but she’s got her own friends. And she’s only ten so...”

“I’m sorry,” Jared blurts out. “I was stupid.”

Jensen blinks. “What?”

“Before. When you were still at school. I saw you and thought you looked lonely but Sandy said you were weird and no one talked to you so I didn’t. And then I forgot. I shouldn’t have listened. I should have talked to you and then you would have had a friend. I would have loved to be your friend. I’m sorry.”

The rush of words smell of salt and regret and Jensen doesn’t know what to say. It would have been nice, having a friend throughout those years. But back then Jensen had nothing to offer anyway. He’s not sure he wants Jared to realize that though, that without his music Jensen is nothing.

“Don’t be. It’s okay. I’m okay. And...” he hesitates. It seems too forward, after all they’ve only known each other three weeks, but he wants this, so much. “We can be friends now. If you want?”

Jared looks up at that, and Jensen holds his breath until the guilt in Jared’s eyes makes way for genuine happiness. “Yeah. I’d like that. Very much.”

“Okay then.”

Jensen beams, only realizing he’s still holding on to Jared’s shoulder when the boy’s t-shirt tingles under his palm and to Jensen’s horror the red color starts fading around his fingers. He lets abruptly go and stumbles back, still smiling even though it must look forced now, eyes fixated on the mark he’s left. It looks like the sun reached down and touched the boy, leaving a bleached handprint. Jensen tries to force it to change back, asking, commanding, begging, ‘Please, please, don’t do this to me!’ even if he knows it’s no good. He has no control over this, no more than he has control over anything else. And he’d been thinking of going outside the house with this boy? What’s wrong with him?

“What’s wrong?” Jared asks worried and before Jensen can snatch his eyes away Jared follows his gaze. “Huh,” he says and then looks back at Jensen. “Did you do that?”

“What? No! How would I...?”

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s an old t-shirt. Don’t worry about it.”

Jensen just stares at him. Why isn’t he freaking out?

“That’s some strong hand lotion though.” Jared laughs. “Better not lick your fingers.”

Huh? Oh! “Yes! Sorry!”

“Dude, it’s okay. So... the game?”

He should say no. He should suggest they just meet some other day and do something here, within the safety of his room. But Jared is gazing up at him with hopeful eyes and Jensen can still hear Jared’s subdued voice, thinking he’s too small and insignificant to be seen with and he can’t bear having to hear that voice again.

“Ok,” he hears himself saying before he can stop himself and he’d take it back if Jared didn’t look so *happy*. “What kind of game is it?”

“Oh, it’s basketball! Chad’s really good. We play sometimes one-on-one but...” Jared looks down and shrugs. “I’m too short.”

Jensen can’t keep from smiling. “Not for long. You’re growing already.”

“Nah, I’m not.” The boy blushes and ducks his head before glancing hopefully up through his bangs. “Am I?”

He looks so adorable Jensen wants to hug him but instead he nods and grins. “At least an inch since I first met you. Promise.”

He’s not sure that’s true, after all what he sees and what is actually there isn’t always the same. But he’s been thinking growing thoughts for Jared, of weed and beanstalks and oak trees. It can’t hurt. He hopes.

Jared spreads out his fingers studying them hopefully. Then he stretches out his legs from where he sits backward on the piano bench, seeming to measure how far he can reach with his toes. “Wow. A whole inch?”

“At least,” Jensen says firmly and as he watches the boy’s shadow stutters and grows an inch and a half.

“Cool!” Jared laughs delighted. “That’s so cool. I can’t wait to tell Chad! Think I’ll be as tall as him?”

Jensen has no idea how tall Chad is but he doubts he’s as tall as Jared will become. “Taller. Dude,” he says, borrowing one of Jared’s favorite words, “he’ll have to stand on an apple box.”

Jared bursts out laughing then he jumps up on the couch and stretches his fingers toward the ceiling. “This tall? Think I’ll be this tall?”

“Taller!”

Jared stretches as high as he can, adding half another inch with a pop of his spine. “Like this?”

“Taller!” Jensen climbs up on the piano bench and stretches as high as he can. “This tall!”

Jared laughs until he collapses on the couch, stretching out and sighing happily, small hitches of laughter making him twitch. “Can you play something for me?” he asks and looks hopefully over at Jensen. “I’ll promise not to fall asleep.”

Jensen stills. He thought Jared knew he hadn’t fallen asleep by himself, even if he might not realize what exactly did happen. But it’s not the first time people conveniently forget what they’ve seen when it comes to Jensen and his ‘weirdness’. He’s just happy he caught what was happening before Jared got hurt. Seeing Jared’s head stop only two inches from the hardwood floor was so frightening Jensen hasn’t dared play for him since.

“I don’t know,” he says hesitantly. “You should probably practice…”

Jared’s eyes turn huge and puppy like and he bites his lip. “Please?”

The word ‘no’ that is tipping on Jensen’s tongue scurries back down his throat and instead he finds himself sighing indulgently. “Alright. But you have to lie still and close your eyes and promise you won’t open them, ok?”

“Ok.” Jared closes his eyes obediently. “Is this some… strange musician thing?” he asks with a soft laugh.

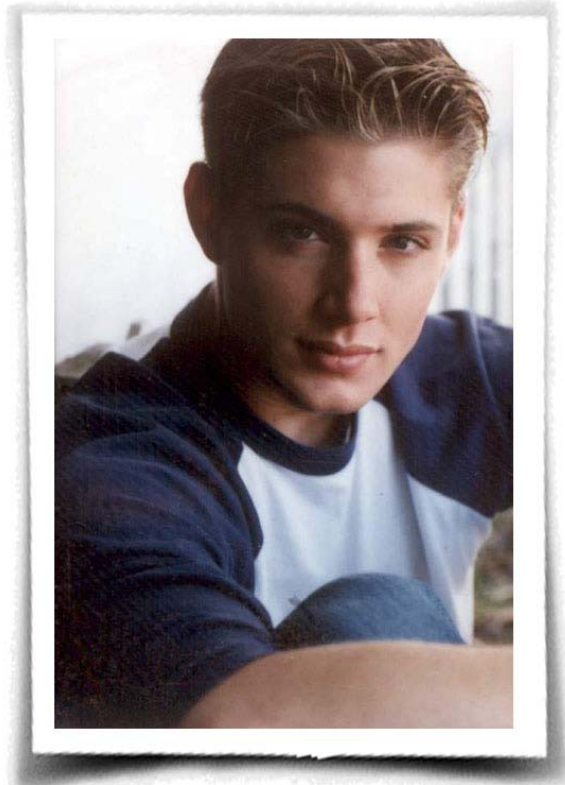
It’s kinda sweet how careful he is not to use the word ‘weird’. Jensen smiles and shakes his head, even if Jared can’t see him. “You listen better when you keep your eyes closed,” he says and at least that’s not a lie. “Just keep them closed and try to hear what the music is telling you. Then when I’m done you can tell me what you saw in your head.”

“What if I don’t see anything?” Jared asks worried, like it’s a test he might fail.

“Don’t worry, you will.”

*River Flows In You / Yiruma (3:09)*





“So real! I could smell the water in the spring and the grass on the bank. And I think there was fish. Did you see any fish? Just small ones, swimming all around the paper boat. Wow!” Jared breathes out, blowing the bangs out of his eyes. “Is this what it’s like for you?”

Jensen smiles. “Pretty much.”

“Wow,” Jared repeats, his eyes shining. He lets himself fall down on the grass, arms stretched out above his head. The thick foliage of the oak tree shelters them from the sun but every now and then the breeze lets a stray sunray through to tickle his nose. The grass is cool beneath him and everything smells like summer even if it’s already September. He feels amazing!

“Will you play for me every day?” he asks. “Every Wednesday I mean. Every time I come here.”

“I’m supposed to be teaching you, not blowing my own horn,” Jensen answers but the wariness from before is gone from his voice and when Jared glances up through slit eyes he catches Jensen watching him with a soft smile on his face.

“I like your horn. Your horn is beautiful,” Jared says. There is silence for a moment before they both burst out laughing. “I didn’t mean it like *that!*” he hiccups, cheeks blushing.

“I know.”

Jensen pulls up his legs and wraps his arms around them, resting his chin on top of his knees. He's watching Jared the way he does sometimes, like he's seeing something magnificent. No one else looks at Jared like that, not even his parents. They still see him as a little boy, like their precious baby, but Jensen... Jensen looks at him like he's all grown up and important.

"I'd like to play for you every day. Not just Wednesdays," he says softly. "You can come, whenever you want, and I'll play for you. Like today."

Jared beams but then he remembers and his smile falters. "Mom says we can't afford more than once a week." He glances over to show Jensen how sorry he is and the stricken look that meets him makes him sit up in concern. "What's wrong?"

"You're paying?" Jensen asks, incredulous. "You're paying my mom for this, for coming here?"

"Well, yeah," Jared says, not really getting what the big deal is. "You're tutoring me, remember? Tutors get paid."

Jensen jumps to his feet. If Jared didn't know better he'd say he was glowing with anger. "I don't want your money! I don't want you paying for coming here!"

The wind suddenly picks up, blowing leaves all around them, and Jared wraps his arms around himself, pulling his zipped hoodie tighter. "Jensen, it's okay. You should get paid. You're a wonderful teacher."

"But I'm not! I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know anything."

There must be a storm coming the way the wind is rapidly increasing, ripping at Jared's hair and clothes, chilling him to the bone. "We should go in. Jensen!"

He has to yell to be heard above the storm but Jensen doesn't even seem to notice. He's standing rigid in the wind, breathing heavily, his hands tightened into fists by his sides.

"Jensen!" Jared grabs Jensen by the wrist and starts pulling him toward the house. "C'mon! Can't you feel the wind? We gotta get out of here!"

That seems to snap Jensen out of it. He looks around and his eyes widen with fear. Jared wants to tell him it's okay, if they just get into the house they'll be alright, but just then the wind dies down as suddenly as it appeared, the leaves around them dropping to the ground like pebbles.

Jared stands still and then he slowly lets go of Jensen's wrist. "Huh," he says, and looks around. "That was weird."

"I'm sorry."

Jared turns to Jensen. He's staring at Jared, eyes wide and frightened.

“What?”

“I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. Please... please don’t leave.”

Jared blinks. “Jensen, it’s alright. You got upset. It happens. If you want I can talk to my mom, tell her I want to come see you more often, but just as friends, not for a lesson. You think your mom will be okay with that?”

“No, I meant...” Jensen stops abruptly. He blinks and then he suddenly breathes out, as if in relief. “Oh. Oh! Yeah! I’m sure she won’t mind. Because we’re friends, right? We are, Jared, aren’t we?”

“Yeah. And friends meet all the time,” Jared points out, grinning. “That’s what friends do.”

Jensen laughs, sounding almost hysterical with relief. “Yeah. Friends do that, right? Meet. And do stuff.”

“Like playing music.” Jared laughs as well, not really understanding what’s going on but suspecting it has something to do with Jensen never having a friend before and therefore being worried he’s doing it wrong. “Oh, and sports! You’re still going to the game with me, right?”

Jensen only seems to hesitate for a second before he’s nodding, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “Yeah. Of course. Saturday.”

“Right.” Jared wants to ask Jensen if he’s sure, wants to tell him that he doesn’t have to if it really makes him uncomfortable, but the truth is Jared wants more than anything for Jensen to come. Plus, always being stuck alone inside the house can’t be good for anyone. He looks up as his mom calls his name from the back porch.

“I got to go. I’ll call you!”

“Okay.”

He grins happily and runs to his mom, looking over his shoulder again and again just to make sure Jensen is still there. He doesn’t know why but he has this ridiculous fear that Jensen will disappear if he leaves him alone.

“Everything okay?” his mom asks puzzled and he gives her a huge smile.

“Everything’s great!” he says and looks back one last time. Jensen is still standing under the tree, gazing after him, a dazed expression on his face. Jared thinks he can see a faint rainbow shimmering in the air above Jensen’s head but just as he’s narrowing his eyes to try and see it better the door closes behind him.

“What are you so happy about?” his mother asks and gives Jensen’s mother an amused smile.

She doesn't smile back but is watching Jared with a look in her eyes that echoes Jensen's from before, after the storm. Like Jared is holding her whole world in the palm of his hand and could crush it with the slightest curl of his fingers. Maybe she too is afraid Jensen is doing this whole friendship wrong, that he will chase Jared away.

He doesn't know how to assure her that will never happen so he just smiles at her and says, "Jensen's coming to Chad's game with me on Saturday. Isn't that great?"

"It sure is," his mother says but her smile falters when she catches the shocked expression on Mrs. Ackles' face. "That's alright, isn't it? You don't have any plans, do you?"

Jensen's mother seems to jerk out of whatever was troubling her because she smiles stiffly and says, "I'm not sure. Why doesn't Jared give us a call on Friday? We should know by then."

Jared's mood plummets. That sounds like dismissal. He's pretty sure they don't have any plans, not involving Jensen anyway, he would have said. Maybe Jensen's mother just doesn't like him. Maybe she thinks he's too young to be Jensen's friend. Or not good enough. He gives her a curt nod when his mother nudges him and then follows his mother out and to the car.

"Hey," his mom says when they're inside, glancing at him in the rearview mirror as she fastens her seatbelt. "I'm sure he'll come. If he said he would."

"I don't think she likes me," Jared mumbles, staring out the side window.

"Sure she does." His mom sighs as she puts the car in gear and sways away from the sidewalk. "I'm sure it's not about you. Maybe she's just worried about Jensen."

"Why? Shouldn't she be happy he has a friend? Because we are, mom, friends." He leans forward in his seat, his eagerness returning. "Can he come visit me? Can he? And can I go see him more often? Not lessons," he hurries to add as his mom opens her mouth to answer. "Just visiting. Because we are *friends*. We are. And you don't have to pay for that."

His mother sighs. "Jared, of course you can be friends. I think that's great. Just... It's not lessons, ok?"

"It's not lessons. Even if we might play. Friends play music all the time," he says stubbornly.

"Jared..."

"They do!"

She sighs again, catching his stubborn glare in the rearview mirror. "I suppose they do." They stop at a red light and she turns to look at him more closely. "Are you growing? Heavens, I think you are."



He beams, his sour mood completely forgotten. “Jensen says I’m gonna grow tall like a tree!”

“Well, if *Jensen* says so...” She smiles and he figures she’s teasing him but he’s too happy to care.

“Yep! A tree with branches.” He spreads out his fingers and sure enough, they *do* look longer. Man, Chad is gonna be so pissed when *he’s* the short one, Jared thinks and laughs quietly to himself.



“Jensen.”

She looms over him, a dark shadow in his otherwise sunny moment and he closes his eyes, wishing she would go away and leave him to his happiness.

“Jensen!”

“I know!”

“They’re already talking about it on the local news. Freak storm they’re calling it. What were you *thinking?*”

Her voice is getting shrill and he wishes he *did* have some control over the things he does because then he’d mute her, right now. He doesn’t want to listen to this, he doesn’t want to have to think about what he did or practice his breathing or meditate or do anything that his mom thinks helps. He just wants to go back to that moment when Jared told him they were friends. With those happy eyes and a smile that would have brightened the sky all on its own if Jensen hadn’t beaten him to it.

“I’m calling your dad. This... It’s not working.”

That gets his attention. “No!” He sits up and catches her by the wrist just as she turns to storm away. “Mom, no. Please. I just... I got mad, that’s all.”

She huffs angrily. “You got mad. Well, that’s just great. You know you can’t do that! No emotions, Jensen! Nothing. Or we’ll be right back at square one and I can’t...” She closes her eyes, chest heaving. “It would break my heart.”

‘*Your* heart?’ he thinks. ‘What about *my* heart? What about my *life?*’

“I can’t have *no* emotions,” he says instead, voice shaking. “You can’t tell me to feel *nothing*. I’m not a machine, mom. I’m a human being.”

“Are you?” She opens her eyes and stares at him. “Are you human, Jensen? Because sometimes I just don’t know.”

He jerks back, her wrist slipping from his paralyzed fingers. “What? Mom, what are you...?” Tears spring to his eyes and he frantically blinks them away. “I’m *your* son, mom. I’m your *son*, for God’s sake.”

“I just don’t know, Jensen,” she repeats, looking away as she pulls her arm to her chest, cradling her wrist as if his touch has left her aching. “I just don’t know.”

This time he doesn’t try to stop her, just stands frozen and watches her slow walk up to the porch and into the house, closing the door quietly behind her. He hears something crack and the smell of snow whiffs past him. When he looks down there’s a white spot on his chest, right over his heart. He feels cold and empty in his chest and he realizes that his heart just lost one of the few persons it’s always relied on to keep it safe.

He doesn’t go inside but slides down the trunk of the oak tree and there he sits, staring into his empty future. Minnaloushe joins him after a while, rubbing her chin against his knees and tickling his nose with her tail as she twists and turns. He scratches her between the ears absentmindedly but otherwise ignores her. She goes away after a while, evaporating in the twilight. Others take her place, fairy children that pull at his hair and the ghost of the old lady offers him cookies. Even the unicorn from the woods comes and rests its heavy head on his shoulder for a while before disappearing as well in a wisp of grey smoke.

When Mac comes out and sits beside Jensen he doesn’t notice her until he realizes that she, unlike the others, doesn’t fade away.

“Is this it?” she asks quietly. “Are you leaving?”

“I don’t know,” he says. His throat hurts when he talks.

“Mom is crying,” she tells him, sounding frightened. “I don’t want you to go, Jenny.”

“I don’t want to go,” he answers and then they’re both crying, shoulder to shoulder, temples touching. “I’m sorry,” he hiccups. “I didn’t mean to be bad. It was an accident.”

“I know,” she sniffs and puts her thin arm around his neck, pulling his head down until it rests in her lap. She smells like strawberry gloss and bubble gum and he’s going to miss her so, *so* much.

He falls asleep with her fingers stroking his hair and when he wakes up she’s gone and his father is holding him by the shoulder, shaking him. “C’mon, Jensen. Let’s get you inside.”

He gets slowly to his feet, his dad catching him when he stumbles. He’s cold and stiff and numb with terror. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he whispers, his voice hoarse. “Dad, please.”

“Let’s just get you to bed, alright?” his dad says gently, one heavy hand on Jensen’s shoulder. “You’re freezing cold.”

“I don’t want to go away. I’ve been good. I have. It was just a mistake. One mistake. Please, dad, please.”

His dad stops and looks down at him with fond eyes. “I know. It’s alright. You’re not going. We’ll figure something out.”

Jensen just stares at him. He doesn’t dare to believe it. He’d been so sure this was it, he’d be whisked away and locked up before morning. “I can stay?”

“Yes, you can.” His dad sighs, running one hand through his hair. He looks old and tired. “Your mother... she’s been going through a rough time, kiddo, ever since your grandma...” He shakes his head. “Anyway, she overreacted. A little wind is not the end of the world.”

Jensen flinches and his dad sighs again.

“Sorry. Bad choice of words.”

“It’s okay.” He swallows. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I’m not human?”

His father goes absolutely still. “Why do you...?” He sucks in his breath. “Jesus!” He looks toward the house, a mixture of anger and sadness in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jensen. She’s just confused. She doesn’t mean it.”

Jensen nods but he doesn’t believe it. He thinks she does mean it, that this is the way she’s always felt deep inside but hasn’t admitted to anyone, even herself, because he is after all her son and a mother is supposed to love her son, not fear him. Not think he’s a monster that will bring on the end of the universe.

“We’ll talk tomorrow, alright? Just... go get some sleep. Tomorrow. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Jensen nods again and walks slowly up the stairs, every step like another millstone around his neck. He doesn’t go to his room but into the piano room where he lies down on the couch. He closes his eyes, turns his head and buries his face in the smell of Jared on the pillow.

Outside his window it starts to rain.



Jensen’s mom bites her lip, watching her husband with eyes that are wide with worry. “Alan...” she says again, pleadingly, and Jared doesn’t know what to think.

“No, honey. Just go tell Jensen to hurry up.” Jensen’s dad doesn’t even look back at her, just keeps his eyes and smile on Jared who smiles nervously back, shifting from one foot to another. “Jensen will be down in a minute, son. So, a basketball game, huh?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine is playing. I try to go to all his games,” Jared explains.

“Well, you’re a good friend, doing that.” The grey eyes boring into him are unsettling. “Jensen could use a friend like that.”

“Uh...” He doesn’t know what to say. “Okay. I mean, Jensen *is* my friend so... yeah.”

“Good. That’s good.” The steady gaze falters for a moment and then Alan lowers his voice. “He hasn’t been feeling well so if he seems... Well, just don’t worry about it.”

Jared blinks, a knot of worry tightening in his belly. “He’s sick?”

“No! Nono. Just... he sometimes gets... upset and needs help to calm down.”

Jared’s wondering what the hell Jensen’s dad is going on about when there’s a noise from above and they both look up. Jensen is coming down the stairs, one hand gripping the railing, the other trailing along the opposite wall. He’s staring down at his feet as if he’s scared of falling and when he finally reaches the floor and raises his head Jared can see that his eyes are drowsy, matching the slight slackening of his lips. He sways a little as he lets go of the railing and Jared’s steps automatically forward.

“Are you okay?” he asks even if it’s obvious Jensen isn’t. Not at all.

“Yeah,” Jensen mumbles in a hoarse voice. “M fine. Can we go?”

He doesn’t quite slur his words but it’s close enough and Jared doesn’t know whether to feel scared or angry. How upset can a person get that he needs to be medicated like that?

“Yeah, of course,” he says instead, shooting Jensen’s dad a worried look. The anger he finds there doesn’t reassure him one bit. What the hell is going on? “You good to walk?”

“Yeah. Just... slowly.”

“Okay.”

It’s not far, just about ten minutes by foot, but judging by the way Jensen is dragging his feet Jared’s not sure he’ll make it. Jensen’s dad seems to agree because he grabs his jacket from the hanger in the hall, lips thin with anger, and offers to drive them.

They’re silent in the car. Jared wants to ask what happened, wants to put his arm around Jensen’s shoulders and offer his own for Jensen’s drowsy head to rest on. When a tight curve in the road makes Jensen slide sideways until it actually does,

Jared tilts his own head, pressing his cheek into Jensen's hair. Jensen sighs, his eyes closed. Jared thinks he might even be sleeping.

"I'm sorry," Jensen's dad suddenly says. "His mother must have misjudged the dose. He should shake most of it off in a couple of hours."

"What's wrong with him?" Jared asks quietly but Jensen must have been awake after all because he jerks slightly then turns his head and gazes at Jared with green eyes that swim in sadness.

"I was bad, Jare," he says in a hoarse whisper that carries further than he probably intended because his father looks at him sharply in the mirror. "I was bad but now I can't be."

"Jensen..." his dad warns.

"How could you be bad?" Jared asks him confused, ignoring the interruption from the front seat. "You're the best person I know." But Jensen has closed his eyes again and doesn't seem to hear him. Jared meets Alan's worried gaze in the mirror. "Why do you need to drug him like this?"

"It's... complicated. Nothing serious," Jensen's dad hastens to add when he sees how scared Jared looks. "Just difficult to explain."

"But he'll be alright?"

"I hope so. I really hope so," Jensen's dad mumbles but Jared's not sure he's talking about the drugs. They pull up by the school and Jensen's dad turns in his seat and hands Jared a bottle of water as he gives him a firm look. "Make him drink that and then keep filling it up, ok? And keep close. Don't leave him alone for even a second."

"M not a kid. I'll be okay," Jensen mutters and fights with the seatbelt. He swats away Jared's hands as he tries to help him and finally manages to get loose. "Let's go watch some football."

"Basketball," Jared says, hurrying out of the car and to the other side so he can catch Jensen if he should fall.

"Right." Jensen nods slowly.

"Call if you need me to come get you," Jensen's dad says and hands Jared a business card. Consultant it says with a logo that promises a brighter future with financial security. "My cell number is there. Better to use that than our home number."

He doesn't say why and Jared doesn't ask, just takes the card and nods an "Ok" before running after Jensen who's walking slowly toward the hall, as if he's calculating each careful step.

“Hey, wait up,” Jared shouts and Jensen turns his head, looking at him but seeming miles away. They walk together inside and Jared looks around frantically until he sees Sandy waving him over. She’s grinning until she notices Jensen, then her smile falters. By the time they make it over she’s stony-faced and won’t even say hello.

Jared ignores her; he’s too worried about Jensen to have time for her prejudice. He pats the seat beside him and Jensen stands staring at it for a moment before clumsily taking off his jacket and sitting heavily down, clutching the jacket in his lap.

“Just tell me if you start feeling sick or something,” Jared whispers, leaning close so Sandy won’t hear him. When he straightens up again Jensen follows until he’s leaning against Jared’s side, staring blankly out at the court.

“Who’re we cheering for?” he suddenly asks, too loud, and people turn around and glare at his ignorance.

“The blue ones,” Jared tells him quietly. “That’s our team.”

“Blue?” Jensen squints for a moment before shaking his head. “I can’t see colors,” he says sadly and Jared looks at him in surprise.

“What?”

Jensen shrugs. “The pills. They make everything grey.” He straightens up, blinking his eyes furiously. “Don’t let me fall asleep,” he says, sounding almost frightened.

“It’s okay, if you’re tired...”

“No!” Jensen grabs his hand under the jacket, fingernails clawing at Jared’s knuckles. “I get nightmares. They give me nightmares. Promise you won’t let me fall asleep.”

“I promise. I promise, Jen.”

Jensen gazes at him, his eyes swimming, and Jared wants to take him out of there and home to his mom who would never ever drug Jensen if he was her son, no matter how ‘upset’ he got.

Someone tugs at his arm and he turns, meeting Sandy’s angry eyes. “That’s Jensen!” Sandy hisses in his ear, as if he isn’t aware of that fact. “Why’d you bring Jensen? How do you even know him?”

“He’s my piano teacher,” Jared hisses back through gritted teeth. “And my friend. Be nice.”

“Friend?” She makes it sound like that’s a crime. “Since when?” She shoots another glance at Jensen whose head has dropped to Jared’s shoulder. “And what’s wrong with him anyway?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him!” Jared shifts until Jensen’s head is cradled in the crook of his neck. It must be uncomfortable for him considering how much shorter

Jared is but Jensen sighs contently like there is no place he'd rather be. "He's just been sick and the drugs make him drowsy."

"If he's sick then there *is* something wrong with him," Sandy points out. She shakes her head, her frown dismissive. "He's way weirder than usual."

Jensen stiffens beside him and Jared bristles. "Don't call him weird! And what do you know what's usual? You haven't seen him in years! And you never bothered to get to know him when you could. So just back off."

She jerks back, looking hurt and confused, but Jared doesn't care. He can't help thinking that if it wasn't for her words maybe he would have gone to Jensen and talked to him all those years ago and then maybe Jensen wouldn't have been so alone. When she stands abruptly up and moves over to some of her friends three rows further down he lets her. He can always apologize to her later if he feels like it. Right now he just wants to make sure Jensen makes it through the game without falling asleep.

"M sorry," Jensen whispers into his neck.

"It's okay," he says. "You didn't do anything. She's just being a jerk."

"She doesn't like me." Jensen blinks, gazing at the back of Sandy's neck as if that might make her change her mind. "No one likes me."

Jared's right arm feels trapped between their bodies. He wants to put it around Jensen's shoulder, wants to pull him close and hold him tight until all the sadness disappears from Jensen's voice. But boys don't hug, really they don't, even if girls do it all the time. Jared's not sure why. It seems stupid because boys need hugs just as much as girls do. Like now. He thinks Jensen really needs a hug now.

"I like you," he says instead and squeezes Jensen's hand. Boys don't do that either but no one can see it under the jacket so it doesn't matter. "You're my friend and I like you."

Jensen sighs heavily, like breathing is almost too much work. "If you knew," he whispers. "You wouldn't like me."

Jared frowns. "If I knew what?"

"How bad I am." His voice is so low, hardly audible, as if he doesn't really want Jared to hear him.

"Jensen, you're not bad," Jared says with a sigh. "And even if you were I'd still like you. You're my friend, ok?"

Jensen's silent for so long Jared thinks he might be falling asleep and is just about to shake him awake but then Jensen says quietly, "Ok. Thank you."

They sit and watch the players warm up. Chad keeps giving Jared weird looks, obviously wondering who that guy is who's plastered to Jared's side and, even more

importantly, *why* are they sitting like that? Jared pretends not to notice and just smiles and gives him the thumbs up like usual. Every now and then he nudges Jensen upright and reminds him to drink from the bottle of water. It empties as the game's about to start but Jared doesn't dare leave Jensen to refill it. It will have to wait until halftime.

They're halfway through the second quarter when Jensen slowly straightens up and turns to look at Jared, his eyes strangely contemplative in their haziness. "When you're as tall as a tree," he says slowly, "can I stand in your shadow?"

Jared can't help smiling at him. Drugged Jensen is kinda silly. "I'd rather you stand in the sun with me," he says, keeping his voice light as if this is just a normal conversation between normal friends.

Jensen nods. "I'd like that. I think I'd like that very much." He looks over at the players running back and forth on the field, ball bouncing around but very rarely making its way into the basket.

"We're blue?" he asks and Jared likes that, hearing Jensen referring to Chad's team as something he's a part of.

"Yeah. Your colors coming back?"

"A little. Which one's Chad?"

Jared points to where Chad is trying to run, watch the ball, and yell at his teammates, all at the same time. It's not going too well. "There. Number eleven. The blond one who's waving his arms a lot."

Jensen nods. He's still swaying slightly in his seat but he seems to be feeling better, not as sleepy. "Go Chad," he says and Jared turns his head to see Chad catching the ball, bouncing it off the floor one time and then he's jumping up, eyes on the basket. At first Jared is sure he's way off – again – but as he watches Chad seems to hang in the air and the ball flies higher and higher and... Score!

The hall erupts in cheers and Jared jumps up, wolf whistling and clapping his hands madly. When he plummets back in his seat he turns to grin at Jensen, only to find that he's got his eyes closed, head tilted back and mouth open.

"Jensen?" Jared nudges him gently and Jensen's head falls to the side but he doesn't stir. "Jensen, c'mon. Wake up!"

He'd promised Jensen he wouldn't let him fall asleep and now he's gone and done just that. Jared can see Jensen's eyes moving rapidly beneath paper-thin eyelids, his lips are twitching and when Jared grabs Jensen's hand it's clammy with sweat.

"Jensen, wake up. Please!"

Jensen's breath is coming in small hitches and he starts shaking, almost like he's having a seizure. Jared panics. He digs his fingers into Jensen's shoulders as he



shakes him, silently begging him to please, please wake up. ‘Now, Jensen! Please!’ Suddenly he remembers Mrs. Ackles, slapping her son hard in the face. The thought alone makes him feel ill. Plus, people are starting to notice that something might be wrong and what would they think if they saw Jared hitting Jensen? Unable to think of anything else he takes Jensen’s earlobe between his thumb and forefinger and pinches, hard.

Jensen jerks awake, eyes huge and terrified, hands shooting forward and clawing at Jared’s biceps until they catch hold. At first Jared thinks Jensen’s trying to push him away or hurt him back but then he realizes Jensen’s holding on for dear life, as if Jared’s the only thing keeping him from getting lost in his nightmare again.

“It’s okay, it’s just me,” Jared says and his voice shakes a little. “It was just a dream.”

Jensen blinks. “Jared?” he whispers in a hoarse voice.

“Yeah, I’m here. You okay?”

Jensen nods even if it’s obvious he’s not. “Yeah. I just...” He sucks in his breath and runs a trembling hand over his face.

“I could use some fresh air,” Jared says cheerfully and gives Jensen a bright smile when he looks up. “And something to drink. Man, I’m thirsty. Wanna come with me?”

Jensen stares at him and then a grateful smile parts his lips and he nods. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

Just then the whistle is blown for halftime and everyone around them gets moving. Jensen stumbles as someone bumps into him but Jared catches him by the elbow and together they make their way towards the doors. Once outside Jared walks them casually to a bench that stands against the wall and then offers to fill Jensen’s bottle, claiming he needs to go to the toilet anyway. He’s loathed to leave Jensen for even a minute but he has no choice and hurries as much as he can.

When he comes back Jensen is not alone. There’s a red-haired girl sitting beside him, looking shy and awkward but happy at the same time. Jared catches her saying, “... I was sure you’d moved away when...” right before she looks up and sees him approaching. The smile stays but she stops talking and moves on the bench to make room for Jared beside Jensen.

“Hey,” he says unsure and fumbles with the bottle of water, handing it over to Jensen before sitting down between them. He recognizes her now, she’s in Sandy’s class which means she was in Jensen’s class as well when he was still at school. Not for the first time he wonders why Jensen stopped coming to school. Maybe now they’re friends, he can ask him.

“Hi. Jared, right? Sandy’s friend?”

He nods.

“I was just telling Jensen I thought he’d moved away when he disappeared like that but some people thought they’d seen him around town and I guess they were right. So, what have you been up to?”

She gives Jensen a cheerful smile and Jared has this strange and sudden urge to push her off the bench and tell her to leave them alone. Which is stupid because wasn’t he the one who wanted Jensen to have friends?

“Not much,” Jensen mumbles, staring down at the bottle of water in his hands. “Just... playing.” He looks uncomfortable and stupidly enough that makes Jared feel better.

“Playing?” she asks, frowning. “Like music or...?”

“Jensen’s teaching me how to play the piano,” Jared cuts in. “He’s an awesome pianist.” He gives Jensen a smile and Jensen smiles hesitantly back.

“Wow. I didn’t even know you played,” the girl says. “I play the flute, you know. Maybe we could play together sometime?”

Jensen doesn’t look up but Jared can feel him stiffening beside him and his knuckles turn white where he’s clutching the plastic bottle in his hands. Jared’s trying to find some way to get Jensen out of his obvious dilemma when the girl suddenly flushes and stands up, clutching her sweater to her chest.

“Oh,” she says, blinking. “I’m sorry, I gotta go.” And then she turns and hurries inside, face so red Jared thinks it might catch fire.

“Huh,” he says. “That was weird. I mean...” He fumbles with his words, blushing and glancing nervously at Jensen who looks even tenser if that’s possible. “Girls, eh? *They’re* weird. Like... alien. Or something.”

Jensen sits still, seeming to hold his breath but then a smile tugs at his lips and his shoulders relax as he breathes out. “Yeah,” he says and twists open the bottle. His hands still tremble a little but his fingers have stopped twitching. He takes a deep swig of water and offers Jared a small grin. “Girls are kinda weird.”

They look at each other and Jensen’s the first to start laughing. It’s different from any laugh they’ve shared before, it sounds wicked and mischievous and makes Jared think of all the wonderful things they could get up to now he’s finally gotten Jensen out of the imprisonment of his house. Jensen seems to read his mind because his eyes crinkle in a wink and he covers his mouth with his hand like a child hiding.

“So you know her?” Jared asks when the laughter dies down. “She was in your class, right?”

“Yeah. Danneel. She came over to talk,” Jensen says with a frown as if the whole idea puzzles him. “Guess she was curious.”

“Yeah? I think maybe she likes you,” Jared teases with a grin. Jensen just looks at him blankly. “You know, *likes* you. Like, she wants to kiss you and stuff.”

Jensen blinks. His lips part in surprise and he turns his head, staring at the door that Danneel disappeared through. “What?” he says.

“Dude, don’t act so surprised. Have you seen yourself?”

Jensen turns back abruptly, now staring at Jared with that same look of incomprehension. “What do you mean?”

It’s Jared’s turn to flush and look away. “I mean, you’re... you’re.... Well, you’re not exactly ugly.”

“I have freckles,” Jensen says, like that erases everything else when in fact Jared thinks that only adds to the wonderment. “And Mac says I’ve got bowlegs.”

“You do?” Jared looks at Jensen’s long legs but he’s sitting down so it’s kinda hard to tell. “Ok. I don’t think girls care about that though. I think they’re more about eyes and hair and stuff. And... and butts.”

He blushes when Jensen only stares at him. “Well, I don’t know! That’s what Sandy says! This guy or that one’s got a nice butt.”

“Huh. So I have a nice butt?” Jensen asks, blinking slowly.

Jared can feel his face going even redder. “I don’t know! Who looks at someone’s butt? It’s a butt! It’s like... a lump you sit on. What’s nice about it?”

Jensen grins and that’s when Jared realizes he’s being teased. He bites at his lips to keep from smiling but it’s useless, his face is already splitting into a wide grin and his shoulders start shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Jerk,” he mumbles and bumps Jensen’s shoulder with his own. Jensen just keeps grinning. He’s still grinning when they walk back in to watch the second half, his eyes bright and shining, and it feels like the sun followed them inside.



He should have realized something was up when his mom brought him a glass of warm milk and told him to drink up, claiming it was for his sore throat.

The drug isn’t a surprise, the strength of it however is. He stares into her eyes as they change from hazel to grey, her guilt badly hidden behind a determined gaze. The music and voices in the room fade until everything is silent. As distracting as the sounds surrounding him can be, their absence is terrifying. Like the whole world has shut off and disappeared, leaving him completely alone in a vacuum of nothingness.

“Mom!” he tries to yell but all he manages is a low murmur.

“It’s for your own good,” she says, her voice distant and black. “If you want to go with your friend this is how it has to be.”

“Too much,” he mumbles, blinking furiously as he tries to keep the world on its axes. “Can’t... think.”

For a moment she looks taken aback but she shakes it off quickly enough, her lips a tight line of stubborn denial. “Thinking only gets you into trouble. Now get dressed, Jared will be here soon enough.”

She ends up having to help him put on his jeans and tie his shoelaces, all the while muttering her reasons for why the double dose is for his own benefit. But he can hear her own doubt penetrating as she starts to realize how much difference a single extra pill makes. By the time he’s ready and sits waiting on his bed, staring unseeingly out the window, she stands unsure, biting at the nail on her thumb.

“Maybe we should call him, tell him you can’t go,” she says and Jensen wants to jump up and yell at her but all he can do is turn his head slowly and by the time he can focus she’s already gone.

He doesn’t want Jared to see him like this but he doesn’t want to *not* see Jared either. This was supposed to be the beginning of their new friendship, his first step into becoming a functioning individual and it’s all going wrong. He wants to cry but he can’t even do that. How could she do this to him? One pill is enough to dull all his senses, two pills are shutting him down completely.

No. He won’t let her win. She’s trying to sabotage his chances of being someone who matters. Someone likeable and interesting. Someone Jared will want to spend time with. If Jared sees him like this he’ll probably never come again.

Jensen stumbles to his feet and makes his way slowly to the door, listening for his parents’ voices downstairs and then continuing across the hall when he’s sure they aren’t on their way up. Once he reaches the bathroom he locks the door behind him and stands breathing slowly until he can lift his head and meet his reflection in the mirror. His pupils are so wide the eyes look black. He thinks he looks paler than usual but it’s hard to tell considering all he can see are shades of grey.

Reaching out he turns on the cold water and then drops his head until it’s hanging above the sink, one arm resting along its brink to hold him up. The cold water feels good on his face, even better running down his throat. He needs to dilute the drug. Some of it is already in his bloodstream but more is slowly being dissolved in his digestive system and that he needs to get rid of as soon as possible.

He drinks as much water as he can stomach before flipping the toilet open and sticking a finger down his throat.

Jensen has never been sick in his whole life. Never had a cold, never had a stomach flu, not even felt queasy from eating something strange. Partly it’s probably because of his isolation, he doesn’t get many opportunities to catch any illnesses kids his age have. That still doesn’t explain why all of Mac’s bugs pass him by. At times he’s felt

jealous of the extra attention Mac always gets when she's sick and wished he could be sick too, if only once, so his mom might sit by his bed and stroke his hair, just like she does with Mac.

After five minutes of continuous vomiting he decides he'll never envy Mac her fickle health ever again.

Just as he's stumbling back to his feet, knees shaking with weakness, he hears the doorbell ring downstairs. Damn! He doesn't have time to brush his teeth, just fumbles for the mouthwash and gurgles and spits a couple of times before making his way painfully slowly back to his room. By the time his mother comes up to fetch him he's back on his bed, t-shirt damp with sweat and legs feeling like jell-o.

He refuses her help but makes his way down the stairs slowly and by himself, already feeling the worst of his drowsiness starting to fade. His face still feels numb though and however much he wants to give Jared a reassuring smile it's all he can manage not to drool like an old dog. The state of him must be obvious because Jared looks shocked and his dad looks angry and when he meets his mother's eyes in the mirror in the hall she looks guilty as hell.

He growls silently in frustration when everyone averts their eyes and he's left clueless of what they're thinking. It's handicapping, having to rely on what he sees, especially when he sees so little. There are no colors to tell him what people are feeling, no scents or sounds to let him know what's really going on. All the music of the world is just... gone. He feels blind and deaf and alone in a way that not even Jared's reassuring smile can cure.

If this is all normal people have he doesn't want to be normal. He wants 'Jensen' back, however much people may dislike him. It's him, it's who he is, and he can't be anything else. Maybe his mom is right, maybe he isn't human, but if this is the alternative he'd rather be a Devil's child with all the wonders it includes than being this empty and numb shell that can't feel anything.

He listens to Jared and his dad talking in the car on the way to the game but he can't make sense of most of their words; they float away and disappear before he has time to grasp their meaning. The effort of walking from the car and to the basketball hall is almost too much and he doesn't even notice he's leaning against Jared like a drunk before Sandy starts talking about him being weird.

Jensen *hates* the word 'weird'. He doesn't even know why, after all it *is* the best word to describe him and everything that happens around him, but it still makes him feel like he's wrong in a way that exceeds whatever meaning other people put into it.

He once watched a documentary about etymology of certain words, how their meaning has changed with the times and how words that once were perfectly acceptable are now considered offensive. Sometimes so offensive you can't say them, even when talking about how bad they are. And how at the same time some of them have become a matter of pride for those who they were used against, as they make it a word of their own.

He's tried to think of the word 'weird' like that. Tried to own it, be proud of it. Of being different in a world where uniqueness is rare. He's stood in front of the mirror and told himself, "I am weird and I like it that way. I own my weirdness. It's mine and your disapproval doesn't matter to me." It works fine in front of a mirror. In the face of others it doesn't. Not at all.

He's not sad to see Sandy go but he feels bad for Jared's sake. He wants Jared to be his friend but not at the cost of his other friends. He tries to tell her that, gazing at the back of her neck until his eyes sting but she doesn't even look back, just shrugs her shoulders irritated and he gives up. Not that he has any idea if it would work even if he weren't drugged to his eyeballs. Probably not. If *wanting* something to happen was enough to *make* it happen, his life would be a whole lot different.

He's never consciously tried to use what he has for his own benefit. Sure, it has happened once in a while but never with him meaning to. He's not sure why he's never tried. Maybe because it feels wrong in a way that his grandmother kept telling him he was or the way his mother would look at him when accusing him of 'interfering'. As if by overstepping that line he'd prove them right, he *was* bad and wrong and everything else he didn't feel when they were things that just *happened*.

But this isn't for him, it's for Jared, and that's different. If he had any control he'd wished he could do good things for Jared. Like make his friends not mad at him or help his team win. He thinks about that as he gazes tiredly at the blurs of grey shades running back and forth across the floor, how happy it would make Jared if his team won. Even happier if his friend on the team was the one making it win. Which would be kind of a miracle because Jensen might not know much about basketball but he's pretty sure tripping over your own feet and throwing balls that never even touch the basket are not what it's about. Thankfully the other team is just as bad so maybe it's more a matter of wishing *them* to do worse. Except Jensen's never wished anyone anything bad, he's too afraid of what will happen if it decides to indulge him.

So happy thoughts for the blue team it is. Even if to him they're not so much blue as wishy-washy grey tinted with a hint of violet. At least it's a little color. He straightens up slowly and looks at Jared. Still grey but there are streaks of brown in his hair and when he turns to look at Jensen he can see a glint of hazel in Jared's eyes.

He must have said something because Jared is smiling at him and saying something about... the sun? It's all a blur. He still feels so tired, like just breathing is too much effort, and his eyes are struggling to close. He blinks furiously and stares out over the court, the moving flecks of colors making him feel dizzy. Suddenly everyone is jumping up and cheering, Jared included. His hand slips out of Jensen's grasp and it's not until then that Jensen realizes they'd been holding on to one another the whole time. It's like losing an anchor, like the final straw slipping from his fist and he starts sinking deeper and deeper and...

His drug-induced nightmares are hardly ever about anything in particular, they're just terrifying. Like feeling lost and haunted and alone and smothered all at the same time. Like running through a forest and curling up in a tight space with no way out as a shadow of terror closes in on him. He's tried to tell his parents, tried to explain why he doesn't want to take the pills, ever, but somehow their understanding of nightmares

isn't even close to what he experiences. They seem to think bad dreams are just that, like watching an old black and white horror movie, with the fake screaming and cheesy music. That you can wake up and forget just as easily as you turn of the TV-set. Maybe that's how it is to them. To Jensen it feels like being thrown into the Hell his Grandma kept telling him he'd end up in. Like everything that has ever made him happy is gone and will never ever come back, leaving him to face eternity in perdition all alone and forgotten.

Except he isn't. One moment he's there, mad with terror, and the next he's staring into Jared's eyes. Jared who's big again, tall and strong and solid where Jensen grabs hold of him. He wants to pull Jared in and bury his face in Jared's stomach, just breathe in the earthy smell of oak and sunshine until he feels alive again. But then he blinks and it's just thirteen-year-old Jared in front of him, watching him with such fear in his eyes he seems even smaller than usual. It's what helps Jensen pull himself together, seeing that fear. What helps him pretend he's okay now he's awake again.

He feels better once he gets outside and sees the world is still there, bright and warm and gradually regaining its colors. Not that he really thought it wouldn't be, but seeing is better than believing. He gives Jared a grateful smile. Jared who isn't freaking out but instead handles everything smoothly and effortlessly, smiling brightly like acting everything's okay will make it that way. Jensen can see the worry in his eyes though and swears to himself that he will never put Jared in this situation again. God, he's the older one here, he should be the one looking after Jared, not the other way around.

He doesn't notice when the girl comes over. One moment he's gazing dazedly at a bird struggling with a worm that seems determined to rather pull its predator underground than allow itself to be eaten, and the next she's there, sitting on the bench beside him. For a second he's confused because it's supposed to be Jared and as far as he knows he can't transmogrify people. He thinks. Then he remembers Jared went to get more water.

The girl starts talking and he turns to look at her more closely. She looks vaguely familiar but it isn't until she says her name that he realizes she used to be in his class when he still went to school. One of the kids with dark shapes dancing around them that always made him feel sad without knowing why. Now he's older he *does* know, which only makes him feel worse. He tries to focus on what she's saying, feeling confused about why she's talking to him in the first place and starting to panic about whether he's supposed to say something back. Before it comes to that Jared is there again, a solid presence by his side, sheltering him partially from the girl's curious gaze. He focuses on that and the coolness of the bottle in his hands and breathing becomes a little easier.

It takes him a while to realize she's asking him a question and that he is expected to answer. He doesn't know why that unnerves him so, after all he's gotten used to talking to Jared. Maybe it's the drugs. They make the usual complex path between thinking and talking even less clear. Before he makes a complete fool of himself Jared comes to his rescue again. Jensen is pretty sure the smile he shoots Jared looks more loopy than grateful but Jared smiles back so maybe he did ok.

Then she starts talking about them playing together. Her flute flirting with his piano. It doesn't sound right. It definitely doesn't *feel* right. It feels like cheating. Like having an affair with a different instrument, like cheating on... on Jared. Jared's stubby kid fingers stroking the tangents. Jared's graceful and long grown-up digits, caressing the keys like a lover. Jensen feels hot inside, shameful that she would even suggest such a thing. That she would think he'd ever do that.

Before he can find the words to explain why he wouldn't, without sounding completely insane, she suddenly stands up and practically runs away. The heat in his chest dies away and he tries desperately to figure out what he did. Because he knows he did something and he's pretty sure it was bad. Seems that's the way they are, the effects he has on people, especially when he doesn't mean to. He should run after her and apologize but he still feels so tired.

Thankfully Jared chalks her strange behavior up to female weirdness and then somehow that turns into a conversation about Jensen being bowlegged and freckled and having a nice butt and it's possible it wouldn't be as confusing if he wasn't seeing two versions of Jared, one a blushing and awkward teenager and the other a winking and smirking grown-up but really, he isn't too sure about that. Maybe this is how teenagers talk. Jared knows that better than him and he's the one doing most of the talking so it probably is.

It's stupid but somehow knowing Jared finds him 'not exactly ugly' gives him a warm feeling in his chest. Not that he's ever thought of himself as ugly but he hasn't thought of himself as attractive either. In fact he hasn't given it any thought at all beyond sighing if he finds a pimple on his face because Mac just loves to tease him about those. But this, now, hearing Jared's awkward attempt of a compliment, it makes him smile stupidly and it isn't until they're back inside, settling down to watch the rest of the game and someone complains about the lights being too bright that he realizes what he's doing.

It still takes him all the next quarter before the last rays of sunshine fade away.

Chad throws Jared the basketball as he walks backwards toward the change rooms beaming happily.

"We're going out for pizza," he yells. "To celebrate. See you later."

Jared fumbles with the ball, dropping it, and it bounces off the seats and shoots across the court, banging into the opposite wall. Chad just shakes his head and does the loser sign on his forehead before walking off. Jared shrugs like he doesn't care but his face is flushed and his smile is too bright when he turns to Jensen instead.

"Would you like to come home? With me, I mean," Jared elaborates. "Mom says it's okay. Unless... unless you're still feeling bad," he adds wide-eyed and embarrassed for forgetting. "Are you... How are you? Your dad said I could call if..."

"I'd love to," Jensen says quickly. Going home is the last thing he wants to do. "If your mom says it's alright, then yeah, I'd love to see your home." He smiles and tries



to look perk and alert. He is, more or less. He can even see Jared's dog now, watching them with its tongue hanging out and its tail sweeping the floor right-left, right-left. It should really have a name, he thinks, but he feels weird naming Jared's dog. Maybe he can ask him later what he'd name his dog if he knew he had one.

"Jensen? You sure?" Jared asks, voice loud, snapping Jensen out of his thoughts. Jared's eyes dart to the spot on the floor where the dog sits and then back to Jensen, looking slightly worried. For a moment Jensen panics, thinking he said all that out loud, but then he realizes they're alone because everyone else has left. He must have zoned out again.

"I'm sure," he says firmly. His mother will have a fit when he gets home but right now he doesn't care what she thinks. "Is it far?"

Jared shakes his head, he's smiling and looks like he's five seconds away from bouncing on the balls of his feet out of excitement. "Not far at all. You good to walk?"

"Yeah. I'm almost back to... being myself," he says because 'normal' is not a word that will ever fit him. He keeps glancing at Jared as they exit the building and start walking in the direction of Jared's house. Jared's going to ask, sooner or later, about this whole thing and Jensen doesn't really know what to tell him. Maybe he can make up some kind of illness.

Except he doesn't really want to. He doesn't want to lie and he really doesn't want to pretend there's something wrong with him when honestly, there isn't. There's nothing wrong with him. The more he thinks about it, the clearer it is to him. There is *nothing* wrong with him. This, whatever this is, is just a part of who he is. It's about time his parents realize that. He will never be what they want him to be but maybe he can become someone *he* wants to be. And being locked up in his room the rest of his life will not get him there. His dad is right, he needs to be able to function out here, in the real world.

Jared is quiet but not withdrawn. He keeps close to Jensen's side, their hands bumping every now and then into each other, and when he catches Jensen's eyes he smiles as if to say, 'I'm right here if you should need me.' But he doesn't ask. The closer they get to Jared's house the more nervous Jensen gets. What if Jared's mother notices? What if *she* asks? What if she thinks he's dangerous because he's on drugs and she tells Jared they can't see each other again?

In the end he can't stand it anymore and says quickly, "I'm sorry about... about weirding you out. With the drugs and falling asleep and being... like this. Bet you're thinking I'm crazy, right?" he laughs nervously.

Jared opens his mouth but Jensen's too anxious to wait for his answer. "I'm not. I'm not crazy. I'm just... I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not... Why aren't you curious?" he finally blurts out just to shut himself up.

Jared glances at him, teeth worrying his lip for a moment before he says, “I am. I just didn’t think you wanted to talk about it.” He hesitates. “*Do* you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” Jensen says honestly. “I mean, I don’t know how to explain it.” He breathes out. “It’s kind of a secret.”

“Oh. Ok.” Jared seems unsure, his worry red and spicy. “Is it a bad secret?” he finally asks in a very quiet voice. “Because mom says sometimes people tell you to keep secrets you really shouldn’t. Like if it’s something... hurting you. Then keeping the secret is worse than telling it.”

It takes Jensen a moment to figure out what Jared’s talking about but when he does he almost starts laughing. Not because it’s funny but because it’s horrible. Black shadows and dark clouds and fear so red it hurts. But not his. However difficult his life sometimes seems it’s a thousand times better than that.

“It’s not that kind of secret,” he says gently, “I promise.”

Jared breathes out and smiles a little before turning serious again. “Ok. Just... if you ever want to tell me, you can. Because I won’t tell anyone. Unless it’s really something hurting you, then I gotta tell. I promised mom. Not about you but, you know, if anyone told me something like that. *Then* I gotta tell.” He looks away. “But if you don’t want to tell that’s okay too. I don’t have to know.”

Jensen bites his lip. “Can I think about it? It’s not because of you, I promise, it’s just... We never tell anyone. It’s kinda the family rule.”

“Oh.” There’s silence for a while and then Jared asks, “You’re aliens?”

He sounds serious, but when Jensen looks at him startled there’s a glint in his eyes and he’s biting his lip to keep from smiling.

“Yes,” Jensen says and laughs. Who knows, maybe he is. Maybe someone switched him with a human baby when he was little. It would explain a lot. “Martians.”

“Huh.” Jared looks him up and down. “You don’t look green,” he says with a grin as they start walking again.

“That’s because we eat human pills,” Jensen explains. “Made out of baby teeth and old ladies toenails.”

“Eeww!” Jared laughs out loud, delighted. “You have antlers too?”

“Yep. If I close my eyes I can watch TV on the back of my eyelids,” Jensen says. He squeezes his eyes shut. “Oh look, Baywatch is on. And... they’re running! Look at’em go.”

Jared cracks up. “You are so funny! Watch it!” He catches Jensen by the arm just as he’s about to walk into a light pole. “Save it until later, ok? Better be sitting down for that.”

“Or lying down...” Jensen says and winks at him.

Jared blushes deep red. “Yeah, I guess.”

He looks so uncomfortable Jensen almost apologizes, he just doesn’t know what for. Jared’s thirteen. No way he doesn’t do *that* yet. But maybe you aren’t supposed to talk about stuff like that with your friends. Jensen really doesn’t know. Thing is, it’s not like he can ask his parents or talk to Mac. Then whom are you supposed to talk to about these things?

“Can I ask you something?” Jared suddenly says, interrupting Jensen’s confused thoughts then hurries on before he has time to answer, “Do you really need to use your tongue when you’re kissing someone?”

Jensen blinks. “What?”

“I’m just asking because Sandy, you know Sandy, she’s going out with some really old guy, like twenty or something, and he keeps kissing her and it looks really gross and I don’t think I’d want to do it like that with tongues all over the place. It looks stupid. And messy.”

“I don’t...”

“But there’s this girl in my class,” Jared keeps going as if he’s afraid he’ll chicken out if he takes time to even breathe, “who asked if I wanted to go out with her and that means kissing, right? So I need to kiss her and what if she likes the tongue thing and wants me to do that, what then? I don’t even know how. I mean, you’re almost an adult, you know this stuff, right?”

He gazes embarrassed but expectantly at Jensen who just stares back, completely at loss.

“Jared,” he says slowly, “*how* would I know this stuff? Who am I supposed to have kissed? My sister? My mom? I. Never. Go. Anywhere. Ever. I don’t know anyone but you.”

Jared’s mouth opens and then he snaps it shut, blushing deep red. “I forgot,” he mumbles. “Sorry. I just thought...”

“Just because I’m older doesn’t mean I know stuff,” Jensen says gently. “I don’t know anything but what I’ve read in books or watched on TV. Your life is a thousand times more exciting than mine.”

“That’s not true!” Jared is quick to protest, shaking his head vigorously. “You have your music and... and...” He stops and Jensen gives him a sad smile, eyebrow raised.

“And that’s it. That’s all I have.”

Jared flails. “No. You have you. *You’re* exciting. You’re totally different from everyone. And I don’t mean that as a bad thing,” he hastens to add when Jensen grimaces.

Jensen snorts. “You’re the only one then.”

“Well, everyone else is just stupid,” Jared says firmly as he stops and pushes open a small gate. “Here we are.”

Jared’s house is yellow. The lawn is dry but neatly trimmed and there are pretty flowers in the flowerbeds running along the path to the house and all around it. It’s simple and plain and absolutely wonderful.

“Mom loves your garden,” Jared says suddenly as they’re walking toward the house. “She talks about it all the time. She says it looks enchanted with all those beautiful flowers.”

Jensen only just keeps from flinching. “It’s okay, I guess,” he mumbles. Not his fault the stupid flowers don’t know they’re not supposed to be there. “Yours is neater though. I should probably try and keep ours neater,” he adds absentmindedly.

“You?” Jared gapes. “*You* did that garden?”

Damn. “Kinda.” In a way. Not on purpose, but still.

“Wow. Mom is gonna love you,” Jared says as he pushes the door open. “Mom, we’re home! I’ve got Jensen with me!”

“Don’t yell, honey,” Jared’s mother says as she pops her head out of the kitchen. “Hi, Jensen. How nice to see you.”

“Hi. I mean, thank you, for inviting me.” He blushes and she gives him a reassuring smile.

“All of Jared’s friends are welcome here. Speaking of which, how did Chad’s game go?”

“Oh wow, mom, he scored! Twice!”

She looks surprised. “Really? Chad?”

“I know! It was unreal.” His smile falters slightly. “They went out for pizza. The team, I mean.”

“Well, I’m making peanut butter chocolate chip cookies,” Jared’s mom says lightly. “It’s not pizza but... “

Jared's face lights up like a Christmas tree. There's even tinsel in his hair. "It's a thousand times better!" He turns to Jensen. "You like cookies, right? Oh, you're not allergic or anything? To peanut butter, I mean? There's this guy in my class and his head swells up like a balloon if anyone brings pb&j sandwiches for lunch. Very scary."

"I'm not allergic," Jensen assures him. "And I think everyone likes cookies, Jare."

Jared beams. "You wanna see my room? It's upstairs. C'mon!"

He keeps on rambling nervously as they trod up to the upper floor. "It's nothing special and probably messy. I can't remember if I even made my bed this morning. Bet I didn't. And don't mind the stupid posters. Or the planes. I've got a lot of planes. Mom says I should take'em down but I kinda like'em, you know. And I put a lot of work into them so... Here we are!"

Jared's room *is* messy. There are clothes and books and CDs everywhere. There are dozens of plane models hanging from the ceiling and posters of Spiderman on the wall. A big blue bear sits propped up on the sloppily made bed. Jared snatches it away and then stands flushed, holding it awkwardly in his hands before putting it back, face down.

"How did he get there?" he says and Jensen bites back a grin. "Bluebear, I mean." Jared's eyes widen. "Not that I named him or anything. I mean *it!* I mean... Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing," Jensen says and smiles. He turns Bluebear over, propping him up against the pillows again and the bear gives him a grateful smile before throwing a hurt glare Jared's way. "I have a rabbit called Slipper. He sleeps on my pillow."

"Really?" Jared looks relieved. "But you're almost grown up."

"You're never too grown up for a friend," Jensen says and Bluebear nods in agreement.

"I just realized I've never seen your room. I mean, I've seen the piano room but not *your* room." Jared hesitates. "You have a room, right? With a bed."

Jensen laughs even though he's kinda horrified. God, what must Jared think of his messed up family. "Yes, Jared, I have a room. With a bed."

Jared blushes but he looks relieved as well, as if it was a real possibility that Jensen was kept in that dreary room all day and night. Not that the room Jensen sleeps in looks much better, in fact, after their renovation, the piano room feels more like his than the other. He even sleeps in there now, on the couch, sometimes when he feels too lonely to be in bed. Slipper, for all his comfort, doesn't have quite the same solid and reassuring presence as the piano has.

"I'll show it to you some time. And Slipper. He'll be glad for the company."

Jared laughs and Bluebear winks at Jensen. He smiles and takes a look around Jared's room. There's a sort of order to the mess, the kind that is invisible to others but Jensen is sure Jared knows exactly where to find everything. A complicated organized chaos perfected over time.

"I like this room," he says. "It's like peeking inside your head."

"My head is messy?" Jared asks, looking like he's not sure whether to be insulted or not.

"No. Your head is complicated," Jensen explains. "It's got so much going on inside, it doesn't know how to keep track of everything. It's all a jumble, like different toys thrown in a box. But don't worry, everything is still there when you need it. You'll figure it out."

Jared blinks and Jensen looks away, tracing the patterns on the wall with his eyes, the signs of Jared growing up inside this room, his hands and feet scuffing the walls as his shadow strains to grow taller.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I keep saying stupid things."

"No."

Jensen glances up. Jared is watching him with a kind of wonder in his eyes.

"They're not stupid. You make more sense than anyone I know." Jared bites his lip, worrying it with his teeth. "It's like... It's so much. Everything." He sits down on the bed, staring at the clenched hands in his lap. "My friends, they're all changing. Like they're going somewhere I'm not. And my parents, they're expecting things I don't know if I can live up to. And me, myself, I've got all this stuff happening and I don't know what to make of it. Like thoughts and feelings and... it's like..."

"Trying to read a book with half the pages ripped out and the other half are all in the wrong order?" Jensen suggests. It's pretty much how he felt when he was Jared's age. Well, that and some more.

"Yes! Just like that." Jared sighs. "How am I supposed to know how the story goes if it's all messed up?"

Jensen smiles. "You're not. That's the whole point. It's all a surprise. Your whole life is made up of surprises. Isn't it great?"

Jared stares at him. "You think it's great? But what if the surprises are bad?"

He looks so scared Jensen walks over and sits down beside him, putting an arm around his small shoulders. "There are always going to be bad things," he says. "But there are also going to be wonderful things and amazing things and you just have to remember that and the bad things don't matter so much anymore."

"You think so?"

“I know so.”

Jared leans against him, a small boy with a huge future. Jensen can see it, can feel Jared’s greatness in the taut muscles under his fingers and the strength of his gaze, staring back at him from the mirror opposite the bed. He’s so tall, so beautiful it takes Jensen’s breath away. He tightens his hold around Jared’s shoulders, feeling the small bones underneath. Not yet, he tells himself. He’s not there yet. He’s just a boy, just a little boy. He looks up at the mirror again and finds Jared’s watching him, eyes dark and hooded under a high brow. The longer they stare at each other the more heated Jared’s gaze gets. Flames reflect in his eyes and the air around him shimmers with heat. As Jensen watches Jared licks his lips before reaching out with his hand and...

Jensen let’s Jared abruptly go and stands up, his heart beating too fast in his chest. What the hell was *that*? He risks a glance at Jared, the real one, not the reflection in the mirror, and is met with startled eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Jared asks. He looks confused and a little hurt, like he doesn’t know if it’s something he did that made Jensen turn away like that. His eyelids are heavy, blinking slowly, and Jensen realizes Jared must have been on the brink of falling asleep when Jensen jarred him awake.

“Nothing,” Jensen says lightly. “I just got dizzy all of a sudden.”

Jared instantly straightens up, worry in his eyes. “Oh. Is it the drugs? You want some more water? Or maybe you’re hungry. Have you eaten anything?”

He sounds so worried Jensen feels instantly guilty for lying. Except now he thinks about it he does feel slightly dizzy and as if on cue his stomach rumbles. He averts his eyes in embarrassment. He hadn’t eaten anything this morning before leaving, just had the glass of milk his mother brought him. And then barfed that and what little was left in his stomach since last night. No wonder he feels a little lightheaded. Yes, that must be why.

“You wait here and I’ll go get you something,” Jared’s saying just as there’s a knock on the door and then Jared’s mom pops her head in. The smile on her face falters slightly as she looks from one to the other.

“Everything alright?” she asks and Jensen offers her a weak smile but before he can say anything Jared jumps up and grabs the plate with cookies from his mother’s hand.

“Thanks, mom! We’re really hungry. Look, Jen, cookies!”

Jensen nods, feeling awkward and unsure. Jared’s mom is still looking at him, frowning in worry.

“You sure you’re alright, sweetie? You look pale.”

Jensen nods again. “I’m fine,” he says. “Just...” He stops, not knowing what to say.

“He’s been sick,” Jared offers helpfully and Jensen starts.

“I’m *fine*,” he insists, stronger this time.

“He’s fine *now*,” Jared quickly agrees. “He was sick but he’s fine now. Just a bit tired. Can we get milk?”

“Sure,” Jared’s mom says slowly, eyes still on Jensen. “Jensen, if you’re not feeling well I can drive you home.”

“No! I’m fine. I’m not sick,” Jensen says, covering up his panic with a shaky laugh. “Jared’s just scared I’ll eat all the cookies.”

“Dude! That’s a lie. He’s lying, mom!” Jared sputters as his mother laughs. He shoots Jensen an angry glare but his eyes dance with mischief. “I was gonna give you the big ones but now it’s every man for himself.”

She leaves them fighting over which ones have the biggest chocolate chips and comes back with two large glasses of milk and some napkins. “No food fights!” she warns them as she closes the door behind her. Jared giggles and flips some crumbs at Jensen’s face.

“Hey!” Jensen shakes his finger at him. “I should go tell your mom, being the responsible grown up an’all.”

“You’re not grown up until next year,” Jared points out to him with a grin but then he turns serious, eyes darting away. “Sorry. About telling mom you were sick. I wasn’t gonna tell her about... you know. Not without asking you first if it was ok.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jensen assures him. “It’s just... I don’t like people thinking I’m sick. Like in the head or something. Because I’m not.”

Jared rolls his eyes. “Dude, I know *that*. I didn’t mean it like that. I was just trying to save you from being wrapped up in a blanket and fed chicken soup and hot tea. She does that, you know, when I’m sick. Don’t your mom do that too?”

“I don’t really get sick,” Jensen says slowly. “I mean, not that kind of sick. Just...”

Jared nods. “Upset.”

He looks away. “Yeah. I guess.” He waits again for Jared to ask but when he finally looks up Jared is busy stuffing his mouth full of cookies, crumbs littering his t-shirt. Jensen breathes out. He takes another cookie and bites into it. It’s sweet and warm and soft in the middle. He thinks it might be the best cookie he’s ever tasted.





Jensen eats cookies like they're manna from Heaven. Jared keeps stopping mid-chew, distracted by the blissful look on Jensen's face as he eats. Maybe Jensen's mom doesn't like baking.

Jared's not sure he likes Jensen's mom. The few times he's met her she keeps staring at Jensen like she's waiting for him to do something wrong and then she looks at Jared like she expects him to *say* something wrong. It's weird and it makes Jared uncomfortable and worried that he actually might mess up without even knowing. He can't help wondering what she's so afraid of. And even if he's determined to not be nosy and ask, it's hard not to be curious about what it is that's wrong with Jensen.

No, not wrong. What it is that makes people *act* like he's wrong. Because Jared just can't see it. Jensen is just... Jensen. Funny, kind and different but still just a guy. If anything he's tame because he's so reserved, almost shy, and Jared can't really see a guy like that ever getting into trouble the way him and Chad always do. Well, Chad does, dragging Jared along. That's mostly how it goes, not that anyone remembers *that* when they're yelling at *Jared*.

"Would you like to see my piano?" he asks when he's wiped the last crumbs away from his t-shirt. Jensen is smiling toward the floor as if he's thinking of something nice but when Jared speaks he looks up and the smile is all for Jared.

"I'd love to," he says and stands up. There are no crumbs on his clothes because he held his hand cupped under the cookies as he ate and then sucked the crumbs up from his palm like a vacuum cleaner. Jensen is very neat, Jared observes. He keeps brushing invisible dust from his clothes and ironing creases out of them with the palm of his hand. Somehow Jared doubts Jensen's room really is messy. Jensen's home is very neat too and tidy, not a single thing out of place. The books are behind locked cabinets he noticed, and there are very few knickknacks on the shelves. It's as if they don't like things being seen. It's weird.

Jared's home is filled with things. There are magazines and books lying around, flower pots in the windows and small statues on the shelves. The walls are covered with pictures of him and his siblings smiling with goofy grins. In the kitchen there are pots and pans and utensils hanging on hooks on the wall with jars of all sizes littering the shelves. Jared's never noticed that before, how cluttered his home is. Jensen must see it too because he keeps looking around with this odd expression on his face, like he's worried he might break something. Jared wants to assure him that it's alright, that they're not like that here, but he's afraid it might sound like he's criticizing Jensen's home and whatever he might think of it he knows that's rude.

They go down into the basement where his piano stands in a room that used to be Jeff's hangout place when he still lived at home. The walls are well isolated – a remainder of Jeff's two-year stint as a drummer in a high school rock band called Nipples – and part of the floor is covered with a soft rug. Jeff's old couch is still down there as well, along with a small sofa table and on a shelf by the wall there's an old LP player and a big box containing dad's old album collection. There are posters on the wall, again Jeff's. Nirvana and Nick Cave and a naughty picture of Pamela Anderson. Jensen eyes it with a quirk of his eyebrow and Jared blushes but doesn't make excuses. They both know that if he didn't like it he'd had torn it down by now.

Jensen stops by the piano. It's shinier than his, so polished in fact that they can easily see their reflection in its glossy surface. The ivory keys are still white and there are no scratches or chips damaging them. It looks almost new, but then again Jared can't remember his uncle ever playing the thing. Mostly it just stood there in his living room, gathering dust. Mom said his cousin used to play but he died when he was just a little older than Jared is now. Supposedly that's why Jared got the piano, his uncle saw something of his own dead son in him. Which is kinda creepy when he thinks about it.

"What music have you been playing?" Jensen asks and looks over at Jared.

Jared shrugs. It's not like he really knows how to play yet. Just some simple notes, enough to make it almost sound like music. It's different from playing at Jensen's house. Here the notes are just notes and the confidence he feels when Jensen is listening to him is gone. "Just the exercises you showed me," he says and Jensen frowns.

"Why?" he asks. "You know more than that."

Jared shakes his head. "I don't. I mean, when I play for you it's different. It's music. Here it's just noise."

Jensen looks thoughtful. He studies the piano, running his fingers over the tangents, head cocked as if he's listening for something specific. Then he sits down on one end of the bench and motions Jared to sit beside him.

"It's not happy," he says when they're both sitting comfortably, sides pressed together. The bench is in the wrong height for Jensen, his knees bent at an awkward angle but he doesn't seem to mind. "You need to cheer it up."

Jared's rather used to Jensen's odd way of talking by now but that still doesn't mean he always gets what Jensen's saying. "Why is it sad?" he asks foolishly.

"It misses someone," Jensen explains, "and it doesn't know yet that it belongs to you now. I think once it does it will be much happier."

"So how do we tell it?" Jared asks, reaching out to stroke the piano's side. Chad would laugh at him if he saw what he was doing but Jensen only nods and lays his palm on the panel in front of him, as if trying to comfort the instrument.

"We play something cheerful. Something that will help it remember what it's supposed to be doing."

Jared nods. He looks down on the row of keys, wondering what he's supposed to do now. He's suddenly reminded of his mom's warning, that this is not supposed to be a lesson. But it's not. They're trying to fix his piano. There's no use playing a sad piano, is there? She's got to understand that.

"Close your eyes," Jensen says, just like he did last time he played for Jared. "We'll do it together. Just listen to me first and then you play whatever you feel like. Ok?"

“Ok.” Jared closes his eyes obediently. He feels the air move in front of his face and knows it’s Jensen’s hand, waving to make sure he’s not peeking. He never peeks. This is different though, this time he’s not just listening, he’s playing too, and he’s not sure how he’s supposed to do that if he can’t see anything.

“You don’t need to see,” Jensen says, as if he’s once again reading Jared’s thoughts. “Your fingers will know where to go.”

He takes Jared’s hands and positions them above the row of tangents. Jared holds them still, hovering in anticipation. He can hear Jensen breathing beside him and when Jensen finally lifts his arms he nudges Jared’s elbow, that’s how close they sit.



***The Skyline Firedance Suite: Prelude To The Dance / David Lanz (2:10)***

*They’re out in a brilliantly green field. It’s wide, expanding to every direction with no end in sight. A horse is running. It gallops through the field, wind blowing through its mane and stroking its flanks. The high grass whips its legs, sweat running in rivulets down its neck and breast. Faster, it thinks and steam bellows from its nostrils.*

Jared lowers his hands.

*A small bird swoops down, its wings nudging the stallion’s ear playfully. The horse shakes its head, irritated. The bird twitters happily, flying in swoops and circles around the horse, diving between its legs and under its belly, kamikaze style. The horse huffs in annoyance and Jared laughs. He is the bird and he thinks Jensen might be the horse but he’s not sure. He flutters closer and then flies out of reach just as the horse’s big teeth snatch at him. ‘You can’t catch me,’ he sings and flies around the*

*horse's head teasing. The horse raises his head. 'A challenge,' it neighs and then they're off.*

*He flies ahead, urging the horse on but it soon gathers its strength, neighing happily into the wind as it gallops faster and faster. Jared can hardly keep up, his short wings flapping for all they're worth. They fly across the field, the horse running, the bird stretching its wings, the wind whipping through its feathers and stroking the horse's flanks.*

*Finally they reach a creek and the horse slows down, coming to a standstill in front of the running water. The bird lands on a small stone in the middle of the creek, ducks its head into the cool water and lets it shower over its body. The drops roll off its feathers like pebbles. When they've both drunk their fill the horse takes a step back before folding its legs and lying down to rest beside a small bush. The bird flies up and lands on a thin branch by the horse's ear, twittering happily as they both breathe in the taste of freedom.*

A door snaps closed and Jensen stops abruptly. Jared blinks his eyes open. For a moment he thinks he's still out in that field, sun warming his face and blue sky expanding above him but then the mirage disappears and they're back in the basement, with the piano and the smell of cookies and Jensen warm and nervous by his side.

"Wow, that was..." Jared starts just as Jensen says quickly, "I think your mom is coming."

Sure enough, there's the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. "It's okay," Jared says, giving Jensen a reassuring smile. "I told her, 'Friends play music together'. They do. It's not a lesson."

Jensen blinks. His eyes are the same color as the field Jared saw in the music. "That's not..." he begins but seems to catch himself and the worried look on his face makes way for a soft smile. "It's not a lesson," he agrees and bumps Jared's shoulder with his own. "Friend."

He says the word fondly, as if it warms him up inside and again Jared gets this strong urge to hug him. In stead he bumps Jensen's shoulder back and by the time his mom comes into the room they're jostling each other on the bench, trying not to fall off, and laughing like idiots.

"Having fun, boys?" she asks with a smile and they giggle like they're five years old. "Your mom is on the phone, Jensen," she then adds, holding out the cordless phone, and Jensen's laughter cuts off mid-breath.

He doesn't move from the bench, doesn't even turn around, so Jared stands up and takes the phone from his mother's hand, answering her questioning look with a shrug, then walks over to Jensen. He touches one stiff shoulder lightly and when Jensen looks up, eyes carefully blank as if he's preparing himself, Jared holds out the phone for him. Jensen takes it reluctantly from his hand and Jared steps back to allow him some privacy but he can still hear Jensen's low voice.

“No,” he’s saying. “Mom, no. Because I’m not a kid anymore. I’m...” He looks up and meets Jared’s eyes. “I’m seventeen, mom, almost grown up,” he says, echoing Jared’s words from before and something clenches in Jared’s chest. “I’m allowed to visit friends.” Jared can hear angry murmur from the other side of the line and Jensen’s eyes turn sharper. “And whose fault is that, mom?” he hisses. “You...” He looks abruptly at Jared’s mom but she’s brushing invisible dust of the shelves and doesn’t seem to be listening. “You did that,” he says, more quietly. “To me. You did that to me, mom.” The angry murmur starts again but Jensen cuts her off impatiently. “I’ll come home when I’m ready,” he snaps and hangs up.

His eyes are wary when he turns around to face them again and Jared offers him a reassuring smile. He looks at his mother who is trying very hard to seem oblivious but some of the conversation must have reached her because the happy smile from before is slightly strained now.

“Everything alright, dear?” she asks and Jared sighs. Why can she never leave anything alone?

“Fine. Everything’s fine,” Jensen says, lips thin and his hands slightly twitching. “She’s just...” He laughs nervously. “Being a mom, I guess.”

Jared’s mother smiles. “Overbearing and fussy? I can relate to that.”

Jensen nods, but Jared can tell it’s more out of courtesy than agreement. True, Jared’s mom can be very overbearing and fussy but at least she doesn’t drug him. At least she doesn’t want him to be alone and have no friends. At least she doesn’t slap him in the face.

“You want to stay for dinner?” she asks, as if to make up for her nosiness, and Jared gives Jensen a hopeful gaze.

“Please? ‘Cos then we’ll get dessert. Right, mom?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “You just finished off a double batch of cookies!”

“Mom...” he pleads and jerks his head discreetly Jensen’s way. Not that he really thinks he needs to bribe Jensen to stay but promises of dessert can’t hurt.

She smiles indulgently, “Fine. You can have ice cream.”

“Yes!” He turns back to Jensen who is looking amused if slightly uncomfortable. “Now you have to stay.”

“I don’t know...”

“You want me to call and ask your mom?” Jared’s mom offers and that does it.

“No,” Jensen says curtly, a renewed defiance in his eyes. “Thank you, I’d love to stay for dinner.”

“That’s settled then.” She smiles and turns toward the door but then stops and looks back. “That was really beautiful, what you were playing earlier. You have a wonderful talent, Jensen.”

He averts his eyes, blushing, then looks up and smiles at Jared. “I didn’t do it alone,” he says and her eyes widen.

She looks at Jared and he shrugs, embarrassed. To be honest he’s not sure how much of that he was a part of and what was just Jensen. Probably most of it. He remembers the tangents under his fingertips, but he has no idea if he was actually playing or just tapping a few keys, leaving it to Jensen to fill in the rest.

“Honey, that’s amazing,” his mother is saying. “I didn’t know you had come that far.”

“I haven’t. Jensen did most of it. I just helped.”

Jensen shakes his head. “You did more than help. The bird? That was all you.”

Jared stares at him. He hadn’t said anything to Jensen about what he’d seen in the music this time. Usually they talk it over once they finish playing. Jared tells Jensen what he saw and felt as the music played and then they’d go over it note by note, trying to figure out what parts of the piece gave which impressions. But this time they’d been too busy laughing to talk it over.

“You saw the bird?” he asks and Jensen freezes.

“Bird?” he repeats. “Uh…” He swallows and then his face shifts into a surprised look. “Oh. You saw a bird too?” His voice sounds way too casual and Jared frowns.

“Yeah. And a horse.”

“Huh. Weird. Me too.” Jensen shrugs. “Guess it must have been really expressive.”

“Yeah.” He feels like he’s missing something but Jensen’s already turned away, his fingers stroking the piano as if seeking reassurance from the familiar.

“Well,” Jared’s mom says, startling both of them. Jared had completely forgotten she was still there. He feels strange, like discovering someone has been watching him and trying to remember if he did something embarrassing, like picking his nose. Except this time he’s running his and Jensen’s conversation back and forth in his head, trying to figure out what might be making him feel so intrude upon. “I’ll call you when dinner’s ready. And Jared…”

“I know. It’s not a lesson, mom. We’re…” He hesitates. ‘Making the piano happy’ sounds stupid with her in the room. “Just making sure it’s tuned right,” he finishes, giving her a challenging glare. She just rolls her eyes with a smile and leaves, closing the door behind her.

He turns to Jensen, feeling awkward now they're alone again. "She wasn't happy, huh? Your mom, I mean."

Jensen's smile drops instantly. He clenches his jaw, lips thin, and Jared wishes he'd kept his mouth shut. "I'm sorry," he says. "It's none of my business."

Jensen dismisses that with a wave. "She just... I was supposed to go straight home. She wasn't too happy about me coming here instead."

His tight voice says he doesn't really give a damn about it but Jared feels kinda guilty anyway. "She's probably worried about you, because of... you know," he offers awkwardly.

"Yeah well, she shouldn't have drugged me then," Jensen says all bitter, then closes his eyes as if realizing he's said too much.

"Maybe it was an accident..." Jared tries but Jensen shakes his head and he stops. They stand in silence for a while. Jared shivers. The room seems colder than before, probably a draft since his mom came downstairs. "Are you cold?" he asks. "You want to go back upstairs?"

Jensen frowns and then shakes his head as if clearing it of cobwebs. He takes a few deep breaths and then runs his finger lightly over the piano's silent tangents. "I'd rather play. You think that's alright?" he asks hesitantly. "Would your mom mind?"

"No, it's fine." Jared walks over to the couch and sits down. "Will you play for me?"

Jensen smiles. "Sure. Just..."

"...close my eyes," Jared says and grins as he lays down and pulls the blanket over him. The couch is old and saggy and smells weird. Jared thinks Jeff might maybe have smoked pot down here when his parents weren't home. "You know, my ears work too when I have my eyes open."

Jensen doesn't answer and when Jared glances at him he's staring down at the piano, jaw clenched. "Hey," Jared says and Jensen looks up, startled. "I was just joking. I'm closing my eyes. See?" He squeezes his eyes shut and waves his hand in front of his face. "Can't see anything, promise."

He hears Jensen laugh softly and hides a smile behind the blanket. He loves hearing Jensen laugh. It tickles his ears and for a brief moment the room feels warmer before slowly going cold again. Jared pulls the blanket up until only his nose sticks out. Seriously, his mom must have left the front door open. It's warm and snuggly under the blanket though and by the time the first notes vibrate in the room he's already half asleep.



Jensen's hands tremble. He's so angry he's terrified. This is what his mom means when she says he can't have feelings. This cold anger in his belly that makes the blood slow down to a sluggish beat in his veins and his breath come out like white crystallizing clouds. He takes several deep breaths, trying to get it under control before Jared notices. Before something bad happens.

Jensen looks over at the boy huddled under the blanket. His eyes are obediently closed, eyelashes frosted white and the tip of his nose shining pink. If he gets pneumonia it's on Jensen and his stupid inability to keep himself in check.

He sits down on the piano bench, resting his fingers lightly on the tangents. Frost crackles under his fingertips, patterns of white stars spreading out from each and every one. He closes his eyes. 'Think of something bright and calm. Something warm.'

But he can't get away from the coldness of his mother's voice or the grey color of her eyes, watching him as his world slowly slipped away. 'How could you do this to me?' he thinks bitterly. 'Why can't you allow me to have this one thing, this one person, in my life?' 'Because it's not safe,' he hears her answer. 'Because you'll ruin it. Just like you've ruined everything else. Because you're not *normal*, Jensen.'

"I don't *want* to be normal!" he hisses as he raises his hands. "I don't *want* to be like *you*."

It's madness and anger and frustration. Black and red and the smell of sulfur. It rumbles the air and shakes the walls, gathering dark clouds under the ceiling that hang heavy and foreboding. Trolls walk the earth and dragons fill the sky. The floor hisses with snakes and scorpions.

'This is what you do to me,' he beats out. 'This is how you make me feel, mom, when you tell me to have no feelings at all. When you look at me like I'm wrong. Like you wish I wasn't here. *This is...*'

A lighting bolt hits the floor with a loud crack and Jensen jumps up and away from the piano, breath stuck in his throat. Oh Jesus. There's a scorch mark on the floor, a shallow black hole branded into the smoking wood, and he beats at it in panic with his foot. He can feel the heat blistering his skin through his sock but it gets the job done and the smoke dies away.

Jared mumbles in his sleep and Jensen holds his breath until the boy settles down again. How he managed to sleep through all of that Jensen has no idea. He's surprised Jared's mother isn't running down the stairs already.

He grabs the rug and moves it over the spot, hiding the evidence. The room still smells of burnt wood and cotton and there are no windows he can open to air it out. He is so screwed.

'Please,' he thinks, closing his eyes. 'Help me. Just this one time, do what *I* want.'



A soft breeze brushes his cheek. He opens his eyes to find dust bunnies twirling on the floor in a tiny tornado. Round and round, growing stronger and stronger until the wind is tugging at his clothes and shaking the posters on the wall.

'Roses,' he thinks and a sweet scent of flowers fills the air. 'Sunshine and grass and spring.'

He closes his eyes, basking in the warmth that fills the room.

*He's in the middle of the green field again and Jared is there. Tall like a tree and strong like a mountain.*

*'You're amazing,' Jared says, with such wonder in his voice Jensen can't help blushing. 'Look at what you can do. Oh wow, Jen, look at what you can do!'*

*'I can. I can do this,' Jensen says dazed. 'I can do this and so much more. Things that make people happy. Things that make the world brighter and warmer and beautiful. I am not normal. I am weird and different. This is what I am.'*

*'This is what you are,' Jared agrees and pulls him in, hugging him tight. He's big and strong and warm and when he says Jensen's name softly he doesn't hesitate but tilts his head up, lips already parted.*

*The kiss is soft and warm and destined. Like there was never any other option. Like this is what they've been moving towards since before Jared was born. Like this is what he was born for. His big hands move up, cradling Jensen's face, caressing the flushed skin of Jensen's cheeks with his thumbs. His lips are like kisses of sunshine, his breath filling Jensen's mouth with air that feels free for the first time in his life. And Jensen knows, as sure as if it's been written in the blue sky above them, that he's exactly where he's supposed to be.*

Jensen opens his eyes. The wind is dying down around him, the sun fading in the disappearing sky. He feels dizzy and exhilarated and... apparently somewhat gay. Huh.

He's never really thought much of himself in relation to anyone else, not in that sense. Sure, he likes girls, likes looking at them. The girls on TV don't seem much like real girls though. But then again, that's how most things on television are to him, unreal. Just flat and dull and so... limited. The screen offers him no scents or feelings, he can't tell anything about the people in front of him beyond what they're trying to deliver with their acting. It's frustrating and so he hardly ever bothers with it.

But he's not blind. He can appreciate the beauty of their faces and bodies even if he sees nothing of their souls. And he's not like a monk. Everything's in working order down there, thank you very much. A little too much sometimes, considering the effect it has on everyone around him. Which is why he's learned to restrain himself to when everyone else is asleep or out of the house. Scarred for life doesn't even begin to describe the realization of having accidentally given his mother an orgasm.

So yeah, he's thought of girls when he does that. Thought of their silky hair and round breasts, the softness of their skin. Wondered what it would be like to kiss lips covered in lip-gloss and slide his hand under their skirts and into their panties. He's never gone much beyond that since, to be frank, he isn't sure what happens next.

Well ok, *technically* he knows. The man's penis goes inside the girl's vagina. That's the basic idea of sex as his mother very awkwardly explained to him in what was the most mortifying biology lesson he's ever had to endure. And shortest. There were brief mentions of sperm and eggs and "That's how babies are made, Jensen. Lunch break!" Going by his mother's descriptions alone sex sounded about as exciting as burnt toast.

Still, knowing the technical details doesn't tell him anything about what it *feels* like, touching a girl like that. Inside. Sliding his fingers inside her or pushing his dick in there. Is it tight? Open? Warm? He's got to admit he's kinda curious about that. He only knows what it feels like touching himself. And no matter how good his imagination is, sometimes it's just easier to concentrate on what he's got instead of what he doesn't know. His dick, his hand, the taste of his own precome.

Closing his eyes, it's not that hard to make the leap to someone else's dick, hand and taste. In fact it's a lot easier to visualize than girls he's never touched or seen. And if the person he's imagining is Jared in all his grown up glory... He shouldn't really be that surprised. He's certainly not shocked. In the light of everything else he is, being slightly gay doesn't seem such a terrible thing. Especially if his vision is right and Jared is heading the same way.

Jensen opens his eyes to a world slightly less confusing and a whole lot more promising.

Jared is still sleeping. His hair has blown into his eyes, one corner of the poster with Pamela Anderson flopping loose above his head by the last remnants of the summer breeze. His cheeks shine flushed and he has a soft smile playing upon his lips. He's so beautiful he takes Jensen's breath away.

He can still clearly see the small boy beneath the glamour of Jared's future self. Thankfully, or he would be hard set not to fall to his knees right now and kiss Jared awake, possibly scaring the hell out of him. Jared's already growing though, faster than he probably should but slower than he wants to. Jensen can't help smiling. Jared is so impatient to grow up, his shadow keeps tugging him upward, scowling when his body doesn't follow fast enough. He'll probably get stretch marks if he doesn't slow down some.

'Relax,' Jensen tells him. 'It will happen soon enough. Tall like a tree, Jared. You'll grow tall like a tree.'

He walks over and sits down with his back against the couch, resting his head on Jared's shoulder jutting out from the blanket, and closes his eyes.



That's how Jared's mom finds them when she comes down to call them to dinner an hour later. Both fast asleep with Jared's arm dangling down across Jensen's chest, his face buried in Jensen's hair.

For a moment she stops, seeing what appears to be a rainbow shimmering in the air above them. She blinks and it's gone. Shaking her head at her own foolishness she crosses the floor. A nap probably wouldn't be such a bad idea, she thinks as she gently shakes them awake. She's been feeling dizzy and cold and earlier she'd suddenly burst into tears without having the slightest idea why she felt so sad and angry all of a sudden. Maybe menopause is setting in. It would explain the hot flushes she'd felt shortly afterwards.

The thought is somewhat disconcerting – she feels way too young for it even at 45 – and as she walks back with two sleepy boys stumbling behind her she wonders whether she should make an appointment with her doctor or perhaps wait a while and see.

She's so caught up in her thoughts she completely fails to notice that the walls are a much darker color than usual.



“I don't like this. I'm really not sure you should do this anymore.”

Jensen rolls his eyes. This is the third time his mother has started this discussion and frankly, he's sick of it. The last two times his dad was there to calm her down but this time he's at work and she's finally getting the row she seems to be itching for.

“Why? It's working just fine, mom,” Jensen tells her through gritted teeth. “Jared is happy, his mother is happy, hell, even dad is happy. And not that it seems to matter but *I'm* actually happy, for the first time since I can remember. The only one who *isn't* happy is *you*, mom. Why? Why aren't you happy? Why the hell can't you be happy for me?”

“Don't swear!” she hisses. “This is why, Jensen. Because ever since you became friends with that boy you've been... like *this!* Aggressive and... and rude.”

He snorts. “What, because suddenly I don't agree with every thing you say and with every stupid rule you think I should follow? It's called being a teenager, mom. It's called growing up!” He throws out his arms in frustration. “Compared to Mac I'm a frigging saint, mom! She's been talking back and going her own way since she was five and... and you're *proud* of her! You think *she's* being independent and strong. But me, I'm just rude and aggressive. How's that for hypocrisy?”

“You watch your mouth, Jensen,” she hisses. “It's different with your sister, you know that. She's not like you. She's not dangerous. That's what you are. Dangerous. And selfish. You could hurt the boy and you don't even care.”

“Hurt Jared?” He’d laugh if he wasn’t so angry. “This has *nothing* to do with Jared. You don’t care about him. You’re worried about yourself, about your reputation. You’re worried that if Jared finds out, other people will too. That’s it, mom, right? Can’t have them finding out your son is a... a *freak*. That I’m ...this!”

“It’s not normal!” Her voice is hysterically shrill.

“I don’t frigging care! I don’t *want* to be normal. That’s you, mom. *You* want me to be normal. You want me to be someone else. Well, I’m *not* someone else. This is who I am. This is *what* I am. Isn’t it about time you stop trying to hide me and accept that this is what I’ll always be?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “It’s not acceptable. It’s not! I won’t accept it. Not my son. Not *my* son!”

“Well, mom,” he says sarcastically, “that’s *your* problem, not mine. And I’m not going to give up teaching Jared. I’m not giving up Jared!”

She doesn’t answer, just glares at him, lips pinched tight together. He growls in frustration and stalks out, ignoring her when she calls after him to, “Come back here! Jensen!”

When his dad comes home he gets an earful for upsetting his mother and grounded for the rest of the weekend, but he doesn’t care. As long as his dad still agrees that he can keep on tutoring Jared nothing else matters.



Jared’s wary when he shows up at Jensen’s house the coming Wednesday. He’s not sure how to face Jensen’s family, not after everything that went down over the weekend. He hesitates before ringing the bell but when the door opens a complete stranger glares out at him.

“What?” she demands, rather rudely, and he takes a step back, glancing at the name on the door to be sure he’s at the right house (as if there was any chance of missing the tropical jungle decorating the lawn) before looking back at her with a confused smile.

“Er... I’m here to see Jensen?”

She blinks. Then it dawns on her and she grins. “You’re Jared! Hi!”

“Hi.” He looks at her expectantly and after a while she takes the hint and steps back, opening the door further.

“I’m Mac,” she says as he slinks inside. “Jensen’s annoying little sister.”

“Oh.”

He remembers now, Jensen mentioning a sister. His mom as well, that first day, how Jensen had been teaching her to play. She looks about eleven, blond hair and green eyes like Jensen, but there the similarity ends. Where his are so often subdued with shyness and self-doubt, hers shine of confidence. She stands straight with her head held high where Jensen tends to hunch in on himself. Even her smile looks more like a smirk, as if she's used to being in charge and getting her way.

"I'm supposed to be at cheerleading practice but the coach got sick," she answers his unasked question. Seems Jensen is not the only one in the family with an uncanny ability to read minds. "Good timing, I've been wanting to meet you."

He frowns. "Me? Why?"

She raises one eyebrow in a very Jensen like manner and he feels his cheeks turning red from her scrutiny. "Why? Because you're the first person *ever* to visit my brother, even if it's just for piano lessons." She tilts her head, a small frown wrinkling her nose. "Is it just for piano lessons?"

He blinks, buying time. She unnerves him and he doesn't even know why. "No. Not anymore," he says slowly. "We're friends too."

This time her smile looks real and grateful. "Great!"

She waits while he takes off his jacket and kicks off his shoes, at the last minute remembering to arrange them neatly against the wall. When he straightens up he finds her studying him, a calculated look in her eyes.

"So..." The eyebrow goes up again along with the corner of her mouth. "He's something, huh? My brother. Not really your average Joe. Kinda... weird."

Jared stiffens. What is it with everyone constantly picking on the guy? "He's a great pianist," he says defensively. "And my friend."

She looks taken aback. "Hey, I only meant..."

"You know, I have a little sister too," he continues, feeling irrationally angry. "She can be a pain but she always has my back when it matters."

"What's your problem? I was only being friendly!"

"Mac!"

They both jerk away from each other, matching looks of guilt on their faces as they turn and meet Jensen's intense gaze.

"Jenny, I was just..." she starts but he shakes his head at her and she stops.

"Don't you have stuff to do?" he asks angrily and her face turns sour.

"No."

“Well, *we* do. Come on, Jared.” When Jared hesitates Jensen raises his eyebrow, mirroring his sister’s earlier expression. “Unless you’d rather stay here and play with my kid sister.”

Jared shakes his head, throwing Mac a last glare before following Jensen up the stairs.

“Sorry,” he says as soon as Jensen’s closed the door behind them. “I don’t know what that was about.”

“She’s just looking out for me,” Jensen says dismissively. “Testing you. She does that with her own friends, riles them up and sees who can take it. She’s not exactly diplomatic. I mean, I love her but she can be a total bitch even if she’s just eleven.”

Jared can’t help it, he starts laughing and Jensen looks back at him in surprise. “What?”

“Just... you.” Jared waves at him, stifling his giggles. “Saying ‘bitch’. It’s funny. Sorry,” he adds when he sees the confused look on Jensen’s face. “You just never...” He takes a deep breath, careful to keep the smile on his face to show Jensen he isn’t trying to be mean. “You always talk so...so nice. I mean... Chad, remember Chad? He calls everyone a bitch. Hell, he calls me bitch. But you... you’re so... *refined*. You don’t really sound like a teenager.”

Jensen frowns and for a moment Jared is worried he might have insulted him, but then a smile tugs at the corner of Jensen’s lips. “I guess,” he says slowly, “that I talk like my parents. They’re very... ‘refined’. I only remember my dad swearing at me once. No matter what’s going on they keep their manners.” His eyes dim slightly but before Jared can ask what is wrong Jensen blinks and whatever was there is gone. Instead he waves toward the piano, looking at Jared expectantly. “You been practicing?” he asks, the previous matter obviously dismissed.

“Yeah. And you were right, it’s going so much better now.”

“No one can play a sad piano,” Jensen says, looking completely serious. “Now that it knows you, things should pick up real quick.”

“I hope so.” Jared walks over to Jensen’s piano and sits down, waiting while Jensen looks through his drawers for whatever piece he’s got planned for today’s lesson. “Oh, my mom says hi.” He laughs softly as he runs his fingers lightly over the tangents. “Dude, she adores you.”

Jensen glances at him over his shoulder. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know. Something about you bringing good vibes. I think she was talking about the garden, petunias or roses or something looking perkier. I didn’t really pay much attention.”

Jensen doesn’t answer and when Jared looks up he’s back to reading through sheets of music, shoulders hunched up. Maybe he didn’t hear what Jared said. Jensen has a tendency to get distracted sometimes, zoning out mid-sentence. Jared’s not sure if it’s

just something he does or if it's related to the whole drug thing. He doesn't really want to ask. He looks around instead while he waits, once again trying to read the musical notes stuck on the wall. He's getting better at reading notes but it's still slow going. Something is different this time but it takes him a moment to figure it out.

"Hey, did you do another make-over?"

Jensen turns around this time, his eyes blank. "What?"

"Your walls, did you paint? Weren't they green?"

Jensen looks around at the pale blue walls, his mouth opening slightly and then closing again. He looks lost for a moment but then he bites his lips and smiles, almost apologetically. "I'm having trouble deciding on a color. You know, since I spend so much time in here I want it to be something inspiring."

Jared nods. He gets that. "You moved the notes too," he observes. "It used to be..." he frowns, trying to remember the name.

"Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata," Jensen helps. "Yeah. I'll probably change it again to something else," he adds, somewhat awkwardly.

"What's this called?" Jared asks, indicating the slightly crooked notes on the wall. What little he can read seems familiar though he can't place it.

Jensen looks over, eyes running quickly over the notes, his fingers tapping air like testing them out. Then his eyes brighten and he nods. "It's from The Piano. The movie? You seen it?"

Jared shakes his head. "Is it good?"

"I don't know." Jensen shrugs but he looks over at the wall, a silent yearning in his eyes. "I don't go much to the movies," he explains. "I've only seen the trailer on TV. I guess the music stuck with me."

"We could go," Jared suggests but Jensen shakes his head sadly.

"It was two years ago. They're not showing it anymore."

Jared smiles. "We could rent it? Watch it over at my place."

Jensen looks uncertain but Jared can see the hopeful glint in his eyes. "You think we could do that?"

"Sure. This weekend even. We're supposed to go visit my aunt Mary. I really, really don't want to go. If I say you're coming over I bet I can get out of it." He looks at Jensen pleadingly. "She's mean. She calls me fat and tries to feed me carrots. Please, save me."

"If you think they won't mind..." Jensen says hopefully.

“Dude, they’ll be happy to get rid off me. I usually complain the whole three-hour ride getting there and then even worse on the way back. There’s a reason why we only go once a year.”

Jensen smiles. “Alright. Yeah. That... that would be wonderful. Thank you.”

“Awesome.” Jared raises an eyebrow at Jensen. “That would be *awesome*.”

“Awesome.” Jensen grins and adds, “Dude.”

“There you go. I’ll make a real teenager out of you yet.”

Jensen blushes but he looks pleased, even laughing softly, and Jared beams. He gazes up at the notes on the wall again and tries to find the right ones on the tangents in front of him. After a while he gives up. He’s not really there yet. “What does it sound like? Will you play it for me?”

“Maybe later. This is supposed to be a lesson, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He sighs but then Jensen sits down beside him and he forgets what he was sighing about. It’s strange, how much he likes Jensen being that close to him. It’s like Jensen radiates comfort, making Jared feel warm and relaxed and good about himself. He doesn’t feel short or fat or clumsy when he’s with Jensen. It’s like he’s finally found a skin he fits into. He watches Jensen’s long fingers tap out a simple exercise and copies with his own stubbier ones. He’s not sure, but he thinks maybe they might be getting a little bit longer. Maybe.



Jensen looks around in wonder as they enter the video rental. The library has some movies but nothing like this. This place has rows upon rows of movies, more movies than he ever imagined existed. It’s true what he told Jared, he doesn’t go to the movies much. In fact he doesn’t at all. Not since he took Mac to see *The Little Mermaid* when she was five and promptly flooded the theater. Even if he’s pretty sure that won’t happen again, (he was eleven and not very good at controlling massive feelings like a sudden terror of drowning) he hasn’t been allowed to take her to see anything since. And he never goes alone anywhere, just in case something happens.

They scout the aisles, Jared pointing out various movies he’s seen in a nervous stuttering voice, the way he seems to do when they’re out among other people. Like he’s worried Jensen might see him differently out here than he does in the safety of Jensen’s piano room. Jensen gives him reassuring smiles even if he has to admit to feeling slightly nervous himself. Emotional movies or TV shows can give him bad reactions and it’s only now that he remembers reading a review that said this one was a real tearjerker. That doesn’t sound good. Maybe they should go for something else. Something safe.



“Oh, here it is,” Jared suddenly says and grabs an empty cover from one of the shelves. He turns it over and reads what it says on the other side, his face getting a strange look. “Oh,” he says, blushing.

“We don’t have to see it,” Jensen hurries to say. “I’m sure there’s something else…”

“Dude, it’s R-rated. For… for sexual content.” Jared looks up, bug-eyed and Jensen doesn’t know whether to laugh or hide. “You think there are boobs?”

Jensen grins. “Maybe. You scared of boobs, Jare?”

“No! I just… What if they won’t rent it to us? Oh God, what if they call my mom and tell her I’m renting a porno?”

That does it. Jensen starts laughing, his shoulders shaking with it. “Porno?” he wheezes. “What, like piano porn?”

“I don’t know!” Jared looks around frantically, flinching when he sees an older woman glancing their way, probably wondering what’s so funny. “Sshh, keep it down.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’ll pay for it.” Jensen searches his pockets and comes up with a fiver. “That enough?”

“Yeah, plenty. You have an account here?”

“No,” he says hesitantly. “I need to register?”

“I think so. So they can call you if you forget to return it. I use my mom’s.”

“Oh.”

Well, why not? Jensen walks up to the counter, joining a nervous Jared on the sidewalk ten minutes later with the movie in his hand and his cheeks flushed. Who knew they needed all that info just so you could rent a movie? And what the hell is an eMail?

They walk back to Jared’s home, Jensen clutching the plastic box in his sweaty hand as Jared’s golden lab bounces ahead of them. The more he thinks about it the worse this whole idea seems. How explicit would those sex scenes be? Explicit enough to get things moving? God, he hopes not. It’s going to be awkward enough with Jared blushing and paranoid that his parents might decide to come back early without having to make sure he doesn’t flood the room with his stupid hormones as well.

The house is quiet when they unlock the door. Jensen can’t help feeling like he’s not supposed to be there, like he’s stepping into a world he doesn’t belong to. It smells like home, but not his home, and the pictures on the walls are watching him suspiciously. Jared stops in the doorway and breathes in deeply before letting it out with a grin. Then he looks at Jensen and yells, “First one in gets the remote!”

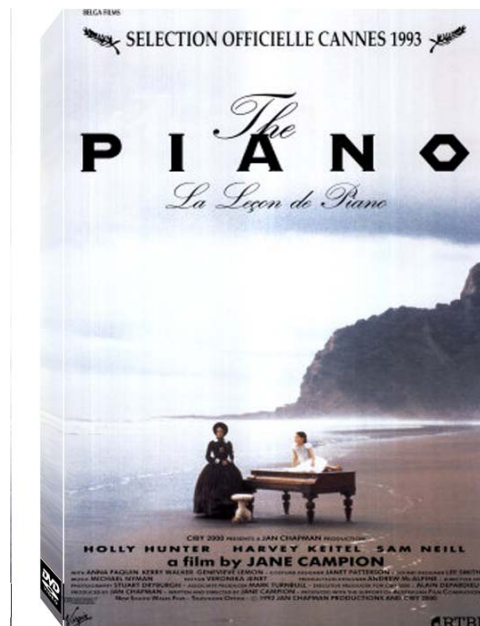
“I don’t even know where the TV is!” Jensen objects but Jared just laughs, kicking off his shoes and running through the house. When Jensen catches up with him he’s already spread out on the couch, wiggling the remote triumphantly. “Cheater,” Jensen mutters and wonders where he should sit.

“Nuhuh. Faster. And smarter.” Jared grins and then sits up, scooting over to make space on the couch. “You want popcorn? I can make some in the microwave.”

“Sure.” He waits until Jared is halfway to the kitchen before snagging the remote Jared left on the sofa table. Two can play that game.

When Jared comes back, a bowl full of popcorn in one hand and two sodas in the other, he only laughs and promptly stuffs his mouth full of popcorn, before crouching to put the tape in. They settle down on opposite ends of the couch, bowl on the low table in front of them.

“You ready?” Jensen asks and Jared nods, still chewing. Jensen hits Play and the tape starts whirring.



Afterwards they sit silent, watching the credits roll across the screen. The popcorn lies forgotten in the half-full bowl, the soda has long since gone tepid and flat in the bottles. It’s not until the tapes comes to a stop and then starts rewinding loudly, that they jerk awake.

“That was...” Jared starts and then stops.

Jensen just breathes.

“Did you...?” Jared tries again, but hesitates and finally just slides down on the couch until his feet are touching Jensen’s hip and lies staring up at the ceiling. “Wow. I’ve never...” He laughs shakily and rubs one hand over his face.

“You okay?” Jensen asks quietly. He still can’t look at him. God, he knew this was a stupid idea. So, so stupid. No way Jared didn’t feel that. No way he didn’t feel how thick and heavy the air got when she was drowning, wet and suffocating like water in his lungs. Or the sharp pain when her husband... Jensen feels sick. And then the... the... God. He closes his eyes in mortification. He’s just very glad he never watched any R-rated movies with his sister.

“I can’t believe they sunk the piano!” Jared suddenly blurts out and Jensen blinks his eyes open. “I know he got her another but... they just drowned it!”

Jensen chances a glance at him. “Yeah,” he tries cautiously. “That was pretty harsh.”

“I mean, ok, when he chopped off her finger? That was bad. And when I thought she was gonna drown I felt...” He swallows. “It was kinda tense, right?”

“Very.” Jensen holds his breath. He wants to ask what exactly Jared did feel but he doesn’t dare.

“But that still doesn’t mean they had to throw the piano away! It wasn’t its fault!” Jared raises his head and looks over at Jensen. His face is flushed and his lips are swollen where he’d been gnawing them during the movie.

“It’s not alive, Jare,” Jensen reminds him. “It’s just an instrument.”

Jared looks at him, outraged. “Dude!” he says. “You telling me you’d do that to *your* piano?”

The thought is sickening. “No. But that’s different. My piano is all I’ve got.”

Jared looks sad but he still raises his eyebrow and gives Jensen an ‘Uhuh?’ expression and Jensen averts his eyes, duly chastened.

“Ok, yes. But she also had her daughter and Baines.”

“And you also have your family. And me.”

For a moment Jensen forgets which Jared is talking and he stares at him, stunned.

“Your best friend, remember?” Jared kicks him lightly with his socked foot and Jensen snaps out of it.

“My only friend,” he points out but with a smile that not even the pity in Jared’s eyes can dim. “And yeah, I guess I do.”

He kicks Jared back, then starts tickling Jared’s side with his toes, digging them into the soft flesh around his middle. Turns out Jared is horribly ticklish. His laughter fills the room, chasing away the last trace of tang and salt in the air. He finally rolls off the couch to get away, banging his shoulder on the sofa table and sending popcorn scattering all over the floor before landing on his stomach, wheezing for air.

Jensen panics. He scrambles off the couch, not even caring that he's crushing popcorn and kernels under his knees as he falls to the floor and lays a hand on Jared's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he says. "Jare, are you okay?"

"Ough," Jared groans then bursts out laughing again. Jensen hovers awkward and worried until Jared finally turns over on his back and looks up at him, his face flushed and tears in his eyes but he's smiling and he doesn't look like he's in any serious pain. "Dude, you're so going down for that," he says and suddenly Jensen's the one lying on his back, popcorn digging into his spine, a triumphant Jared straddling him. He's looking down at him with a wicked glint in his eyes and when Jensen tries to roll over he's thrown back down by a heavy Jared, bouncing on his stomach. "Oomph."

"That's right. I win!" Jared laughs gleefully but then he looks around and takes in the mess. "Oh man, did I do that?" he groans.

"Yesss," Jensen hisses, trying to get his breath back. "We need to clean it up before your parents get home. Move it."

"Dude, not like it's the first time I've spilled popcorn all over the place," Jared says but he stands up anyway, offering Jensen his hand. "Plus they aren't coming home until late."

Jensen doesn't accept the offer but rolls over and crouches on the floor instead, gathering crushed popcorn in his shaky palm. "It's messy. Your mom won't like that."

Jared sighs. "Jen, it's okay. We'll just vacuum and it will be fine. Seriously, don't worry about it." He vanishes into the kitchen and comes back shortly after, vacuum cleaner in tow. "Here, let me." A warm hand lands on Jensen's shoulder, squeezing it. "Jen, it's just popcorn. Let it go."

Jensen gets to his feet, popcorn clinging to his clothes. He feels foolish. Sometimes he forgets he's not at home.

It used to be just heavy things, like books and flower pots and stuff like that that they had to put away so he wouldn't knock someone out when he took one of his tantrums as a toddler. Somehow over the years it's turned into an obsession with his mother, keeping everything clean and in its place. He's long since stopped throwing stuff around like that, not counting his early teen years, but she still sees every speck of dust as her enemy and treats the slightest clutter like a sin.

Jared's home isn't like that though. There are books lying around and traces of spilled milk on the sofa table. He can see dead flies on the windowsills and when he was on the floor he spotted dust bunnies and stray things that had rolled under the couch. His mother would be horrified but Jensen thinks it makes the house feel more alive. Traces of lives being lived shouldn't be wiped away instantly with the sweep of a dust cloth. If they leave no mark, how can you tell they were there?

"There," Jared says and switches off the vacuum cleaner. "All good."

Jensen's pretty sure there's still popcorn under the couch and hidden in between the cushions. He bites his lip and clenches his hands into fists to keep from jerking the appliance out of Jared's hands and make sure they've got every last trace of evidence of what happened cleared away.

He waits while Jared goes and puts the vacuum away again, fingering a small statue of a dog that sits on one of the shelves. It's nothing like Jared's dog; this one is a puppy of a pit bull, face squashed and a short stubby tail. He strokes the puppy's back and it wags its tail, its tiny tongue giving a dry stroke along the pad of his thumb.

"Hey," says a voice behind him and he turns around, careful to shield the statue from Jared's gaze in case it's actually moving. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Of course." He tries to smile but it's stilted, a reminder of their first meeting, when Jensen didn't know how much he was allowed to show. "You have a nice home," he then adds awkwardly because Jared is still looking at him like he's expecting something.

Jared shrugs but he looks pleased. "It's kinda messy, compared to yours anyway."

"Yeah, well..." Jensen looks away. "I like it." He bites his lip.

"Thanks." There's silence for a while and then Jared asks, "You wanna do something? Or do you need to get back?"

"I'm not a kid," Jensen says stiffly and regrets it at once when Jared's face falls. "I'm sorry. I just meant... I'm tired of being home all the time. I like... this. Being here with you. So, yeah. If you want to... I'd love to."

"Ok." Jared's smile is bright but his eyes are too soft and he smells like warm soup. His pity makes Jensen feel empty in his stomach. "We could go somewhere or...?"

"I like your room," Jensen says. "Can I see it again?"

Jared looks at him surprised. "Sure. C'mon." They climb the stairs, two steps at a time, Jensen hanging back to allow Jared to win the race. The room is even messier than last time, the bed unmade with the covers draping down on the floor. The whole room smells like Jared, sweet and impatient. Jensen sits down on the bed, moving Bluebear so he doesn't get flattened under him.

"I never got to see your room," Jared says, awkwardly shuffling things around with his foot in order to make the floor look less cluttered. "You're not hiding anything in there, are you? Like a monster or something." He gives Jensen a teasing grin.

"No. No monsters..." '...but me,' his mind adds silently and he hushes it. "It's just not much to see. I don't really have much stuff."

He used to. He had books and stuffed toys and other presents of confused guilt from his parents. Then he turned thirteen, everything went haywire, and he set the room on

fire one night. Burnt everything except the bed with him and Slipper in it. He woke up to a cold black room reeking of smoke and empty of all his keepsakes. His mother had a nervous breakdown, saying he could have killed them all in his sleep. It was an accident brought on by hormones and feelings he couldn't control but that still didn't change that it was his own doing and now all his things were lost forever. 'A lesson in discipline,' his dad had called it and made him scrape the walls and repaint the room by himself. Since then it's just the bed and his desk, a chair and some drawers. And a picture of his family superglued to the wall.

"Can I ask you something?" Jared says quietly and Jensen can feel himself tensing.

"I guess," he says cautiously, eyes on the rug under his feet.

"When did you know that you wanted to be a pianist?"

Jensen frowns. "I'm not a pianist. I just play the piano. There's a difference."

"Oh." Jared looks confused. "What *is* the difference?"

"A pianist plays for a living. I just play."

Jared ponders that for a moment. "But you could. Play for a living, I mean. If you wanted to."

Jensen shakes his head. "No, I couldn't." What's he supposed to do, tell everyone to close their eyes? Yeah, right. "You need to have a degree, I think," he adds to stop Jared from asking why. He doesn't really think that's true but it sounds like a valid explanation.

"So what? You'll get a degree. Any school would love to have you, Jensen, I know they would."

He laughs and shakes his head. "I can't go away to school. My mom would..."

"Jensen," Jared says impatiently, "it's *your* life. You'll be eighteen soon, right? That means you can do whatever you want. Go to school, move out... You could travel the world!"

Jensen stops laughing. He's never thought of that. Eighteen. He still feels like a kid, too insecure and no experience, but Jared's right, he's becoming an adult. He can move out, he can make his own decisions. Maybe he even *could* go to college. He hasn't even thought of it, hasn't looked or applied anywhere. But he could! And his parents won't be able to do anything about it because he'll be a goddamn adult! He can feel a grin splitting his face.

"I could," he says. "I could go anywhere."

Jared smiles but his eyes shift as if he's suddenly thought of something. "Yeah," he says weakly. "You... you could." He averts his eyes.

“Jared?”

“What?” He looks up, eyes too bright. “No, absolutely. I think... I think you should.”

“But?”

“I’ll miss you. If you go, I mean. That’s all. Like... Sandy’s going to college in Dallas next year. I’m gonna miss her even if she hardly ever talks to me anymore. And if you go too it will just be me and Chad. Which... I mean, he’s great but he’s got his basketball buddies and...” His voice trails off.

Jensen stills. He hadn’t thought of that. Going away would mean leaving Jared. Jared who’s got a long way to go before he can leave home. Almost five years until he turns eighteen. Five years is a very, very long time.

He forces on a smile. “Hey, it’s just an idea. Where would I go anyway?”

Jared tilts his head in thought. “You could go to musical college. There are colleges like that, right? You could probably get a scholarship.”

That hadn’t even occurred to him. “You think so? Even if I was homeschooled?”

Jared nods, his enthusiasm returning. “That shouldn’t matter. You just take some tests and if you do well they give you money. Something like that. I can ask my mom if you want. She’s a teacher, she knows this stuff.”

Jensen nods slowly. It wouldn’t hurt to ask. It sort of annoys him that his own mother hasn’t. Hasn’t asked *him* if he wants to go, hasn’t asked anyone if he can. Sometimes he thinks his dad is right, that his mom just wants him to stay in the house, locked up forever.

“Jensen, that music in the movie,” Jared says suddenly, “the same that’s on your wall? That’s what you played for me, the first day, wasn’t it? You know, when I fell asleep?”

“Er... I think so. Yeah.” Jensen holds his breath.

“It’s really beautiful. I think... I think you played it better than whoever did in the movie.” Jared ducks his head, looking embarrassed. “It made me feel... I don’t know. It was really emotional. I don’t understand how I could fall asleep listening to that.” He glances at Jensen like he’s looking for an explanation and Jensen doesn’t know what to tell him.

“You must have been really tired,” he says slowly. “But hey, you fell asleep when I was playing at your house too. Maybe it’s some kind of Pavlovian thing. Hear me play, you fall asleep,” he says with a smile.

Jared giggles. “Jerk,” he says and kicks Jensen’s foot with his own. Jensen just grins.

They fall into an easy conversation about music and school and all kinds of things. Jared mainly talks while Jensen listens. He likes listening to Jared talk. His shyness quickly falls away and his voice gets more confident, eyes sparkling and hands waving for emphasis. With every word his body grows taller until it's getting harder and harder to see the teenage boy behind the glamour of the grown up.

It starts to get dark outside but neither of them notice until suddenly the phone rings, making them both jump. Jared gets up from the bed and takes the phone with him out into the hall. Jensen can hear the murmur of his voice and what starts as annoyance suddenly changing into fear.

"No," Jared's saying. "Sure. Mom, I'll be fine. Mom, no. What? Jensen's here. Yeah." He's silent for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe. I'll ask. Mom, don't worry, I'll be fine. Ok. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Yeah. I promise. Mom! Ok. Love you too." There's silence for a while and then Jared comes back, a smile plastered on his face even if his eyes are huge with worry.

"That was mom. The car broke down and they're stuck there until tomorrow." His shadow is so small it's like a puddle by his feet.

"Oh."

"But it's okay," Jared hurries to add. "I mean, I can be by myself. I'm not a kid."

'Yes, you are,' Jensen thinks but aloud he says, "Course not. You'll be fine. You'll be asleep most of the time anyway."

"Yeah," Jared says but he doesn't sound convinced at all. He's biting his lip, a frown creasing his forehead between his eyebrows. He smells like rain. "Yeah, you're right," he says quietly, more to himself.

Jensen hesitates. He shouldn't. Really, *really* shouldn't. Not just because his parents will freak out but because when he's asleep things happen. Things he has even less control over than he does when he's awake. It's a horrible idea. A horrible awful idea. He watches Jared walk to the window and look outside. It's starting to get dark and Jared's shoulders slump even further.

"I could stay," Jensen hears himself saying, knowing he should take it back the second the words leave his tongue. But Jared turns to him, looking close to tears, he's so grateful.

"Could you really?" He seems to catch himself, realizing how desperate he sounds. "I mean, I'm sure I'll be fine by myself. It's just one night, right? It's not like they'll be gone forever."

"Jared," Jensen says more firmly, "I can stay. If you want me to, I can stay. It's okay."



Jared breathes out and a grin splits his face. “We’ll have a sleepover! We can watch TV as long as we want and make grilled cheese and...” He seems to realize how childish he sounds and stops, blushing red all the way up to his ears. “Uh...”

Jensen grins. “I’ve never had a sleepover,” he says lightly in an effort to ease Jared’s discomfort. “Sounds great.”

Jared smiles in relief. “You can probably sleep in Jeff’s room. It’s right across the hall so it’s not too far...” He blushes and then continues in a casual voice, “I mean, Meg’s bed is very, very pink. It’s like sleeping on marshmallows. You don’t want that, right?”

“I’m thinking not,” Jensen snorts. There’s a knot in his stomach but he ignores it. “You sure Jeff won’t mind?”

“Dude, he’s in college. He sleeps in a dorm. He has no say whatsoever anymore.” Jared’s grin falters suddenly. “You think your parents will be mad?”

‘See how little I care,’ is what Jensen wants to say but the truth is he does care. A lot. Not because he can’t handle them being angry at him but because he’s worried they might take it out on Jared. Like telling Jared’s mom he can’t have any more lessons.

“I’ll explain it to them,” he says and tries to look confident. “They’ll understand.”

‘Please understand,’ he begs silently as he listens to the phone ring on the other end. ‘And please let dad pick up.’

He’s in Jeff’s room. It looks exactly like Jensen’s own room should look if he was normal. Books and CDs on the shelves and posters of rock bands and half-naked women on the wall. It’s tidy, probably since he only comes home during the holidays, but the sheer number of small things that could easily become airborne is worrying.

“Hello?” his mother says and Jensen closes his eyes. Damn.

“It’s me,” he says, trying to sound confident and grown up. “I’m at Jared’s. His parents’ car broke down and he’s alone for the night. I said... I said I could stay with him.”

“Jensen, no. You know you can’t. It’s not an option.” She sounds like she’s ready to hang up, like there is no discussion to be had and Jensen hurries on, needing her to see reason.

“Mom, he’s scared to be alone. I’m not gonna leave him. I’ll be okay.”

She sighs. “Jensen, listen to me. I’m sorry about Jared, but you can’t. It’s too dangerous and you know it.”

“I’ll be careful...” he starts but she isn’t listening.

“What if something happens?” she’s saying, irritated. “What if he realizes...?”

“What if he does?” Jensen asks, heart hammering in his chest. “Would it really be that bad?”

She sucks in her breath and he can feel her anger like a cold breeze through the phone. “Jensen! Have you completely lost your *mind*? God, I *knew* this would happen! I knew...”

“Ok, alright,” he hurries to say. “I won’t tell him. But I can’t leave him either. He’s only thirteen, mom. What kind of friend would I be to leave him when he’s so scared?”

“Look, I’m sorry but...”

There’s a shuffle and then his dad’s voice comes through the line. “What’s going on?” he asks. “Jensen?”

“Dad,” he breathes out in relief. “Jared’s parents’ car broke down and he’s alone and scared and I can’t leave him. He’s my friend, dad. I can’t...”

“Calm down, kiddo. When will they be home?”

“Tomorrow. Dad, please... I’ll be careful, I promise. I’ll be in the next room and I’ll close the door, he won’t see anything. Or I’ll stay awake, all night if I have to. I don’t mind. Please, dad.”

His dad sighs. There’s silence for a moment and then he asks tiredly. “Can’t he come stay here?”

“They said they’d be calling to check up on him. I don’t think he wants to leave the house. I could call them, I guess. They’re at some motel. But dad, where are we gonna let him sleep? In the piano room? The cat’s gonna bug him all night and I don’t know if I can keep the piano from playing. It’s gotten used to it now. And he can’t sleep in my room, if he wakes up and sees...”

“Ok.”

The answer takes him completely by surprise. “Wh-what?” he stammers.

“It’s alright. Just be careful, ok? Keep your door closed, his too if you can get away with it. Put as many loose things away as you can. Is there an alarm clock in the room you’ll be in?”

Jensen eyes the clock on the bedside table. “Yes.”

“Let it ring every half hour. That will hopefully keep you from deep sleep. Drink a lot of water, Jensen, and don’t... you know.”

His ears burn with humiliation. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Just thought I’d mention it.” His dad sighs again. “Jensen, you’re taking a huge risk here, I hope you realize that.”

“I know, dad. But I can’t just... I can’t, dad.”

“I get it. I do, son. But if this backfires... I don’t know if we can fix that. You might have to... go somewhere.”

The old fear grips him tight like a cold fist, squeezing all light out of him. “It won’t,” he says shakily. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Just so you know what you’re risking.”

Jensen nods. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think there will ever come a time when I can...? When...?” He swallows. “I hate lying to him.”

His dad is silent for a while but when his voice comes back it’s pale yellow with sadness. “Jensen, he’s just a kid. I’m not saying never but you can’t, not now. He’s too young to understand, ok? He might freak out and then we’ll be... Well, it would be very bad.”

Jensen thinks Jared is a lot less likely to freak out than all the adults he’s known in his life but he’s too caught up in the implications of his father’s words. “But you think maybe one day...?”

“Jensen, let’s talk about this when you come home, ok?”

Jensen swallows. “Ok. Ok, dad. Thank you. And goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jensen. And remember what I said.”

“I will. I will, I promise.” He hangs up and breathes out. His hands tremble when he wipes them on the thighs of his jeans, leaving damp and dark patches on the denim. He can do this. He can. Everything will be ok.

Jared’s downstairs, watching TV. He looks up when Jensen enters the room, failing miserably at hiding his anxiety. “What did they say?” he asks, nibbling at the corner of his lip.

“It’s fine. No problem.” He smiles.

The whole room seems to breathe out, the air shimmering with the sudden warmth that spreads from Jared’s body. The little boy grows before Jensen’s eyes, stretching across the couch and overwhelming the room with his presence. “Yeah?” he says, trying to sound casual. “Cool.”

He pulls his legs up on the couch allowing Jensen to sit down on the other end, then burrowing his cold toes under Jensen's thigh with a grin. Jensen scowls and squirms but he doesn't tell Jared to move his feet away. "I gotta warn you," he says as casually as he can, "I snore. Like really, really loud."

Jared laughs. "You can't be worse than my dad. He sounds like a grizzly bear."

"I wouldn't bet on it. I should probably keep the door closed, just in case," he adds, like it's an afterthought.

He waits for Jared to call him on it but he just shakes his head and says, "Whatever," waving his hand dismissively. "So, what ya wanna eat?"

"You're gonna cook?" Jensen asks, raising his eyebrow.

Jared laughs. "As if. Mom said I could use the emergency stash in the top drawer in the kitchen so we can order something. You like pizza?"

Jensen shrugs. "Sure." His mom sometimes makes pizza when Mac complains they never eat normal food. It's okay but not his favorite.

"Hey, you're the guest. You want something else?"

"Pizza's fine."

Turns out bought pizza is nothing like what his mom makes. It's all greasy and kinda disgusting. And so delicious he's eaten three slices before he realizes. He even forgets feeling uncomfortable about eating with his fingers, the way Jared says you should eat junk food, and instead licks them clean when the grease starts becoming an issue. He kinda loves it. He looks up to find Jared watching him with a half-smile on his face. "What?"

"Nothing." The smile grows wider. "You're funny when you eat."

Jensen frowns. "Funny how?"

"I don't know. You just look so... happy." Jared blushes and looks away. "I like seeing you happy."

Something clenches in Jensen's chest. "I'm happy. Why do you think I'm not happy?" His voice comes out sharper than he intended.

"I didn't mean..." Jared bites his lip. "Sorry. I'm sure you are."

"No, I'm sorry." Jensen blinks rapidly, trying to find words that won't make him sound like a jerk. "I just...I'm fine, Jared. I know my life seems... different but it's ok. I'm used to it."

"Ok." Jared nods but his eyes shift from Jensen and away, obviously unsure. "Has it... Has it always been different?"

“Well, yeah.” Jensen offers him a smile. “It’s me, you know. And I’ve always been me.”

Jared smiles but his eyes remain serious. “Will you tell me about it?”

Jensen breathes deep, his dad’s words echoing in his head. “Some day. I promise. Ok?”

“Ok.” Jared doesn’t push it but Jensen can smell his curiosity, like crushed blackberries. They finish eating in silence and Jared doesn’t say anything when Jensen cleans up, making sure every surface is spotless and there are no crumbs on the floor.

They settle down in front of the TV. When Jared’s parents call he tells them Jensen’s gonna stay the night and then hands the phone over when his mother asks to speak to him.

“Are you sure it’s alright?” she asks Jensen and he assures her it is. “I can call your parents if you’d like,” she offers.

“There’s no need, ma’am.” If his mother picks up, who knows what she’ll say? “I promise.”

“Well, alright. Can you just make sure he locks all the doors and closes the windows? I’m not gonna tell you to not stay up too late, just try and get some sleep, ok?” She laughs and he echoes it, hoping he’s not being weird.

“Yes, of course,” he says and wishes her a good night before hanging up.

“Bet she told you to keep an eye on me, right?” Jared huffs. “I swear, she seems to think I’m five or something.”

Jensen almost laughs. Compared to *his* mom, Jared’s mother is ridiculously laid back. “She just asked me to remind you to lock the doors and such, that’s all. She was cool.”

“Oh. Ok. We should probably do that.”

They walk through the house, locking the doors and closing all the windows. When they’re done it’s almost eleven o’clock. They sit down on the couch again, some cop show’s on TV. Jensen is starting to feel restless. He hasn’t played since this morning and the need is like an itch under his skin.

“Do you think...?” he starts and then changes his mind. “Forget it.”

“You want to go downstairs and play?” Jared asks and Jensen looks at him in surprise. “Your fingers are twitching,” he says in explanation and Jensen looks down to see he’s tapping out the music in his head on his thighs.

“Do you mind?”

“No. I love hearing you play. C’mon.” Jared jumps up and Jensen follows him through the house and down the stairs to the basement. “It’s weird,” Jared says as they reach the bottom, “I think I might be going colorblind.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. The other day the walls looked suddenly different but now they look the same as before. So weird.”

“Maybe it was the light,” Jensen suggests, cursing silently. “Different light bulbs could change the color.”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

It’s warm, almost stuffy downstairs and Jensen takes off his shirt, draping it over the back of the couch before sitting down in front of the piano. Already his t-shirt is clinging to his back and he can feel a drop of sweat running down his spine.

“I told mom it was cold the other day. I guess she turned the heat up,” Jared says from behind him.

Jensen nods. He’s watching the ghost of Jared’s fingers dancing over the tangents in front of him. Or is it a premonition? The fingers are long, the palms unbelievably large. Those hands could easily cover his whole chest and hold him down if they wanted to. The thought has a flush spreading out from his chest and travel down to his stomach and up the back of his neck. ‘Stop it,’ he thinks. ‘Not this. Not... not yet.’

“Any special requests?” he asks instead, keeping his voice light. “Private concert, just for you. Whatever you want.”

Jared comes up to stand behind him, a solid wall of warmth that exceeds even that of the room. “Anything I want?” he says challengingly, the grin evident in his voice, and Jensen can’t help shivering. Stupid body.

“Yep. Name it.”

“Hmm.” Jensen can see Jared’s face in the shiny surface of the piano, deep in thought. Big nosed, high cheekbones, stubble covering his strong jaw. “These guys.”

Jensen turns around to see Jared pointing at the poster on the wall. Kurt Cobain stares back at him, eyes already dark like the grave. “Nirvana?”

Jared grins. “You said anything.”

He obviously expects Jensen to admit defeat, that he doesn’t know any of their music, not well enough to play anyway. Jensen bites back a smile. He might be a weirdo but he’s not completely cut off from the world. He’s probably listened to more music, *any* kind of music, than Jared’s even heard. He listens while he reads, to keep him distracted. He listens while he does his homework, so he won’t die of boredom. He

listens while he reads notes, merging different kinds of music together in his head until they sound like a beautiful chaos. There's so much music in the world and only a small part of it is available at the music store. The rest he has to pick up by ear. To tell the truth he actually prefers it that way. What the notes say and what he hears is hardly ever the same anyway.

Giving Jared a smile Jensen shakes his head in amusement. "You asked for it. Close your..."

"... eyes. Yeah, yeah." Jared doesn't go lie down on the couch though but sits with his back up against the piano and closes his eyes dutifully.

Jensen looks at him fondly and only just keeps from reaching over and ruffling his hair. Instead he closes his eyes as well, though only briefly until he hears a song playing in his head. Too angry. But that one, oh yes. That one is just perfect.

Jared laughs in delight as the music starts vibrating against his back.

### ***Lithium / The Piano Tribute To Nirvana (5:25)***

It becomes a game. Jared tries to think of the most obscure music he's ever heard and Jensen plays it. Sometimes just parts, sometimes he has to ask Jared to hum a bit to give him an idea of what it sounds like. Most times though the music comes to him before he even has to think about it.

Jared keeps his eyes closed, obedient even though he knows it's just plain fun, not a lesson. It's not going to hold forever though, Jensen knows that. He has to find some other way. Not just for Jared but if he ever wants to...

Jensen swallows. His dad is right, he needs to prepare himself for the future, no matter what it holds. Even if he never leaves the house his parents can only take it for so long. It's wearing on his mother nerves, all the emotions he keeps inflicting upon her, all the colors and visions and other sensations that somehow always find their way through the locked door.

It's not as intense though, with Jared there. Having someone in the room to distract him helps, just like it did when he was teaching Mac. Which proves he can hold it back, to some extent at least. Maybe he can train himself to limit the effects even further. The feelings are difficult to control, they are there in the music, no matter how little effort he puts into playing. But the other stuff... maybe.

He picks Billy Joel's *Piano Man* to experiment. Without Jared in the room everything would smell of beer and cigarettes but thankfully scents are pretty easy to block. The air is still misty, smoke stinging his eyes and he starts with that. After the second verse he can feel the room getting clearer and when he looks around he sees the patrons sitting around the bar are fading, one by one. By the end of the song they're transparent and the neon sign on the wall advertising Budweiser is flickering, finally going dark as he hits the final note. Yes!

He looks to Jared to ask for his next request but finds him asleep, chin digging into his chest and arms curled up on his lap, mouth slightly open. The clock on Jensen's wrist blinks half past midnight. He sits silent for a while, watching Jared's chest rise and fall in easy breathing, his fingers twitching slightly then settling down again as he sighs in his sleep.

It scares him, how much he feels for this boy. After being told again and again that he has to control his feelings, that they're dangerous and bad, this almost painful heat in his chest terrifies him. What if his mom is right? What if he does hurt Jared, just by loving him so much? And he does love him, he can't deny that. It's not a sexual kind of love, not yet anyway. He is very careful about that, looking at the little boy in Jared's skin every time the memory of his vision pushes to the surface. Concentrating on the softness of Jared's cheeks and the innocence in his eyes until Jared the grownup shimmers and disappears along with any inappropriate thoughts he might invoke in Jensen's head. He waited seventeen years just to meet Jared, he'll wait forever if that's what it takes, to hold his heart.



Jared blinks his eyes open against the harsh morning light, then promptly rolls over and pulls the covers over his head with a groan. His head aches slightly, like in July when it's too hot for his brain to rest even when he sleeps. He feels drained, his limbs heavy and his eyes dry. He's just about to drift back to sleep when he remembers Jensen and his eyes snap wide open.

He checks the clock on his nightstand. It claims the time is already ten o'clock even if Jared feels as if it's barely six. He doesn't remember getting into bed, not really. He has a vague recollection of clinging to Jensen, a warm arm around his waist and a soft laugh vibrating in his ear. Then nothing. He had weird dreams though, very vivid and real, but they kept getting cut off just as they started to get interesting. He thinks Jensen was in his dream, Jensen and him and music. He felt older and more confident somehow. Tall, like the person Jensen insists he'll turn into.

Yawning he rolls out of bed and searches for his clothes. They lie neatly folded on the chair by his desk, except for the t-shirt and boxers he's still wearing, which are baggy and damp with sleep. The realization hits him that Jensen undressed him like a kid before tucking him in. He flushes red, mortified, feeling even more pudgy and ugly than usual. Why is he always such a loser?

He changes out of his damp clothes quickly, promising himself he'll take a shower later. The door to his room is closed and when he peeks out in the hall he sees the one opposite is as well. Guess Jensen was serious about the snoring. Jared lays an ear to the door but he doesn't hear anything. For a moment he hovers outside the door, wondering what to do. He should let Jensen sleep but at the same time he kinda wants to ask him if they should go get breakfast at the small coffeehouse his mom sometimes takes him to. It's close enough that they can walk and Jared wants to treat Jensen to something good to thank him for staying the night.



In the end he opts for at least checking if Jensen looks like he might wake up soon. He opens the door quietly, taking one step inside the room, then stops. Jensen is asleep. He's lying on top of the covers, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs, freckled skin covered in goose bumps. The window is open, allowing a slight breeze to sweep through the room when the door opens and Jensen shivers. When Jared walks over and touches Jensen's arm with his fingertips, his skin is cold.

Jared doesn't know what to think. Maybe Jensen really felt uncomfortable, sleeping in someone else's bed, and that's why he slept on top of the covers. But if that's the case, shouldn't he have kept his clothes on so he wouldn't be cold? It doesn't make sense. Jared reaches for the corner of the covers, intending to tug them around Jensen so he doesn't get sick but a soft whimper stops him and he looks up at Jensen in alarm. His eyes are moving rapidly behind bluish eyelids, his eyebrows are knitted and his lips twitch. Jared lays a hand on Jensen's shoulder, unsure whether he should wake him up or not and the icy skin feels shocking under his palm.

"Jen?" he says quietly and the body on the bed instantly relaxes. Jared watches fascinated as the freckled skin – and wow, look how many freckles there are! – smoothes out, like the warmth from his hand is enough to heat Jensen's entire body. Then a flush starts spreading from the middle of Jensen's chest until he's pink from the tip of his ears and down to the dip of his stomach. Jared blinks. He feels hot all of a sudden, sweat prickling at the back of his neck, and he pulls his hand away, pressing it confused against his cheek. It's as hot as burnt skin on a summer day.

"Jensen?" he tries again and Jensen hitches his breath, turning his head towards Jared's voice in his sleep. There are dark circles under his eyes, like he's stayed awake most of the night, and even if he doesn't look distressed anymore he's obviously dreaming judging from the way his eyes keep moving under his eyelids. Heat bubbles down low in Jared's stomach and suddenly he feels something stirring in his pants. What? He steps back, confused and horrified that Jensen might wake up and catch him, and that's when he sees he's not the only one. Oh.

He doesn't mean to stare, really, it's just very hard not to. It's not like catching sight of one of his classmates half-hard in the showers after gym. For one thing, Jensen is still covered although it's obvious what's happening under the thin cotton. Secondly, Jensen is definitely not thirteen.

The warmth in Jared's belly grows hotter and he doesn't even understand why. It's just Jensen. And watching him, although fascinating if slightly embarrassing, isn't turning him on like the time Debbie let him feel her tiny boobs at the spring dance. It's like he's in a stranger's body, feeling it react to something he can't see.

Jensen whimpers softly and Jared flees the room before he embarrasses himself. As he's hurrying down the stairs the alarm rings in Jeff's room and the sudden noise jerks him out of whatever was going on in his body. Once in the kitchen he pours himself a glass of water and drinks it down in heavy gulps. He's had his share of weird teenage bodily functions but nothing like this. God, talk about awkward.

When Jensen comes down to the kitchen fifteen minutes later he looks exhausted. He stumbles slightly before sinking down on a chair by the kitchen table, head in his

hands. Jared looks up from where he'd been pretending to read the paper, worry winning over his embarrassment.

"Are you okay?" he asks and Jensen mutters something that sounds like 'yeah' but might as well be a groan.

"Can I get you anything? Water? Painkillers?"

"Coffee," Jensen mumbles, almost to himself, before finally looking up. His eyes are bloodshot and he looks even paler than usual with those dark circles under his eyes. "Hey," he croaks. "Morning."

"Good morning." Jared gives him a worried smile. "Doesn't look like you had a good night though."

Jensen waves that off weakly with his hand. "M okay," he says hoarsely and clears his throat. "So... coffee?"

"I thought maybe we could go have some. There's a book café my mom likes. She says they make awesome coffee."

Jensen's eyes brighten slightly. "Yeah?" he says and rubs a hand over his face. The short stubble gives a raspy sound as it pulls on the dry skin of his palm.

Jared feels giddy all of a sudden, having a friend who's actually old enough to shave and doesn't just do it because he thinks he is, like Chad. Even if Jared of course knew Jensen's age it never hit him before what difference those four years make. Right now four years seem a very long time, especially since he's pretty sure *he* won't have to shave until he's thirty, the way things are going.

"Yeah," he replies and smiles. "I don't really drink coffee but I could get something else. And they have a really good breakfast menu. Only takes about fifteen minutes to walk there."

"Ok." Jensen stands up, swaying slightly on his feet as he blinks furiously. He looks like he's only a breath away from falling over and Jared makes sure to stay close by his side, just in case. If Jensen notices he doesn't comment on it.

Once out in the sun and the soft breeze he starts to look more awake and by the time they reach the coffeehouse he's answering Jared's prattling in almost whole sentences. They step inside the small but cozy establishment and Jensen breathes in deep, his nostrils flaring at the warm smell of fresh coffee. "Oh God," he moans and Jared can't help laughing.

They order the breakfast menu, bacon and eggs and ham with toast and orange juice, and Jensen gets his beloved coffee. He looks blissful as he breathes in the warm steam and then takes a careful sip, closing his eyes as the first taste hits the tip of his tongue. "Oh God," he repeats, with even more feeling than before. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” Jared grins. Jensen is starting to look more alive even if his eyes are still bloodshot and he’s so pale his freckles stand out like gold dust. Jared wants to ask him why he slept above the covers, since that’s probably the reason he had such a bad night, but then he’d have to admit having been in his room and maybe then Jensen would realize that he’d seen him like... that.

Jared ducks his head and sips his orange juice, willing the blush to die down. When he looks up again Jensen is watching him the way he sometimes does, a fond look in his eyes. “What?”

“Nothing.” Jensen shrugs but the smile stays and Jared can’t help smiling back.

“What?” he repeats, laughing a little nervously and Jensen shakes his head, still smiling.

“Just this. Thank you.”

Jared laughs. “Dude, you stayed over the whole night for me. Least I could do to buy you breakfast. Plus, it’s mom’s money anyway.”

Jensen just shakes his head again. “Not that,” he says, eyes dropping, and it takes Jared a moment to realize what he’s saying.

“Oh,” he says awkwardly. “You’re... you’re welcome.” He swallows. “Jensen?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you stop going to school?”

Jensen stares down at the warm coffee cup he’s cradling in his hands. “What do you remember about me from school?” he finally asks.

Jared blushes. “Not much. Just that you were alone a lot. And that the other kids thought you were...” He stops.

Jensen grimaces. “Weird. Yeah.”

He’s silent for a while, absentmindedly running his thumb over the rim of the cup, back and forth. Jared feels like he should apologize, not just for himself but on behalf of all the other kids as well, but it seems pointless since it won’t change anything. Instead he shoves some crumbs around his plate with his finger, waiting for Jensen to continue.

“That’s pretty much why,” Jensen says at last and shrugs. “I wasn’t making any friends and mom felt the teachers were... holding me back.” He seems to hesitate but then he adds, “I did learn more at home. Could follow my own pace. And no one disliked me for being smart.”

“They did that before, at school?”

“I think. Or maybe they just disliked me for being me.” He looks up but his eyes aren’t sad, just resigned. “People don’t like you when you’re weird.”

Jared frowns. “Why do you think you’re weird?”

Jensen scratches his nose, looking uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I was just born that way.”

“No, I mean, what is it about you that you think is weird? What other people think is weird? Because I don’t think you’re weird at all. Different maybe but not weird.”

Jensen blinks. “You don’t?”

“No.” Jared drops his eyes, feeling his cheeks flush. “You talk funny sometimes but I like that. And you are smarter than anyone I know. And you’ve got amazing musical talents. But none of that is weird. It’s just... unusual.”

He glances up to find Jensen staring at him, his lips parted as if he’s on the verge of saying something. Just as Jared thinks he’s going to unravel some of the mystery that’s Jensen Ackles, someone slaps him on the back and he jerks forward, spilling juice all over his plate.

“Dude, whatya doing here?” says Chad’s squeaky voice and Jared glares up at him.

“Eating breakfast?” he answers sarcastic but Chad isn’t listening.

“Who’s that?” Chad’s looking at Jensen like he’s a strange insect and Jensen flushes red, eyes dropping to his plate.

“Jensen, Chad. Chad, Jensen. Jensen is my piano teacher. Remember, I told you.”

“Don’t you know it’s illegal to date your teacher?” Chad says and laughs when Jensen flinches. “I’m just kidding. So, you been teaching my boy some decent stuff? None of that Mozart crap, right?”

Jared wishes there was a hole in the floor he could fall through. Or better yet, push Chad into. “Dude! You’re being rude!”

“What? I’m just making conversation.” He turns back to Jensen, jerking a thumb at Jared. “Seriously though, he any good?”

“He’s very promising,” Jensen says stiffly, still not looking up. “He’s making good progress.”

“That means he sucks, right?” Chad snorts. “Dude, I told you, you should have gone for the electric guitar.”

Jared stares at Jensen. ‘Do I suck?’ he wonders. ‘Is that really what he meant?’ He wishes Jensen would look up so he could see his eyes but Jensen seems to be shutting down completely, shoulders slumping further down with every second that goes by.

His ears are tipped red and he's drumming his fingers on the table, like he's playing some song in his head.

Jared's just about to ask Chad what the hell he's doing there and please leave now when Jensen suddenly takes a deep breath, looks up and says, "He doesn't suck. He's going to be magnificent. You however could use to practice your shots if you're ever going to be anything but average at basketball."

Chad goes red in the face, the mocking look in his eyes making way for anger and he turns to Jared, "You gonna let him talk to me like that?"

Jared shrugs, fighting to keep the grin from breaking out completely. "Well, he's kinda right. You could use to practice your shots."

"Dude, what the fuck?"

"Chad Michael, watch your mouth! Oh hi, Jared." Chad's mother turns back to Chad who's looking like he doesn't know whether to be embarrassed or angry. "Your dad called. He's busy, *again*. With his newest catch no doubt. We're going to visit your grandma instead."

"Aw, mom!"

"Not another word. Nice to see you, Jared. And you too...?"

"Jensen. Jensen Ackles," Jensen offers, standing up and taking her hand. He still looks uncomfortable but Jared can see he's enjoying Chad's embarrassment. "Jared's piano teacher," he elaborates when Chad's mother looks at him expectantly.

"Really? Well, how good for you, Jared." She beams at him. "It's so nice to see young people interested in music. Why can't you be like that, Chad?"

"I'm interested in music!" Chad objects. "I play music all the time."

"You call that music, that noise you blast in your room all day? Really, I..."

Jensen and Jared sit silent as the pair disappears out the door, arguing all the way, then burst out laughing as soon as it closes behind them.

"Wanna bet she signs him up to play the violin or something?" Jared snorts. "He's gonna be so pissed."

Jensen laughs. "As long as she doesn't ask me to teach him." He looks up at Jared, smiling softly. "You don't suck, Jared. In fact you're doing incredibly well. I meant what I said, you're going to be magnificent one day. And I don't just mean as a pianist." He blushes suddenly as if he feels he's said too much but he keeps Jared's gaze until he's the one to look away, flushed red as well and feeling stupidly happy.

"You really think so?" he asks hesitantly. "You don't think I'm just wasting my time? I mean, I know I'll never be like you..."

Jensen leans forward, his gaze intense. “Jared, you don’t want to be like me,” he says gently. “I don’t want you to be like me. You’re supposed to be *you*. And *you* are going to be magnificent.”

He smiles and Jared’s spine pops as he swears he grows yet another quarter of an inch.



When he can’t put it off anymore Jensen goes home and is met with stony silence.

He says, “I’m home,” and “Nothing happened,” but his mother doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even look at him. It’s like she’s pretending he’s not there. For a moment he wonders why he is. He could still be at Jared’s house where Jared’s mother hugged him and told him they were so grateful he stayed, that he was a great friend, while Jared blushed and cringed in embarrassment. She was going to make lasagna, she said. Jensen loves lasagna.

He stands watching his own mother for a long time before giving up and walking slowly upstairs and into his room. He closes the door, pulls the blinds and crawls into bed.

She doesn’t wake him up for dinner.

The next couple of weeks the house feels more like a prison than a home. Even Mac keeps to herself or is out with her friends, the tension in the family more than she can handle. Jensen’s mother still won’t look at him and she keeps conversations to a minimum. His dad just looks tired.

Jared’s lessons every Wednesday are the highlights of Jensen’s week but even those are subdued. Jared looks nervous every time Jensen’s mother checks in on them, which she does a lot these days. No words, just silently opening the door, watching them and then closing it again. Jared’s fingers falter on the keyboard every time, still not comfortable with anyone but Jensen hearing him play.

Jared keeps asking him if they can meet other days, just to hang out. The first time he asks Jensen opens his mouth to say ‘Yes, of course’ when he catches sight of his mother in the hall mirror, a black cloud of anger hanging over her head. Jared is watching him expectantly and his shoulders slump when Jensen tells him no, not this week. Walking to his mom’s car where it stands waiting for him by the curb, Jared looks almost as lonely as Jensen feels.

This week turns into next week and next week. Every time Jensen hints at going somewhere, doing something – anything! – his mom’s lips turn thin and the temperature in the room drops to zero. Finally he stops even trying. There’s no going to the library, no walks down by the river. No wishing Jared would just come by and drag him out. He doesn’t even go out into the garden anymore, since his mom has been spending an increasing amount of time out there, muttering about weed or whatever.

Instead he spends almost all his time in his room, trying to be as quiet as he can. He's not even playing the piano much since it seems to make her more irritated. Instead he keeps his radio tuned down low, listening to music while he reads notes and tries to find interesting pieces for Jared to play. Jared's getting quite good at playing by ear but he's still struggling with reading musical notes, never quite hitting the right keys to correspond with what's written. But he's determined to learn, never even contemplating giving up but focused on his goal, on getting what he wants.

Jensen wishes he had Jared's strength of mind. These days he feels like he has no will left, no independence, no hope for things ever improving. He feels like he did before he met Jared. No, worse. He feels like he did before he had his music. It would scare him if he allowed himself to think about that, how empty he is without these two things in his life, Jared and the piano.

By the third week the black cloud in Jensen's room is covering most of the ceiling and starting to creep down the walls. He sits for hours on the windowsill, the thick glass presenting a world outside as blurred and incomprehensible as he feels inside.

"You have to get out of here, kiddo," his dad says from the door and Jensen turns his head slowly, blinking him into focus. His dad looks tired, the way he always does these days. "Get some fresh air, go see Jared, something."

"I'm not supposed to," Jensen answers, voice flat. "I'm supposed to stay in here until I die. That's the plan, right? Hide me away in here until I die or end the world, whichever comes first."

His dad's jaw clenches. "Jensen, stop it. You know that's not true."

Jensen shrugs. "Do I?" He turns to stare out the window again. "Then what is the plan?"

"There is no plan, Jensen," Alan sighs. "Your mom and I... We're playing by the ear, doing the best we can."

Jensen shakes his head. "I don't believe that. All these years, when I was growing up, what did you plan to do with me? You must have had some idea, some kind of plan what to do."

"We always hoped..." His dad hesitates. "We hoped you would grow out of it. Like a child with an overactive imagination. We thought you would get... better."

Jensen closes his eyes in frustration. "But I won't. I'll never get 'better', dad. I'll always be like this. Always! And I can't... I can't rot away in here for the rest of my life!"

His father moves into the room, closing the door behind him. "Don't yell. Your mother is resting."

Jensen laughs coldly. “Right. I’m going crazy but she’s resting so who cares? God!” He bangs his head back against the wall. “Have you seen the way she looks at me lately? Why, dad? Why does she hate me? What did I do?”

“Jensen, don’t you dare talk about your mother like that!”

He flinches and Alan sucks in his breath, blowing it out slowly before speaking again, lower and calmer. “Your mother loves you. She’s just very worried. We both are.”

Jensen clenches his jaw and the cloud rumbles. “Yeah, I’m just a huge problem for you all. Bet you’re regretting it, right? Having me.”

There’s silence for a long time and Jensen doesn’t even realize he’s holding his breath until his father finally starts talking, voice gentle but firm, leaving no room for doubt. “I’ve never regretted having you, Jensen. Never. It hasn’t been easy but don’t you *ever* think I regret you.”

Jensen breathes out and blinks, tears suddenly clouding his vision. There’s a huge lump in his throat which he’s having difficulty breathing around and he pinches his lips together to try and keep them from turning downward. He’s not gonna cry. He’s almost an adult, goddammit. He’s not gonna fucking cry.

His dad lays a hand on his shoulder and that’s all it takes. A sob bubbles up from his throat and the dam of tears swells until it floods over. He’s vaguely aware of arms pulling him in and holding him tight, the pain in his chest so fierce he thinks his heart might literally be breaking.

“Hey,” he can hear his dad saying through the loud rushing in his ears. “Come on, kiddo. Breathe.”

Air rushes down his throat, sharp like razor blades. “I can’t... I can’t do this,” he hitches. “Dad, I’m suffocating. I’m suffocating in here.”

“Sshh...”

“I’m losing my mind. Dad, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“No. No, you’re not.” His dad’s grip tightens around Jensen, one hand pressing his head into the broad chest, the other arm tight around his shoulder. “Listen to me. We’ll figure something out. You’ve been doing great with Jared, right? You can do this. You can go out there and be someone, Jensen.”

The warm palm is a source of strength where it cradles the back of his head, thumb stroking him soothingly behind his ear. “I know you’re feeling hopeless and I know your mom is scared but listen to me. I know you can learn to control this. You’re getting better at it. You are. And we’ll work on it, together. That’s our goal, ok? *That’s* our plan. From now on that is the only plan we have, to make you able to function out there. Ok?”



Jensen nods, still hiccupping for air but the cold fist crushing his chest eases somewhat. “I didn’t ask for this,” he whispers. “Why am I like this? Why me?”

“I don’t know, kiddo,” his dad sighs. “I wish I did. I wish I had some answers but I don’t.”

“What am I, dad? Am I evil? Do you think I’m evil?”

He can feel a shiver run through his dad but his tight grip never falters. “No. You’re not evil, son. I know you’re not. And *you* have to believe you’re not, that you’re *good*. You hear me?” Dad shakes him, still holding tight. “I’m not gonna lie. This... What you can do, Jensen, it can be dangerous and if you wanted to I think you could do horrible things. Which is why you have to believe in your own goodness. You have to believe... to *know* that you’re the kind of person that would *never* use it to do bad things. Do you understand?”

Jensen nods, sniffing. “Ye-eah. I don’t want to do bad things, dad. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“I know. That’s how I know you’re not evil. And that’s how I know you can do this. You can become the person you want to be. A good person, Jensen, a *safe* person. That’s our plan, ok? To get you there.”

“Ok.”

“Ok. Alright. Feeling better?”

He nods again, managing a small, “Yeah.”

“Good. Now maybe we should get back down.”

Jensen blinks his eyes open. His dad’s head is tilted sideways, pressing up against the ceiling. The black cloud is slowly evaporating around them. “Oh.”

“Easy...” his dad starts saying just as Jensen lets abruptly go. They land in a tangle on the edge of the bed and when Jensen grabs for the covers to try and keep from sliding off he ends up pulling it over them and just like that they’re on the floor with a dunk. There’s a stunned silence and then his dad starts chuckling.

“I gotta say, kiddo, there’s never a dull moment with you around,” he laughs before pushing the covers off them and stumbling to his feet. “You okay?” he asks and pulls Jensen up. Jensen’s hip aches from where he hit the edge of the bed and he’s sure he’ll get a bruise from where his dad’s elbow slammed into his ribs but he still feels better than he’s done in weeks.

“Yeah,” Jensen assures him and laughs shakily. “Yeah, dad.”

“Good. Now why don’t you call Jared and arrange something. You can go see a movie or...” At the look on Jensen’s face he sighs. “Jensen, that was years ago. I’m

sure you're better now. Or if you want to do something else...It doesn't matter. Just get out of here and try to have some fun."

He shifts uncomfortable. "But mom..."

Dad's eyes turn hard. "I'll talk to your mother. This has gone on long enough, she's made her point." He rubs a hand over his face before giving Jensen a tired smile. "I'll tell her what we've decided. Our plan. If it's going to work it has to be a joint effort, involving the whole family. We can do this, ok? *You* can do this."

Jensen nods, even if he doesn't feel confident at all. A plan which goal is to make him independent and able to get out of the house more, even live his own life? That doesn't sound like a plan his mom will be enthusiastic about. As much as she seems to dislike having him around these days, she hates even more the idea of him being 'out there', especially by himself.

His doubt must show because his dad reaches for him and squeezes his shoulder. "Stop it. I believe in you, Jensen," he says firmly before pushing him away with a smile. "Now get out of here and don't come back until Jared's grown tired of you. Or before bedtime, whichever comes first."

"Jared doesn't grow tired of me," Jensen says, and this time the smile is real. "I got lucky with him."

His dad smiles back and ruffles his hair. "You know what? I think you did."

Things slowly go back to normal after that. Well, as normal as they can be within their family. Not to mention the added awkwardness of The Plan. They begin with sessions where they sit together in the living room and Jensen is supposed to think about stuff and then try to stop what they bring on before it gets out of hand. Mac rolls her eyes and his mother sits stiff and unsupportive but Jensen locks eyes with his dad and draws strength from him. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

"I don't know how I'm doing it so how am I supposed to know how to stop it?" he asks frustrated when another pillow flies across the room, only just missing his sister's head.

"Well, what were you thinking when that happened?" his dad asks patiently.

He bites his lip. "That she doesn't think I can do this."

Mac has the decency to look guilty. "That's not true," she objects anyway. "I just don't know why I have to be here. I was going to meet up with Myra and instead I'm stuck here, getting pillows thrown at me!"

"Mackenzie, stop it," their dad says firmly. "Jensen, focus on what you're thinking and feeling when things like this happens and either stop it or try to redirect it."

"Like how? I can't just stop thinking and I don't know what thoughts will do what!"

“Ok, like now? Instead of thinking she doesn’t believe in you, focus on *making* her believe in you, on proving her wrong.”

Jensen tries but one eyeroll from his sister and he’s back to throwing pillows, this time smack in the middle of her face.

“Dad!”

“Jensen!”

“She deserved that!”

“See, he did it on purpose!”

“I didn’t! Dad, I didn’t!”

“Shut up the both of you. Try again.”

When the next pillow falls to the floor midway across the room even Jensen’s mom smiles a little.

Jared comes on Wednesdays for his lessons and they get together at least one other time during the week, hanging out like Jensen imagines regular teenagers do. They even go see a movie, Jensen sitting stiff and on edge the whole time. Thankfully Jared doesn’t seem to notice, he’s too busy laughing at the stupid jokes on the screen. The one time Jensen can’t keep his laughter in check the lights flicker on and off and people start cursing and throwing popcorn at the screen. Jensen sinks lower down in his seat and stuffs his mouth full to shut himself up.

They go to another of Chad’s games and nothing happens. The team wins but only by a last second lucky shot from one of Chad’s teammates when Jensen isn’t even looking. Chad’s better though, like he’s taken their advice and put in some extra practice time, but when they go to congratulate him after the game he still scowls at Jensen. Not that Jensen cares. He’s beginning to suspect it’s not so much a matter of Chad thinking him weird, as it is Chad being jealous of Jared spending time with someone other than him. Never mind that he’s off with his teammates half the time, forgetting Jared even exists.

For every week that goes by Jared’s playing improves. He’s reading notes easily now and he’s able to pick up the basics from most music he hears. And he’s growing. Really, really fast. They measure the growth of his fingers on the keyboard, celebrating every added note like it’s an amazing accomplishment. The small boy laughs while the grown up wiggles his eyebrows and whispers what he’s going to do with those fingers once he’s old enough to know how. Jensen swallows and tries his best to ignore him.

Thing is, the more he thinks about it the less sure he is that what he saw in his ‘vision’, or whatever to call it, was real and not just his ‘overactive imagination’ playing with him. Oh, he has no doubts about himself or what *he* will want, once it’s

time. But Jared – the kid, Jared? – he’s very, very, undeniably *not* gay. In fact, the taller and more confident he becomes, the more he talks about girls and what he likes about them. It’s mostly innocent things, like someone’s smile or another one’s soft hair, but every now and then he’ll blush and stammer that he caught a glimpse of a breast or a look under a girl’s skirt.

It’s not as if Jensen minds, it’s really not like that. He knows he has no claim on Jared that way until years down the road. That’s not it. It would be kinda creepy anyway, expecting anything like that from the fumbling kid Jared is now. It’s just...

It’s just that Jensen’s starting to wonder if maybe that particular road doesn’t even exist outside his mind. He tries to tell himself that he only discovered that part of himself recently and so it’s hardly fair to expect Jared to know already. He reminds himself that feelings and preferences can change and just because Jared is obsessed with girls now doesn’t mean he’ll never look at Jensen that way.

Still doesn’t make it any easier, watching your supposed future soul mate fall all over himself every time a girl throws him a smile. What if *that’s* the truth? What if what Jensen saw will never happen and instead the grown up Jared will meet a girl and fall in love with her? The thought has Jensen’s breath hitching and his heart clenching in his chest.

‘This is not the Jared you saw,’ he tells himself. ‘They are not the same person, they don’t even exist in the same time. You can’t expect a boy so young to already be what he’s only supposed to become later.’

He turns away from their reflections in the mirror, passionately making out on Jared’s bed and instead leans against the desk and watches Jared, the real one, lying on his stomach on the bedspread, knees bent and ankles crossed, humming the notes he’s reading.

“I love this song,” he says, tapping his fingers impatiently on the sheets in front of him. “I love when you play it. I wish I could play it the way you do.”

‘Believe me, you don’t,’ Jensen thinks but aloud he says, “I like your interpretation better, Jared. It’s slower but it tells a more interesting story.”

Jared snorts but the red tips of his ears betray how pleased he is. “You think some old people are interesting? They didn’t do anything, just sat there, watching the world go by.”

Jensen smiles. “Maybe not what they were doing but what they are, what they stand for.”

Jared frowns. “Old age? Death?”

Jensen shakes his head, laughing softly. “No, not that. It’s like... You know how every day something happens to you? Sometimes just small things, like seeing a rainbow or eating pancakes. And then there are bigger, more exciting things, like finding a new piece of music or... or kissing a girl.”

He can feel himself blushing but Jared doesn't laugh. He's gazing up at Jensen, listening intently the way he always does when Jensen starts 'talking funny'.

"And there are even greater things ahead," Jensen continues, swallowing his discomfort. "Falling in love, having children, climbing mountains and crossing oceans. Small and great things that together make a person's life. And all these things... they have happened to those two. Imagine the memories they have. How amazingly rich they are."

Jared blinks. "Wow. I never thought of it like that." He rolls over on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Do you think we will be like that one day? Sitting together on a bench, heads filled with memories?"

*Jensen blinks. He can feel Jared's dry hand in his, the skin paper-thin and wrinkled. He's trembling slightly, old age shaking him like a leaf just before it falls. The air is crisp in Jensen's lungs, a cool breeze ruffling his thin hair, but Jared is warm by his side, tapping his cane absentmindedly against his leg as they watch two dogs play catch with a couple of kids. Jared's laugh is hoarser but still so rich and when Jensen turns his head he meets eyes that haven't lost any of their brilliance. Jared takes his hand and lifts it up to his lips, kissing the knuckle just above the wedding band.*

"Jensen?"

Jensen jerks awake to find Jared watching him. "Did you hear me?" Jared asks, frowning slightly.

Jensen nods. "Yeah, sorry. I hope so," he says quietly. "I hope we will... still know each other then."

"Well, duh. Best friends forever," Jared says and rolls his eyes as if there was never any other option.

Jensen tightens his hold on the desk behind him to keep from elevating.

~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~

"Shouldn't your parents be helping you with this?" Jared's mom asks and Jensen gives Jared a quick glance before shrugging.

"You know more about this stuff. Being a teacher and all."

Jared can see he's trying to be cool but he just ends up looking guilty as hell.

"Didn't you say you were homeschooled? I'm sure your mother knows just as much as me." She smiles but her gaze is scrutinizing and Jared can see Jensen crumbling underneath it. Not that Jared can blame him, his mother does have that effect on people. It's impossible to lie to her.

"She's not feeling well," Jared blurts out, trying to save Jensen from embarrassment. "Tired and... and migraines. She'll be glad if someone does it for her."

His mother just raises her eyebrows at him. “Really?” she says and he blushes. Damn.

Before he can think up another lie, this time to save himself, Jensen lays a hand on his arm to stop him. “Don’t.”

“But...”

Jensen shakes his head then looks back at Jared’s mom, who’s watching them, curiosity lining her forehead.

“She... she doesn’t want me to go,” he says and a flush travels up from his chest and to the tip of his ears. “Anywhere. She doesn’t want me to go anywhere. But I do. And I should be able to go to college if I want to. It’s not her life.”

Jared’s mom’s eyes turns soft and she sighs. “You should. I agree that you should. But Jensen, going behind your parents’ back is not the answer.”

Jensen’s lips tighten. “It’s my life,” he repeats stubbornly. “It’s not theirs to decide what I do with *my* life. I’m not asking them for money or *anything*. They have a college fund for Mac but they never...” He sucks in his breath and Jared’s chest tightens when he sees tears glittering in Jensen’s eyes. “I’m doing this on my own. I want to try. If I can’t get a scholarship then ok, I’ll accept that. But I have to try.”

They gaze at each other and after a while she nods and gives him a sad smile. “Ok,” she says and her voice shakes slightly. She reaches over and covers Jensen’s tight fist where it lies on the table between them with her hand and gives it a light squeeze. “Alright, I’ll help you.”

As Jensen breathes out the grip around Jared’s chest seems to let go as well and he breathes in deeply before giving Jensen a big smile. ‘See,’ he tries to tell him, ‘I told you it would be ok.’ Jensen gives him a small smile back but his eyes are still shadowed and when he turns back to face Jared’s mom again Jared sees drops of sweat running down the back of his neck. His shoulders are so tense Jared can see the muscles knotting under his thin t-shirt.

He quickly turns to his mom and says, “Mom, can we get something to eat? Before we start, I mean?”

She opens her mouth, no doubt to tell him he can very well fix his own sandwiches but he casts a glance to Jensen then back at her, hoping she’ll take the hint. She sighs and smiles softly before standing up. “Sure. Jensen, how does a turkey sandwich sound?”

He looks up at her startled. “What? Oh. Thank you.”

She smiles again and leaves them. After a moment the radio gets turned on in the kitchen and Jared sends her a silent ‘thank you’ and promises himself he’ll clean his room tomorrow without her having to ask him even once.

Jensen is still deep in thought, his knee bouncing and his teeth digging into his lower lip. Jared fights the urge to reach out and touch him, wishing he knew how to make him feel better.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty,” he says instead and hurries on when Jensen raises his head and looks at him, confused, “About going behind their back, I mean. You’re right, it’s your life, not theirs. They shouldn’t decide what you make of it.”

“I don’t feel guilty,” Jensen retorts annoyed then closes his eyes and looks away. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“I don’t feel guilty,” he repeats in a more quiet voice. “Not really. I feel... angry. And ashamed.”

Jared frowns. “Why? You didn’t do anything.”

Jensen sits silent for a while, staring down at the application papers spread out before them. When he finally starts speaking his voice is very low and carefully neutral.

“Imagine your parents...hiding you whenever there are guests. Like locking you up in your room and telling you to be quiet because...because they don’t want you to embarrass them. And you can hear them laughing downstairs and everything smells of this really good food and even if you know you’ll get some after the guests are gone it’s not the same, you know.” He hitches his breath. “It’s not the same.”

Jared swallows. His throat feels dry. Something tells him Jensen doesn’t have to use his imagination to know what that’s like. “No, it’s not.”

“Yeah, well... It’s like... This time there aren’t any leftovers because they finished it all and even gave your sister your dessert. And you realize that’s how it’s gonna be from now on. That’s all you’re going to get, to smell the food and never eat it. Because... Well, just because.”

He falls silent again. Jared can hear his mother moving around in the kitchen but with the radio on he doubts she can hear them. He wishes he knew what to say. He wishes he could offer Jensen his room and tell him he can live here, that he never has to go back if he doesn’t want to. He wishes...

“Well, I’m fucking starving!” Jensen suddenly exclaims, voice shaking with anger. “I want that steak and I want that gravy. Hell, I even want those goddamn green beans I don’t even like. I want it all. And I’m taking it, whatever they say, I don’t care. I’m eating it all and then I’m taking seconds. And thirds and fourths and finishing it up with the largest fucking piece of the goddamn pie and nothing they say or do is going to stop me from enjoying every single bite of it!”

He breathes out, making the sheets of paper flutter on the table. The silence in the room is so heavy Jared can hardly breathe. Finally he licks his lips nervously and straightens up.

“Well, now *I’m* fucking starving!” he says with a fake annoyed voice and Jensen jerks back, staring at him. For a moment Jared thinks maybe he only made things worse but then a smile breaks out on Jensen’s face and he starts laughing. Laughing so hard he stops being able to breathe and tears bubble up in his eyes and run down his face.

“What on earth is going on?” asks Jared’s mom from the doorway, two plates in hand, stacked with sandwiches.

They both look at her then at each other and simultaneously yell out, “Food!” before once again breaking into giggles.

She huffs. “You act like you’re starving,” she says and off they go again.

By the time they’ve calmed down and finished their sandwiches all the tension is gone from Jensen’s shoulders and when he looks over at Jared his eyes are bright and excited with all the possibilities Jared’s mom has laid out for him.

Jared smiles back and ignores the small voice inside his head pointing out to him that he’s helping Jensen figure out how to leave.



Christmas is... different. It’s the first time they celebrate without his grandma and Jensen should miss her presence at the table. The fact that he doesn’t makes him feel like a horrible person, especially because everyone else obviously does. His mom keeps looking over where the old woman should be sitting and tears glitter in her eyes. Then she looks over at Jensen and he feels her anger like a knife in his heart. Like she can feel his relief and hates him for it.

He wants to say, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry she’s gone because you all loved her. I’m sorry I can’t grieve for her. I’m sorry she never liked me but I can’t like her, not even now when she’s dead.”

Instead he passes his mother the potatoes without taking any himself. If she recognizes the gesture for what it is she doesn’t show it, just takes the bowl from his hand without a word.

He tries not to feel jealous when his sister gets a new bike. It feels like a token of freedom whereas the books he gets, however appreciated, are like added bricks to the wall shutting him in. He watches her ride it back and forth on the sidewalk by the street and feels absurdly pleased with himself when she doesn’t falter and fall, even when she’s showing off and letting go off the handles. See, he’s not evil. Not at all.

The Plan is going... okay. He can’t really control what happens any more than before but he’s beginning to be able to control *himself* to the point that he isn’t affecting everything around him as much.



Redirecting his thoughts only works to a certain extent, mostly to stop what he knows might happen – like with the pillows flying – because it’s already happened before. It’s more damage control than prevention. For *that* he needs a much more drastic approach.

It’s very much like when he was a kid at school, locking feelings and thoughts up deep inside himself until he all but disappeared. Except the purpose of the exercise makes all the difference. He isn’t doing this to hide, he’s doing it to keep people like Jared safe. That’s how he looks at it, that if he can interact with Jared without putting the boy in jeopardy then one day maybe he can step out and interact with the world without risking blowing it up or something.

To achieve that he has different levels for different thoughts and feelings. The more impact he’s afraid they might make, the further into his head he pushes them, until they’re only fleeting at the back of his mind. The ones he allows himself to really think about, even speak out loud, are the ones he deems mostly harmless. No wonder he always sounds so strange, not that Jared seems to mind.

It’s a good plan but it’s not perfect. Feelings and thoughts are after all not something a person can ever fully control, no matter what his parents might think. And so he sometimes... fails.

When he accidentally changes the weather, one supposed-to-be-rainy day, he manages to look surprised instead of terrified as they both gaze up at the sudden clear blue sky.

“Have you ever noticed how strange the weather is in this town?” Jared asks, shaking his head in bemusement. “I swear, it changes quicker than anywhere else I’ve been. Not that I’ve traveled much,” he adds awkwardly, “just a few places, but still. Think it’s some kind of global warming thing?”

“Maybe,” Jensen answers and fights the urge to *fix* it, back to the way it was. The weather changing abruptly once is strange, but changing twice within minutes? That’s way beyond anything he can explain.

“Some years ago, when I was nine or something, it started to snow in the middle of the summer. How odd is that?” Jared snorts. “Maybe it’s global cooling not warming we should be worried about. It was fun though. I love snow. I wish it would snow more often.”

Jensen laughs with him while desperately shoving all thoughts of snow as far back as he can reach.

They’re back at the coffeehouse, as often before, when he heats a girl’s tea up to boiling level just as she’s about to take a sip. He feels horrible about it afterwards – how often has he promised himself and his parents he’d never hurt anyone with what he does? – but she’d just made him so angry, pointing and laughing at Jared like that, just because he’d stammered a shaky ‘Hello’ as she walked by with her friends. Apparently she’s in his school, a year older, and this is not the first time Jared has

tried to talk to her, only to be snubbed and ridiculed. Still, she could have been seriously injured instead of just mildly burning the tip of her tongue.

Jensen files anger away with the other feelings he can't have in public.

Like fear. Fear is even more fragile. Jared steps off a curve and Jensen freezes time just long enough to pull him back before a car hits him. It's something he's never done before, didn't even know he could, and in his panic that he might never get it started again he stumbles and almost pushes Jared back in front of the car as it swooshes by. Jared just grabs hold of his arm and steps back, blinking dazedly before laughing the whole thing off with a, "Dude, that was close!"

It should amaze him that Jared never notices anything being off, not to the extent that he starts to question it anyway, but Jensen's learned by now that people in general mostly see what they expect to see and very easily ignore things that don't fit into their view of the world. Flowers blooming in front of their eyes are a beautiful surprise but not unnatural. Scents suddenly appearing out of nowhere warrant a glance around and a shrug of dismissal, nothing more. Clothes and walls and even hair changing color from one moment to another is a matter of misperception, that's all.

He can't help sometimes feeling frustrated by Jared's lack of attention. No matter how terrified he is of Jared finding out about him, the need to share it with him is sometimes overwhelming. He wants Jared to ask, "Did you see that? Wait, did you *do* that?" so he can look him in the eye and say, "Yes. I did." Wants Jared to look at him with the same kind of wonder as he did in his vision, like he's not bad and wrong and weird but something wonderful. Something unique and amazing.

One day, he thinks to himself. One day.



The letter from Juilliard arrives at the beginning of February. Jensen put Jared's address as his own, something Jared's mother was very reluctant to agree to. She still thinks he should talk to his parents. That he should try and make them see how important this is to him and his future. He says he will but Jared's pretty sure he's lying.

He sits on Jared's bed with the envelope in his hands, just staring at it while Jared can hardly keep from bouncing with excitement. He wants this so much for Jensen he forgets for a moment what it will mean to him, to their friendship and his lessons, if the answer is yes.

"C'mon," he says, eyes bright. "Look how thick it is. No way that is a rejection letter. C'mon! Open it!"

Jensen swallows and slits it open. He takes out the thick bundle and bends it straight, picking out the top letter. He sits silent and reads. Then he reads it again. Then he hands the letter over to Jared and lets himself fall back on the bed, just breathing.

Jared reads it quickly and whoops out loud. "I knew it!" he shouts and throws himself down on the bed, looping one arm around Jensen's neck and pulling him in for a hug. "I knew they'd want you! I knew it!" he repeats and laughs.

"They need me to audition," Jensen says in a flat voice. "In New York. Next month."

"I know! It's... Oh."

He loosens his hold but doesn't move his arm away and Jensen lets his head drop back, Jared's arm supporting his neck like a pillow. The short hairs tickle Jared's skin and even if he wants to turn on his side so he can read Jensen better he doesn't but lies on his back beside him instead and stares up at the ceiling.

"How you gonna get to New York?" he finally asks quietly.

"I'm not." Jensen squeezes his eyes tighter shut. "I can't. I can't... Fuck!"

This time Jared does turn until he's looking down at Jensen. He looks pale except for red spots on his cheeks and Jared wants nothing more than to pull him in for a hug again. His arm is still trapped under Jensen's head although the pressure is on his forearm instead of bicep now and he can feel his skin heating up as Jensen's face flushes red with disappointment. "Jen..."

"No. It's over." He hitches his breath. "I'm such a fucking idiot."

"No, wait. We'll think of something. Jensen, don't worry."

Jensen shakes his head. "I can't believe how goddamn stupid I am. I knew it, I just... I didn't think they'd say yes so I never... Fuck."

"You're swearing," Jared points out and Jensen sighs.

"Sorry."

"No, I didn't mean... It's good. It means you're... yourself. I mean, you're saying what *you* feel and not being who *they* want you to be."

Jensen cracks one eye open, frowning. "What?"

Jared bites his lip. Why is he always so bad at expressing himself?

"Don't say you can't go," he says. "That's *their* thinking. Say 'I'm going, goddammit!' Believe it. Because you are, Jen. Don't care how you're going to get there but you're fucking going!"

A smile tugs at the corner of Jensen's lip. "You're amazing, you know that?"

Jared can feel himself blushing. Why does Jensen keep saying that? He must know it's not true. "I'm not. I'm just not gonna let you give up without a fight."

Jensen's smile slips away and he sighs. "I wish it were that simple, Jared. I really do. But I can't. I don't have any money, I don't have a car... It's not like I can walk there."

"I can ask mom..." Jared starts but Jensen sits up and glares at him, horrified.

"No!"

"I know she'd want to help."

Jensen shakes his head. "She's helped too much already. I can't ask her to... I can't."

"Ok," Jared reluctantly agrees. "But don't say you can't go. You can. We just have to figure out how."

Jensen gives him a sad smile but he doesn't object. Later, when they're down in the basement, he plays a melody so sad Jared starts crying under his blanket and when he falls asleep he dreams of the grand piano from the movie they saw, sinking to the bottom of the ocean. When his mother shakes him gently awake an hour later, Jensen is long gone.

They don't mention it the next time they meet but Jared doesn't forget. Oh no, he doesn't. He's going to get Jensen to New York, somehow.

The answer comes a couple of weeks later.

"Here," he says and hands Jensen a piece of paper.

Jensen takes it and turns it around, raising his eyebrow at the single phone number written in Jared's childish handwriting, next to the name Chris. "What's this?"

"That's who's gonna take you to New York," Jared says, unable to keep the grin back any longer. "I told you I'd figure it out!" he adds triumphantly.

"What?" Jensen stares at him and then down at the piece of paper in his hand. "Who is this?"

"Chris. He's in a band. He's going to New York to play at some bar the day before your audition. It's some country band, I don't know. Who cares? He's going to New York! He said you can tag along if you want."

Jensen blinks. "But... I can't just..."

"Yes, you can," Jared says firmly. "Jensen, you can. This is your life, remember? Your choice. Say it with me, 'I'm going to New York, goddammit!' Say it!"

"Jared..."

"Say it!"

“I’m going to New York, goddammit,” Jensen says slowly and then he looks up and smiles. It’s so brilliant Jared swears the whole room lights up. “I’m going to fucking New York, goddammit!”

“Hell yeah, you are!” He laughs and Jensen joins him, laughing almost hysterically.

“I’m going to goddamn fucking New York!” he shouts and then grabs Jared and squeezes all air out of him. “Thank you! You... You are so... God, I love you!”

Jared laughs and hugs him tighter, shoving all selfish thoughts as far back as he can. He’ll cry about losing Jensen later.



Jensen turns eighteen on March 1<sup>st</sup> and Jared gives him a beautiful handmade folder, filled with blank music sheet.

“For your music,” he says and blushes. “I know you’re... You’re always humming stuff. I thought maybe you’d like to write some of it down.”

Jensen strokes over the elegant design on the cover, the whirls and floral imprint of black velvet on a red background soft under his fingertips. He’s too overwhelmed to speak and in the end just nods and puts it reverently on the bed but when he looks up Jared is turning away, tense and flushed. Jensen doesn’t know what to say, how to thank him. How to make Jared understand just how much it means to him, this gift, this vote of confidence.

“Jared,” he says, his voice hoarse, and Jared turns to him, lips thin.

“I know, it’s stupid.” He laughs awkwardly. “I just didn’t know...”

“It’s perfect,” Jensen says warmly and before he can talk himself out of it he takes a step forward and pulls Jared into a hug. “Thank you.”

Jared breathes into his neck, a warm puff of air, and hesitantly lays a palm at the small of Jensen’s back, pressing him a little closer. “You really like it?” he asks unsure and Jensen can’t help but laugh, clutching him even tighter in delight.

“Dude, I love it. It’s *awesome!*”

He gives a snorting Jared yet another squeeze before releasing him, both looking flushed and grinning like idiots. Jensen wants to say more but he can’t find the words. Instead he says, “Cake?” and laughs when Jared’s eyes light up.



As he hands Jared a big slice of chocolate cake, their fingers touch under the plate. The heat from Jared's fingers kisses Jensen's fingertips and an odd feeling of happiness moves up his bloodstream and into his heart. Like *his* fingers had told *Jared's* fingers what he himself can't say out loud and Jared had answered, 'Yes, me too.' As Jared digs into the cake with a gusto that belongs more to a five year old child than the almost fourteen year old teenager he is, Jensen sits dazed and watches him, too happy to eat.

That night when he lies in bed, staring up at the celestial constellations playing upon the ceiling, he rubs his fingers together and tiny stars spark and join the ones above. He can still feel Jared's breath brushing his ear and the warmth of his handprint, pulsating like a heartbeat on the skin of his back. Can feel the depth of Jared's emotions on his fingertips, emotions he probably doesn't know he has or maybe they haven't been born yet. But they will be. He's sure of that now, they will be.

Jensen closes his eyes and the music flows in him, louder and louder, until the windows fly open and the neighbor's dog starts to bark. He doesn't care, not even when his dad begins banging on the door, telling him to cut it out. He feels happy. Really, really happy. And hopeful. He's going to New York in four days. He's taking a step toward his own future. Everything is working out to his benefit, just this once.

"What is this?"

Jensen looks at the papers scattered across the kitchen table. She must have been going through his drawers, something he didn't know she did. His heart starts beating faster in his chest and he has to force himself to not grab the documents and run up to his room. Instead he swallows and meets her eyes.

"I think you know," he says as calmly as he can.

He can see her anger like a red halo around her head, sparks flying and ash drifting down to settle in her hair. She's frightening but he's not backing down. Not this time.

“You know you can’t go,” she says, voice shaking. “You know that. You’re not... fit. You...”

“I’m doing fine, mom,” he cuts in. “You know I am.”

“Here maybe but out there? Without us to help you? No. You can’t. It’s not an option.”

He grits his teeth. “I can and I’m going. This is what I want to do.”

“It’s not yours to decide alone, Jensen. Your dad...” she starts but he cuts her off again.

“Dad wants me to be able to leave one day. To make something of myself. Well, I figured out how to do that and I know where I want to go.”

“To college? To *Juilliard*?” She laughs coldly. “Jensen, don’t be stupid. You can’t go to *Juilliard*!”

“No?” he says and grabs the letter. “See!” he says and shakes it in her face. “I sent them a tape and they want me to come for an official audition! *They* think I can get in. *They* think I’m worth it.”

Her eyes widen. “They want you to...?” She gets over her shock soon enough, shaking her head in denial. “*Juilliard* is in New York, Jensen. Not next door, *New York*! How are you going to get there? How are you going to pay for it? You have no money, Jensen!”

“And why is that, mom?” he asks through his teeth, determined not to cry. “Mac has a college fund, but me, you never set a penny aside for me. And Jared’s piano tuition, where is that? Shouldn’t *that* have been mine? I worked for that money!”

“I bought you that piano!” she spits back. “I sold my grandmother’s sewing machine, for *you*! And this is how you repay me?”

“You want me to pay you back for the piano?” he asks incredulous. “Fine, I’ll pay you back. Every goddamn penny.” He fishes into his pocket for a quarter he’d found on the sidewalk that morning and throws it on the table. “Here, consider this the first down payment.”

The slap across his face shouldn’t come as a surprise, but it does and he reels back, staring at her in shock. Her face is flushed and she’s cradling her hand, the palm red. He can only imagine what his cheek looks like. It feels like it’s on fire.

“Mom...” he whispers and she slaps him again, tears burning in her eyes.

“You stupid, arrogant, selfish boy! It’s all about you, isn’t it? What *you* want. You’re not safe. Why can’t you see that? Why can’t you think of anyone else but yourself?”

His mouth opens and he feels a sting from where his lower lip must have split. “Do you even hear what you’re saying?” he asks, voice shaking. “My whole life has been about thinking of other people and *never* of myself.”

He breathes in, gathering strength and when he speaks again his voice is stronger, making the glasses clink in the cupboards. “And you know what, mom? I’m sick of it! I want my own life. I want out of here. I want to be someone. I don’t care what you say, I’m going.”

“To college?” she repeats and laughs, half-hysterically. “You couldn’t even go to elementary school!”

He clenches his jaw. “I’m older now. I’m not a kid anymore. I can handle it.”

“That’s just it! You *can’t* handle it! You’re like a loose cannon, Jensen! You’re a danger to everyone!”

“What is it you think I will do, mom?” he snaps. “Make the sun shine? Grow flowers? What? What the hell do you think I’m going to do, mom?”

“You could *kill someone* like you killed your grandm-!”

She stops abruptly but it’s too late. Jensen stares at her, feeling suddenly so sick to his stomach he wants to double over and puke, right there in the middle of their kitchen.

“*What?* I didn’t... God, mom, you really think I *killed* Nana?” he whispers. “You actually think me capable of...” His knees shake and he fumbles for the chair, sitting down hard. “Jesus. How can you...?”

His mother’s face is flushed, eyes darting nervously from Jensen to the door, as if she’s planning her escape route. If anything it makes him feel even sicker. “She was fine and then she was dead. Right after she said... she said...”

Jensen swallows. “She called me a Devil’s child. I remember. Mom, she’d been calling me that since I was five. You really think I *killed* her? For that?”

She refuses to look at him. “You were looking right at her when she had her heart attack,” she says, the words stale as if she’s said them over and over in her head many times.

He blinks, trying to clear his blurry vision. “I’m looking right at *you* now, mom,” he points out, his voice shaking. She flinches and he has to bite the insides of his cheeks to keep from screaming. “You think I’m trying to kill *you*? Do you really think that’s the kind of person I am? Is that...?” He’s starting to tremble, hands twitching where they grip the table. “Is that why you’ve been like this?”

Her shoulders slump, like she’s finally grasping the enormity of her words. “I don’t know! God, Jensen, I don’t know. I just know you scare the living death out of me.”



He gets slowly to his feet, still holding on to the table since his legs feel like rubber. “I never meant to scare you, mom. But I didn’t ask for this. I never asked for this!”

She stiffens, her anger returning. “But you don’t refuse it either. You don’t go to church, you don’t say your prayers. You do *nothing* to fight it!”

He stares at her in disbelief, jaw dropping. “I do *nothing*? God, mom! Do you have any idea what it would be like if I *didn’t* fight it? *Do you?*”

She just stares stubbornly at a spot to his right, refusing to meet his eyes.

“I fight so hard, mom, every day. I haven’t taken a single fear-free breath since I was old enough to know what fear was. I can’t think or feel or say *anything* without worrying what might happen. *That* is my life, mom. *This* is my life. I am like this. It’s not something I can choose not to be, mom. I can’t.”

His mother pinches her lips tight and shakes her head. “Sometimes I wish…” she starts but stops and turns away. It’s too late, he can see it, as clear as if she’d said the words out loud. ‘Sometimes I wish you’d never been born,’ she’s thinking. ‘Sometimes I wish you would just go away and I could forget you ever existed.’

“Is that what you want, mom?” he says, hating how broken he sounds. “You want me to disappear so you can pretend you never had a son?”

“Don’t talk like that,” she says but the truth whispers into his ear. ‘Yes,’ it says. ‘God help me but yes, that is what I want most of all.’

He stands still, breathing in-out, in-out. In a way he knew but at the same time he never believed it, couldn’t believe it. She’s his mother, his mama. She’s supposed to love him, to protect him, to stand by him no matter what.

“I’m going,” he says, voice shaking. “I have a ride, on Friday. I’m going to New York, mom, and nothing you say or do is going to stop me.”

She swings around, eyes flashing. “You’re not going anywhere! You hear me? Don’t you even dare thinking about it!”

He breathes out. “You never intended me to leave, did you? Your plan was to keep me locked up in this house until I died.” With trembling hands he gathers up the papers before turning to the door. “Well, consider your plan a failure, mom, because I’m getting out of here the first chance I get!”

He slams the kitchen door shut behind him just as she yells, “I’ll break the piano if you do! You hear me, Jensen? You even think of leaving this house and I’ll smash that goddamn piano with my bare hands!”

The last of his restraint snaps. All the light bulbs in the house explode, fine glass raining over him as he runs up the stairs and into the studio. He hardly registers Mac in the doorway to her own room, staring at him with wide terrified eyes before the door slams shut behind him. He can’t breathe. The walls of the room close in on

him, squeezing the air out of his lungs. Outside he hears the rumble of thunder, rapidly approaching. Soon the house is swallowed by the storm, rain and wind slashing against the windows and the lightning flashing through the darkness the only light he can see.

‘I can’t do this. I can’t be here. I can’t live like this. Help me. Please, God, *help me!*’

A crack and a thunder is all the answer he gets.



“Jensen?”

...

“Jensen, open up.”

...

...

“Jensen, I’ll break down the door if I have to.”

...

“Jensen, c’mon. We need to talk. I know you want to go, kiddo, but... New York? It’s too far away, you got to understand that. Jensen?”

...

“Jensen, you have to stop. You’re scaring everyone.”

...

...

“Jensen, please. Please, son. Don’t do this. Please.”

...

...

“Jensen, Jared is here.”



When Jared rings the bell, soaking wet from the short run from the car, Mrs. Ackles barely cracks the door open before telling him he can't come in. He just stares at her, blinking rain from his eyes, and then stupidly says, "But it's Wednesday!"

She shakes her head and closes the door in his face. Utterly bewildered he turns around to find his mother's car gone. As he stares out into the storm another lightning cracks across the sky and he jumps, heart hammering in his chest. Is he really supposed to walk home in this crazy weather? It's been like this for two days now and his mother had only agreed to drive him over because he insisted he had to see Jensen before he leaves for New York in two days.

He's just about to sit down on the porch and wait the hour and a half it will take before his mom comes to pick him up again when he hears yelling from inside the house and then the door bursts open. Jensen's dad comes running out, stopping short when he sees Jared standing there, looking scared and frankly a bit pissed off.

A moment later he stands dripping water on the floor in the hallway, trying to dry his hair with the towel Mr. Ackles gave him while pretending not to hear Jensen's parents argue.

"Alan! What are you doing?" she yelled when they'd stepped in and Jared had wondered if maybe it was just better to brave the weather than get in the middle of this, whatever it is.

"No, Donna. Save it. The boy has a lesson and the boy is getting a lesson."

"And who is going to tutor him when-?"

Jensen's dad cuts her off grimly. "I already told Jensen Jared was here and he opened his door."

It seems an odd thing to say and the look Mr. Ackles gives his wife is even more bewildering. It must mean something to her because she doesn't say anything in response, just turns away and stalks into the kitchen, lips thin.

Jared doesn't know what to think. He's used to things often being tense at Jensen's house but nothing like this.

"Is something wrong?" he asks hesitantly. As much as he wants to see Jensen he really doesn't want to intrude on any family drama, whatever it is about. Especially not when it seems so serious.

Mr. Ackles take a deep breath then turns to him with a strained smile. "Nothing you need to worry about, son." He takes the towel from Jared's hand and points him to the kitchen. "Jensen needs a minute. Do you want something to drink? Soda maybe? Or a sandwich?"

He wants to yell at him to just tell him if there's something wrong with Jensen, but instead he swallows and shakes his head. "I'm ok," he says. "I ate before I came."

“Of course.” Again that polite smile, a copy of the one Jensen uses when he talks to strangers. “But a growing boy like you can always add a little.”

He’s pushed into the kitchen and is grateful to see that Jensen’s mom is no longer there. He spots her through the door to the living room, staring out the window into the garden. Which is when he realizes it’s finally stopped raining. About damn time.

“Here you go.”

He accepts the bottle of Coke from Mr. Ackles hand, smiling awkwardly as he nods his thanks.

“You’re a nice boy, Jared,” the man says, almost apologetically. “You’ve been a good friend to Jensen.”

Something about the way that’s worded makes Jared’s stomach turn. “He is a good friend to me too,” he answers firmly. “He’s a great guy.”

Jensen’s dad gives him another painful smile. “I’m glad you think so,” he says and anger sparks inside Jared’s chest.

“I don’t think so. I *know* he is. He is the most wonderful person I know.”

Jensen’s dad closes his eyes and sighs before opening them again, fixing his eyes on him. “That’s... great. But you have friends your own age, right? Jensen is a bit older than you and...”

Jared stares at him. “Why are you saying this? What happened? What’s going on?”

“Calm down, son. I’m just...”

“He’s my friend. I don’t care if he’s older than me. What does it matter? We’re friends! You don’t want us to be friends anymore? Why?”

“I’m just trying to...” Ackles sighs. “There are things you don’t know...”

“Dad!”

They both look up to find Jensen standing in the doorway. He looks pale, with black circles under his eyes and his lips are stained with bruises, like he’s bit through them again and again. His hair is wet and the collar of his rumbled t-shirt is stained dark like he’d put his head under the faucet. He smells of deodorant covered sweat and he’s gripping the doorway so tight his knuckles are icy white.

His dad stakes a step closer, looking pained and tired. “Jensen...” he starts but Jensen cuts him off with a wave of his hand.

“Not now.” His voice is hoarse. “Jared, are you coming?”

Jared nods and puts away the bottle of Coke he hasn't so much as sipped from. He follows Jensen as he walks slowly up the stairs, gripping the railing for support. Is it the drugs again? Is that what happened, that Jensen was 'bad' or got 'upset'? He staggers when he reaches the second floor but when Jared reaches out for him Jensen shrugs him off. It makes Jared feel ridiculously hurt.

"I'm sorry," he says as the door closes behind them. "I didn't mean to yell at your dad."

Jensen shakes his head, not answering. He looks exhausted and frustrated as he walks over to the drawers containing his sheet music and pulls out the top one. Whatever he's looking for he doesn't seem to find it and soon the floor is littered with white and yellowed pages filled with musical notes. Most of them are photocopies but Jared spots a few handwritten pages in between that he can't help staring at, wondering if that's what Jensen's been humming.

A loud bang jerks him out of his thoughts and he looks up to find the first drawer slammed shut and another being pulled open, its contents surrendering to the same fruitless search, pieces of paper fluttering across the room like white doves. Jared bites his lip, feeling superfluous and unwelcome for the first time since he started coming here. Maybe he should have gone home after all.

"He's right though," Jensen suddenly blurts out after what seems like an eternity of silent tension. "You don't know us, Jared. There are things..." He stops, jaw tense and lips thin. "It's not exactly easy, you know, being related to me."

The second drawer slams shut, half its content on the floor, and Jensen pulls out the third drawer, squatting to more easily be able to shuffle through it.

Jared doesn't know what to say. From what he's seen at least Mac seems to handle it a lot better being Jensen's sister, than Jensen does being himself.

"I just..." he begins but hesitates. "I mean... I *like* you. I think you're a great person, like really nice, and everyone treats you like you're not. Like there's something wrong with you. And I just don't get it. I guess... I guess I expected them to be different, being your family and all."

He glances nervous at Jensen. He's still crouching in front of the drawer but he's stopped searching and has gone completely still. He looks small, his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. Jared wants to go over and... something. Put a hand on Jensen's shoulder maybe or kneel by his side and pull him into a hug. There's just something about Jensen that makes Jared want to hug him, like all the time. Like his arms recognize someone who's starved for physical contact and they want to make up for it. Jared takes a step closer, then stops. Maybe Jensen is mad at *him*. Then he probably won't appreciate being squished by an overemotional teenager.

"Jensen?" he asks instead, taking another step closer. "Are you okay?"

"Do you believe in destiny?" Jensen asks, so quiet Jared has to strain his ears to hear him. "Do you think we have a path already drawn out for us that we have to follow?"

Jared frowns. "I don't know. No, I don't think so. I think we make our own path."

"You don't think things happen for a reason?"

Jared ponders that for a moment. "Sure, sometimes. But that doesn't mean our whole future is set in stone or everything that happens to us is up to someone else."

"Like God?" The capital G is clearly audible. "You don't believe in God?"

Jared shrugs. "Sort of. I just kinda doubt God has time to plan out every single detail of everyone's life. He probably has better things to do. Important stuff. Like rotating the Earth or something."

Jensen nods, more to himself though than Jared's words it seems. "Do you believe in the Devil?" he asks, his voice hitching on the last syllable. "Or... or Hell?"

Jared shakes his head. "No. I don't." Jensen seems to shrink even further but whether from relief or disappointment, Jared can't tell. "Do you?"

"I don't want to," Jensen says quietly, "but sometimes... It would explain some things."

"What things?"

"Me."

Jared feels suddenly cold inside. "What are you talking about? Jensen, what's going on?"

Jensen laughs but there's nothing merry about it. "You know, my grandma, she used to call me a Devil's child." He flushes pink, a drop of sweat running down from his temple and to his jaw where it stops, clinging to his skin. "Sometimes... I think she may have been right."

Jared stares at him. "Why? Why would she call you that?"

Jensen shakes his head. "It's not important."

"Jensen, of course it's important. Hey." He takes another step closer, laying a hand on Jensen's shoulder and he finally looks up. His eyes are glittering, like they're so used to holding back tears that they don't even know how to let them fall anymore. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Jensen swallows. His Adam's apple bobs like a rubber ball in his throat. "I think ... this is our last lesson," he says hoarsely and Jared's heart stops.

"What?"

"Mom says... She doesn't think I should..." He clears his throat but the words still won't come any easier. "She has concerns," he finally says, looking away. "And my

dad thinks they might be valid.” The words don’t seem to fit his mouth, like he’s reciting something he can’t get out of his head.

“Concerns? What kind of concerns?”

“That I might... That...”

Before he has time to elaborate the door suddenly bursts open and Mac is standing in the doorway. Jensen jerks away from Jared’s hand and turns his head, as if to hide his expression from her. Jared just wants to yell at her for interrupting something he feels is more important than anything they’ve ever talked about. She stares at him and he glares back, daring her to say something.

She doesn’t, not to him. Instead she closes the door softly behind her and then walks over to Jensen and kneels by his side, putting her arms around him the way Jared wishes he had done.

“Jenny,” she says softly and rubs her nose into his hair. “Hey.”

“What are you doing here?” Jensen asks but he doesn’t sound annoyed. More exasperated, like he had been trying to avoid her and now been caught. “Aren’t you supposed to be at practice?”

“The weather cleared up so I came home to see you.” She kisses the top of his head, eyes closed. “I was so worried,” she whispers and hugs him tighter. “I was worried sick about you.”

“I’m okay,” he mumbles. “Please, Mac. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“She didn’t mean it, you got to know that” she says without conviction. “Sometimes she just says stuff without thinking.”

Her words make Jensen’s breath hitch and she pulls him in closer. It’s weird, watching that small and slender girl comfort her big brother like she’s the one hovering on the brink of adulthood, not Jensen. Jensen who seems to be shrinking in her arms, curling in on himself like a scared little child. His shoulders shake and Jared realizes with a bang that he’s crying.

“She can’t take it away from me,” he finally croaks out. “She can’t. It’s all I’ve got.”

For a moment Jared is confused as to what he’s talking about but then he notices the way Jensen’s stroking the sheet music on the floor with the palm of his hand and he looks at Mac in horror.

“They want to take away his piano?” he says incredulous and Jensen makes a soft sound like he’s choking. “No. They can’t do that. Why? Why would they want to do that?”

Mac looks up at him, almost surprised, as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Haven't you figured out anything?" she asks, making him feel like he's the dumbest person on earth.

"Figured what out?" he asks stupidly.

"That..."

"No!"

She stumbles as Jensen pushes her violently away. "Shut up, Mac."

"Jen, if there ever was anyone you should tell..." she starts, eyes pleading, but Jensen just shakes his head.

"No!"

"Why?"

'Yes, why?' Jared wants to echo. It hurts, more than anything, realizing Jensen doesn't trust him. That Jensen's sister, who probably doesn't even *like* Jared, trusts him better than Jensen does.

"He's normal. And happy." Jensen's breath hitches. His eyes are fixed on his sister, like she's all he can see and Jared isn't even there. "He's gonna be... he's gonna be magnificent. Do you understand, Mac? He's going to be an amazing person and I'm not gonna ruin that."

"Maybe he becomes an amazing person because of you," she says gently. "Because of you and what you are."

"No. Nonono." He shakes his head furiously, eyes closed. "He's too young. I can't... He's just a kid."

"I'm just a kid, Jensen. You too. We're all just kids. That doesn't make us dumb."

"I want to know," Jared says out loud. "I want... You said you would tell me. One day. You said... I'm asking now. I want to know." They both stare at him and he can feel himself blushing. "I know I'm younger than you but she's right, I'm not dumb."

"Jared..."

"Please, Jen." He's not gonna cry. Whatever it is that's so awful they don't think he can handle it, he won't cry. Oh God, what if Jensen's got cancer or something? Maybe he's dying. Please don't let him be dying. "We're friends, right? You said we were. Friends tell each other everything."

Jensen's shoulders slump and he closes his eyes, breathing deeply. He's still clutching his sister's shoulder, the fabric of her t-shirt crumpled in his fist.



“Jen?” she says, running her fingers through his still damp hair. “Listen to him. Don’t listen to them. It’s not their life, it’s yours.”

“You got to go now. Please, Mac.”

“Ok.” She gives him a last hug and stands up. There are tears in her eyes when she turns to Jared. “Just listen and don’t freak, ok?”

He nods dumbly and waits until she’s closed the door behind her before turning to Jensen. Jensen who is still sitting on the floor, staring blindly at the musical sheets all around him.

“How about we get this sorted first?” Jared offers and kneels on the floor, gathering and stacking the paper sheets. After a while Jensen joins him, still not looking up. They collect all the sheets in uneven stacks, different pieces and composers thrown together.

“I’ll sort them out later,” Jensen mumbles in a hoarse voice and starts shoving them into the drawers. “Doesn’t matter. None of it matters.”

“Hey,” Jared says gently but Jensen doesn’t seem to hear him, just keeps mumbling in a detached voice, more like he’s talking to himself than Jared.

“Even if I tell you it ain’t gonna change a thing. They say I’m getting out of hand. That I need to be looked after. Not here, somewhere else. Then I can’t do this anymore. No more piano lessons. No more... you. They say I can’t. They say.... Doesn’t matter. I can’t stay here anyway. Not after what she said. Not when she thinks... How can she think that? How can she think I did that?”

“Did what? Jensen, you’re not making any sense.”

Jensen shakes his head. “I don’t care what they say. I’m not going somewhere like that. I’m not. College, I’m going to college. I’m going to Juilliard. I’m eighteen, I can do what I want. Don’t have to listen to them. It’s my life. *My* life! Not theirs, *mine*! I decide, it’s my decision. And I... I say no. *No!*”

“Jensen, you’re scaring me.”

Jensen finally looks up, gazing at him with an almost manic look in his eyes. “I would *never* hurt you!” he says heatedly. “I would never hurt anyone but most of all not you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m scared for you, not of you.”

Jensen blinks. “Oh.” He looks away again, biting his lip. A drop of blood springs up from one of the older bruises and he licks it away with the tip of his tongue, not even flinching even if it must sting. “Sorry.”

“Don’t. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Jensen stands silent for a while but then he says, “Me.” He shakes his head. “That’s what they say, what everyone says. That I’m wrong and weird. That I need to be normal like everyone else. That I shouldn’t... But it’s not like I chose this. I didn’t choose this. But it’s still me. It’s what I am. And they want me to just... get rid of it. Even if I could... It’s me! It’s who I am! Without it I’m just... I’m not *me* anymore.”

He stops, heaving for breath.

Jared swallows, the cogs in his brain turning like crazy, trying to make sense of Jensen’s words. “Is it...” he begins then stops, feeling terribly awkward. But Jensen isn’t offering anything, still lost in his own thoughts, and he has to know. “Do you like, you know, boys? Is it that?”

Jensen looks at him startled and for a moment Jared thinks he’s gonna be angry but then he suddenly bursts out laughing, loud guffaws of laughter that sound more like sobs. Jared smiles hesitantly, still not sure if what he said was right or wrong or just plain stupid.

“Oh God, I haven’t even told them *that*,” Jensen wheezes out when he finally gets his breath back. “Mom’s gonna flip!”

“Yeah? So you are...?” Jared smiles and raises his eyebrows, trying to look cool.

Jensen sucks in his breath, blinking furiously to clear his eyes. “Maybe. Who knows? It’s not important right now,” he says and waves his hand dismissively then suddenly seems to catch himself and gazes wide-eyed at Jared. “It’s not, right?” he asks in an almost desperate voice. “To you, I mean. If I am?”

Jared shakes his head. “No.” It isn’t, even if it puzzles him a little. He only knows gay people from movies and TV and Jensen doesn’t look much like them, even if he is stupidly pretty. “Of course not.”

“Thank you”

Jared’s not sure what Jensen is thanking him for but he nods anyway. “But if that’s not it,” he asks after a while when Jensen just stays silent, “then what is?”

Jensen raises his head, blinking slowly as he sways slightly on his feet. He looks absolutely exhausted, his eyes are rimmed red and even more bloodshot from his crying earlier and he’s so pale his skin is tinted grey. It’s like now his rant is over he doesn’t know how to proceed, like it’s too much work to continue talking. Jared suddenly gets the feeling he’s being stupid. That he should have been able to read out of Jensen’s words what was going on but all it did was leave him more confused.

When Jensen stumbles over to the couch Jared doesn’t hesitate but follows him and they sit down on opposite ends. Jared pulls his legs under him, curling up in the corner while Jensen pulls up his knees and wraps his arms around them, resting his cheek on top. It only takes a heartbeat before his eyes start drifting close. He sits like that for a long time, so still Jared is starting to think he’s already asleep.

“Have you ever thought maybe there was something more out there than you can see?” he says finally in a voice so low Jared has to strain his ears to hear him. “More than you can explain?”

Jared frowns. “Are you talking about God again?”

Jensen smiles but it’s tired. “No, not God.” He goes silent again. A small jerk shakes his body suddenly, then another and another and Jared realizes he’s fighting to keep awake but his body is giving up, too exhausted to keep going.

“Jen...?”

“M sorry,” he mumbles. “Tired. Haven’t slept in two days.”

“We can talk later,” Jared offers, even if he wants to shake Jensen awake and demand that he tells him everything, right now! “It’s okay, Jensen, really.”

“I want to...tell you...” He sighs, a deep exhale of breath. “About me.” He sighs again and his arms slip away from his knees as he sinks into the pillows.

“Jensen?”

There’s no answer. After a few moments of hesitation Jared reaches out and touches Jensen’s hand where it lays slack by his side, fingers slightly curled. He doesn’t move. Jared leans back again and sits watching him, the slow rise and fall of his chest. He looks so young in his sleep, even younger than Jared. Like whatever is weighing him down only lets go when he’s sleeping, finally allowing him to be the carefree teenager he should be.

Jared must have fallen asleep himself because the next thing he knows he’s being shaken gently awake and he opens his eyes just in time to see Mr. Ackles carrying Jensen out of the piano room and across the hall. Jared wants to object, wants to say he has to stay there and wait until Jensen wakes up, but his mother is looking so serious as she tells him they really need to go now, that he doesn’t dare. He catches a glance inside Jensen’s room as they enter the hallway, the room he’s never been allowed to see, and is struck by its prison-like appearance. If he didn’t know better he’d think no one had ever slept in there, let alone lived there. Bare walls and hardly any furniture. Locks on all drawers. As Jensen’s dad throws the covers aside to put Jensen in bed a grey-washed rabbit falls to the floor, arms and legs sprawled awkwardly.

“Wait.” Jared pulls away from his mother and runs inside the room, picking the rabbit up from the floor.

“Son...” Mr. Ackles says weary but Jared only glares at him then puts the rabbit on the pillow beside Jensen’s head.

“You’re never too old for a friend,” he says and lets his fingers touch the tips of Jensen’s hair before reluctantly turning around and following his mother out.



“Hi, it’s Jared...”

“I’m sorry but Jensen can’t come to the phone right now.” The voice sounds empty, emotionless, and Jared wants to reach through the phone and shake her. What the hell is going on?

“Then can you please ask him again to call me? I just want to talk to him.”

“Goodbye.”

Jared glares at the phone in frustration and then throws it on his bed with a groan.

“No luck?”

He looks up to find his mother standing in the doorway. She is smiling but it’s strained and there’s a worried look in her eyes.

“It’s been almost a week! And Chris said Jensen never showed up so he had to leave without him. Which means Jensen never got to the audition! And tomorrow is Wednesday and if he’s really stopped tutoring me... I just want to know why!” He bites his lip, gnawing at it in frustration. “I just want to know if he’s ok.”

She comes in and sits on his bed, reaching out to brush his hair back from his forehead. “Honey, maybe you should just let it go. I know you like him but he obviously has some problems and maybe it will just be better if we find you another teacher.”

He glares at her angry. “God, mom. I don’t care about the lessons. I’m worried about Jensen. He’s my friend. I’m his best friend. His only friend. He’s never had a friend before. I’m his first friend and... I let him down.”

She sighs. “I understand you feel that way but maybe he just needs to work out his problems first.”

“They’re not *his* problems, they’re *their* problems,” Jared says frustrated. Damn, he wishes Jensen had had the time to tell him what was wrong before he passed out. “He’s fine. Everyone acts as if there’s something wrong with him when *they’re* the ones that are wrong!”

She sits silent while he stares angrily at the floor. “Sometimes,” she says quiet, “people’s problems aren’t visible to everyone. You’ve only known him a short time, Jared. Maybe there are things about him you don’t know.”

That stings because she’s right. There are things he doesn’t know, things he should know but Jensen has been keeping from him. And when he finally was ready to tell him he was too exhausted to stay awake. Or maybe he fell asleep so he wouldn’t

have to tell Jared? Is that it? Is it Jensen's own choice not to talk to him? Is he telling his parents not to let Jared through?

"I don't care," he says stubbornly. "He's still my friend. Even if there is something wrong with him. Which there *isn't!*" he adds, as firm as he can.

"Alright, dear." She gives him a condescending smile that has him gritting his teeth. "If we haven't heard anything tomorrow I'll drive you over there and we'll see what's going on. Ok?"

Jared doesn't answer, just stares at the phone. 'Please,' he thinks. 'Please call. Please talk to me. Please just tell me you're alright.'

The phone rings.

For a moment they both stare in shock at the phone where it lies at the foot of the bed, flashing Jensen's number across the small screen. Then Jared's mom smiles and stands up.

"Told you so," she says and walks to the door. "Now answer before he hangs up."

Jared almost falls off the bed in his hurry to retrieve the phone from the other side. "Hello?" he says, too loud and nervous. "Jensen?"

"I'm sorry." The voice on the other end is so low Jared can hardly hear it. "I... I can't talk to you."

Jared bites his lip to keep from yelling. "Why?"

"Everything is happening. I can't... It's out of control. I don't know how to... I'm sorry. I have to go." The voice hitches. "I'm so sorry."

"Wait! Will I still see you tomorrow?"

"No!" He sounds frustrated and on the verge of tears. "I have to *go*. Away."

Jared blinks. "To New York?"

"There is no New York, Jared. I have to go away. I'm going away."

Jared freezes with sudden comprehension. "But... where are you going? Why would you go? Jensen?"

"We'll always be friends," Jensen says but he sounds so devastated Jared's heart clenches. "Even if I never see you again you'll always be my friend. You're the best friend I've ever had."

"I'm the only friend you've ever had," Jared says shakily and he can hear Jensen laugh softly. It's the saddest sound he's ever heard.

“Yeah. How great is that? I get one friend and it’s you.”

Jared feels the lump in his throat grow bigger. “I don’t want you to go. I don’t understand what’s happening.”

There’s silence and then Jensen speaks in a rush of words, “You are going to be magnificent, Jared. You’re going to be the most wonderful person in the world. You already are. I wish I could see it. I wish I could be there to watch you grow.”

“Jensen, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry. I gotta go.”

“Jensen!”

“Close your eyes and listen to the music, ok? Just... listen.”

There’s a soft thud, like the phone has been put away on a table and then after a few heartbeats music starts playing through the earpiece.

### *Sorgarstef / Neol Einsteiger (1:53)*

Jared doesn’t close his eyes.

Instead he sits stunned on his bed and watches as music streams out of the phone. It’s like a projector, casting a vision all around him until he’s standing in the middle of a huge room with high windows. A lonely grand piano takes up a corner, light from the windows reflecting in its shiny black surface. Jared turns and Jensen is standing there, so close Jared can feel the warmth from his body, radiating like sunshine. It’s an older, grown up version of Jensen, gazing up at him with sad eyes, green like the ocean.

That’s when Jared realizes he’s grown too. Tall like a tree. Taller than Jensen. He wants to reach out for Jensen, needing to touch him, to feel if he’s real, but he can’t move. Jensen gives him a sad soft smile and then he turns and starts walking away, never saying a single word. Jared tries to call out but he has no voice. The music swells around them, cellos and violins joining in, adding sadness so deep Jared thinks he might die if he hears another note. He can only watch as Jensen grows smaller and smaller, finally fading away into nothing. The room and the music dissolve as in water and then he’s just him again, just Jared the kid, sitting on his bed with tears running down his face, the phone silent by his side. His heart is breaking while everything else suddenly makes more sense.

He hears a soft noise from the doorway and turns his head to find his mother standing there, looking absolutely stricken. “What... what was that?” she asks shakily. “Jared, *what was that?*”

“That... that was Jensen.” He’s crying so hard he can hardly speak. “That was *Jensen*, mom. Did you see? Did you *see* it?”

She shakes her head, looking dazed. “No, it can’t... How could...?”

“*That’s* what he was trying to tell me,” Jared sobs, wiping shakily at his eyes with the heels of his hands. “*That’s* what he is. He’s magical. It’s magic. Mom, it’s magic!” He stumbles off the bed, grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair. “We have to go! Mom, we have to stop them!”

She just stares at him, eyes unfocused. “But there’s no such thing as magic! It’s just nonsense.”

“Mom! C’mon! They’re going to send him away. We can’t let them do that. Mom, wake up!”

He drags her out of the room and down the stairs, across the lawn and to the car before they both realize they don’t have their shoes on or keys or anything and have to run back to get them. Jared is frantic with fear. Something bad is happening. Something horrible is happening to Jensen *right now* and if Jared doesn’t get there in time he will never see him again.

“Hurry!”

His mother starts laughing hysterically. “What are we doing?” she asks. “Christ, Jared, we must be insane. We can’t just go over there and... what? Tell them they can’t send Jensen away for being a... a witch?”

Jared growls in frustration. “He’s not a witch. He’s magical. He’s *enchanted*.”

“How do you know?” she says shakily as she fumbles with the car keys. “Jared, how do you know this?”

“He told me. Every time he played for me he told me and I just didn’t get it. The old people, the horse and the bird, the paper boat. It wasn’t inside my head, it was him, it was all him!”

Talking about being bad, about being weird, a Devils child. Telling him the future, ‘Tall like a tree, Jared. You’re gonna grow tall like a tree.’ Telling him over and over again he was going to be magnificent, a great person. Because he knew, because he could see it. Shaking as he told Jared he couldn’t be normal, he had no choice but to be this.

‘It’s out of control,’ he’d said on the phone. Did he mean that he couldn’t control what he was doing anymore?

Jared stares at the wipes fighting the rain falling down in heavy drops. It’s been raining for almost a week. Since... since Thursday. And before that, the storm, for two days. ‘I haven’t slept in two days,’ Jensen had said. With a bang Jared remembers the weird tornado in Jensen’s backyard under the trees that started and stopped so suddenly. ‘I was bad,’ a doped up Jensen mumbled in his ear, ‘and now I can’t be.’ Oh God.

“He’s doing this,” Jared says dazedly and his mom looks over at him, confused. “It’s raining because he’s sad.”

“Jared, no one can control the weather,” she points out but she doesn’t sound too sure.

“He’s not controlling it. He can’t control it. That’s why they think he’s dangerous, because he isn’t in control of it. It just happens. It rains when he’s sad and blows up a hurricane when he’s angry. Jesus.” Jared laughs shakily. “How many times have I seen sunrays following him without realizing how weird that is? Why would a ray of sunshine always hit him? Because he was happy. When he was with me he was happy.” He drops his head into his hands and groans.

“Jared, you’re not making any sense.”

“No, I’m finally making sense,” he sobs. “I’ve been completely blind. She told me, his sister. ‘Haven’t you figured it out yet,’ she said and I didn’t understand. So stupid!”

“Jared…”

“No! I am his friend. I should have realized.” He wipes angrily at his eyes. “He should have been able to tell me!”

“This is all just speculations. I mean… Jared, we’re talking about *magic!*” she blurts out. “Magic, for God’s sake. It’s insane!”

They arrive at the house just then so he doesn’t have to dignify her with an answer, just shoots her a glare before loosening his seatbelt and jumping out of the car. Only to stop short and stare at what he’s seeing. Every single flower in the garden is dead. Grey leaves cling to the dried up branches of the trees, the grass is pale yellow and the flowerbeds look like composts. He hears his mother gasp behind him and that shakes him out of his shock. He runs up to the house and starts banging on the door.

“Jensen! Jen! Let me in! Mr. Ackles! I know he’s in there! Let me in!”

His mom runs up behind him, grabbing his shoulder. “Jared, stop it. You’re acting crazy.”

He swings around, feeling mad with fear. “*They’re* crazy. They’re destroying him. He made this garden the way it was, mom, and now see what it’s like. You still don’t believe me? You said yourself that it was enchanted. You said it!”

“Yes, but…”

He ignores her and starts banging on the door again. “Jensen! Open up! It’s me! I know! I figured it out! Please open, please!”

“They’re not home so stop that damn ruckus,” a rough voice suddenly says, making them both jump. An old man is looking over the hedge to their right, eyes widening as he takes in the damage. “Oh heck. What happened? It looked fine this morning.”



“The people who live here,” Jared says impatiently, “where are they?”

“Oh, they left about five minutes ago. You’re the kid, right? The one who’s always coming over.” At Jared’s surprised look he smiles. “Don’t get many visitors, that family. When they do you can’t help noticing.”

“Do you know where they went? When they’ll be back? Anything?”

“Looked like they were going for a trip. Packed the car and took off. Kids didn’t look too happy though, young Mackenzie yelling her head off. Quite a handful that one.” He chuckles. “Not like the boy who hardly ever says a thing.”

“Was he alright?” Jared asks eagerly. “Did he look alright?”

The man looks at him, puzzled. “Is something wrong? He did look pale and quiet but he usually does. He’s never been quite right that boy,” he adds as an afterthought. “Very weird.

Jared fights the urge to yell at him and turns to his mom instead. “They’re not going on a trip,” he says, his panic magnifying. “They took him away. They’re going to lock him up somewhere!” God, he’s going to be sick.

“We don’t know that, honey.” His mom says but she looks almost as scared as he feels. “I’m sure there’s some logical explanation. Jared, please, calm down.”

How can he calm down when he’s failed? When he just lost the most amazing thing that ever happened to him, the most amazing *person* he’s ever known. And that was before he realised all the wonder Jensen was hiding.

He can’t. He can’t just let go. He can’t just let Jensen fade away! He’s got to find him!

~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~ End of part 1 ~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~:~♪~



## Part Two

### New York, 2006

The doors slide open. Jensen steps inside, humming softly under his breath. The doors slide close again.

As he heads for his regular seat he doesn't notice who vacates it for him this time, too caught up in the music playing in his head. A reflection in the window makes him look up though and he gives the puzzled young man a soft smile. The guy, a punked-up kid with smudged eyeliner and a row of piercings in his lower lip, smiles back, then looks even more confused. Interacting with a stranger on a subway is after all not something you do, especially not in New York.

They almost always do though. Smile back. It's something that didn't take Jensen long to figure out, that people long to smile. Even more than that, they long for a connection to someone, anyone. Especially in a city like this that has so many people almost everyone feels alone. He can't give them that but he can give them this. And so he smiles and they smile back and when they leave the train they feel a little better without really knowing why.

As the train starts he sits back and closes his eyes. He's not tired, it's just easier to get some rest from everything around him if he keeps his eyes closed.

That had shocked him most of all, the enormity of a big city's population. There are so many people, so many shapes, so many *presences* all around him. It makes it sometimes hard to breathe. Closing his eyes helps him cope in settings like these where he doesn't have the sky above to breathe in. And even if the voices and sounds never go away his music blocks out most of them. Whispers of 'Help' and 'Please' and 'Why can't anyone see me?' fade and leave him with air to breathe and space to live in. Every now and then he does answer but those cases are few and steadily getting fewer. It's not a question of ignoring, it's a question of keeping his sanity more or less intact.

It takes him forty-five minutes to travel from his apartment to his place of work. New York is a stressful city – everyone is always hurrying somewhere it seems – but Jensen doesn't like to hurry. Things take time for a reason, he thinks. If people could do things at the pace they think they want, they'd grow old before they had time to be young.

He opens his eyes half a minute before the train arrives at his destination. It has happened he's gotten so lost in his head the train has to stand and wait for him to rouse, causing numerous curses and stressful outcries from his fellow travelers, but usually something tells him when to turn on again and 'join the living' like Chris likes to call it. Jensen doesn't really think that is an accurate description. If anything he feels more alive in his head than he feels anywhere else.

It's a bright spring day and he breathes in the crisp morning air as he strolls through Central Park. If it's exceptionally cold he sometimes takes the subway closer but he likes the park and it's soothing, having a little time to himself surrounded by what comes closest to nature in a city made of glass and cement. He's frequently been late for work because he forgets where he's supposed to be going and instead wakes up lying on the grass, covered in leaves and flowers and with birds picking at his hair.

"The Park again?" Lizzie will ask when he finally shows up, flushed and embarrassed. He'll laugh and nod and be grateful he made it in before they sent someone out to look for him. After three years of teaching and before that another four years as a student, most of the staff know him well enough not to worry unless he's running very late or the weather is less than friendly. Most of his classes aren't scheduled until after ten o'clock anyway. It's not something he asked for, in fact in all his years here he's never asked for any special favours, but they still tend to grant them to him.

Except a single room his first year as a student, *that* he did ask for. If there had been any other way he'd taken it because he hates lying and single rooms aren't given to first year students without a damn good reason, like having some kind of disability. "I make people cry and come in their sleep and there's a possibility I might set the room on fire," would most likely not have been considered a valid, or even sane, reason. So he'd lied. The student counselor, who knew his background – or rather the background he'd decided to give them – backed him up on his plea, convincing them it was either that or allowing him to be the only first year student living off campus. He was set up in the room before the day was over.

There's only a month left of the school year and however much he loves his job he's looking forward to a few weeks by himself. He's been composing again, nothing big, just small pieces that make him happy. Well, some of them do. There is the blue one with the stars and the planets that is a painful reminder of his short time in school, way back when he was a kid. Everyone shining in their own way but still living in the dark while he was like the sun, alone but seeing all the colors they couldn't.

That's how he'd explained it to Chris who'd just laughed and shook his head and said that comparing yourself to the sun was a sure way of making everyone think you're an egomaniac asshole. Which, yeah, if you looked at it *that* way.

“Besides, if you’re the sun, what’s Jared? The moon? That’d mean that, unless you’re thinking eclipses, you two’ve got fuck all chance of getting together.”

Jensen hadn’t answered, just turned around and stalked into the piano studio, slamming the door behind him. When he came out again two hours later, pale and his hands shaking from hammering on the tangents until the whole building trembled, Chris silently handed him a beer and Jensen took it, apology grudgingly accepted.

Jared is like the metaphorical elephant in the room. The one everyone sees but won’t talk about because it’s pink and huge and acknowledging it would mean you’re insane or drunk or possibly both. Except in their case it’s more a matter of not mentioning what will only lead to them having a row about something they can never agree on.

Chris thinks Jensen is insane to still be waiting for a boy he hasn’t seen in ten years and doesn’t know anything about. Like where he is or what he’s doing or, you know, whether he’s actually into guys. At all.

Jensen thinks Chris should shut up about things he can’t possibly understand.

“Hey man, I understand. You had impure creepy thoughts towards your pimped squeaky-voiced preteen student and now you’re waiting for his grownup hulky version to come sweep you into his arms and make with the gay love. I understand. I understand you’re completely *insane* and probably smoked a lot of pot when you were growing up. And you need to get laid, preferably yesterday.”

“Shut up. It’s not... It wasn’t...” Jensen spits out, feeling his face go hot. “Fuck you, asshole.”

Chris sighs. “Oh come on, man. You know what I mean.” He catches the book flying at him with a practiced move and rolls his eyes. “Stop that. I’m just saying...”

Jensen turns his back on him. He loves Chris, he really does, but sometimes he fucking hates him.

“Jenny...” Chris says patiently and lays a hand on Jensen’s shoulder.

“How many times I have to tell you not to call me that?” he hisses and tries to shrug free but Chris doesn’t flinch away, his grip firm and infuriatingly comforting.

“*Jensen*,” he says, waiting until Jensen gives in and meets his eyes. “It’s been ten years, man. Not everything you see is real, you know that. You say yourself you can’t always tell the difference.”

Jensen clenches his jaw. “Jared is real. *We* are real.”

“And if it takes another ten years? Or twenty? You just gonna wait and wait forever?”

“If I have to,” he says stubbornly, “but I won’t. I *know*, ok? I saw it. It won’t be long now.”

Chris sighs, resigned. “Ok. If you say so. I’m just worried, man. You’re broody and lonely...”

“The fuck I am!”

“...and I’m not saying you should give up and move on,” Chris continues, completely ignoring him, “but... You’re not moving at all, man! You have any idea how many want to get in your pants? Seriously, do you? I’m beating them off you with a stick whenever we go somewhere and that’s without your magic mojo working.”

Jensen glares at him. “I would *never* use that on people!”

“Calm down, man. I’m not saying you would. I’m saying you don’t have to. All you gotta do is breathe and they’re on you like flies on a dead goat. Don’t ask me why chicks always go for that girly face of yours but they do and the guys are even worse. So how ‘bout getting some of that? Let loose a little steam, work off some of that sexual frustration.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Jensen growls. “*What* sexual frustration?”

“The one you should be fucking exploding from, man. Dude, I love my right hand as much as the next person but jerking off is *not* sex. You need to have some goddamn sex, man.”

“Lay off it, Chris. Just... back off.”

Chris sighs. “You really think Jared expects you to be a virgin after ten frigging years? You really think *he* is?”

“I’m not a goddamn virgin!” he bites back, ignoring the latter question because he really doesn’t want to think about that.

“Sleeping with me doesn’t count. Not when all we do is just sleep, you cuddle freak.”

Another thing he hates about Chris is that it’s really hard to stay mad at him.

“Fuck you.” He bites his lips to keep them from tugging upwards. “Like I’d even count it if you actually turned gay and sucked my dick. Bet you’d be crap at it anyway.”

“Hey,” Chris objects indignantly. “I’d give you the blowjob of your life! Oh wait...It would be.”

“Shut up. I’m not a goddamn virgin, ok? I’ve been... When I was Inside.” He averts his eyes, feeling awkward like he always does when they talk about that period of his life. “Which is exactly why I’m not interested in just whoring myself out to the next horny fucker that likes my ‘girly face’.”

“Aw, fuck man,” Chris says quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jensen looks up surprised. “Tell you what?” He takes in the angry and downright devastated look on Chris’s face and retraces his words. “Oh. No! Shit, Chris, I didn’t mean... Stop looking at me like that. No one did anything to me, ok? You should know by now that doesn’t happen.”

“Well, what the fuck am I supposed to think when you talk like that?” Chris growls, his red face a mixture of relief and embarrassment. “Christ Jenny, yeah, I *do* know. I also know that when you’re drugged, like you were most of the time up there, a whole football team could have reamed your ass without you even knowing.”

“Chris,” Jensen says, giving him a small smile, “nothing like that happened. I promise. It just... Yeah, I was all doped up. Him too. So I wasn’t thinking except maybe that being drugged I would be... safe.” Jensen shrugs even if he knows how badly hidden his guilt is. “Turns out I wasn’t.”

Chris cringes. “Do I really want to know?” he asks with a grimace and Jensen rolls his eyes.

“His dick didn’t blow up if that’s what you’re thinking.” He hesitates a moment before adding, “He killed himself.”

Chris blinks. “And?”

“He killed himself!” Jensen repeats frustrated. “There’s no ‘and’ about it.”

Chris stares at him like he’s the dumbest moron on the face of the earth. “*And...* you think *you* did that? Are you like, mental?”

“Certified,” Jensen deadpans. “And yes, of course I did. We had sex, he killed himself. I’d say that’s pretty straight forward.”

“Jensen. Seriously? You fucked a *mental* case in a *mental* hospital and he had a *mental* breakdown and fucking killed himself. I’m sorry but... chances are he was gonna do that anyway.” Chris shakes his head when Jensen just looks away. “Ok, tell me this, what was he in for?”

He has to think about that. Those two years are pretty hazy. “Depression, I think.” He closes his eyes briefly, remembering pale skin and heat and the taste of salt on his tongue. “He was a nice kid but so damn screwed up. He was a Mormon. Got thrown out of his church.”

“A depressed Mormon kid kills himself after having gay sex?” Chris sighs. “Jensen, I hate to break your bubble of self-importance but you and your dick, however magical I’m sure it is, did not do that. He could have had sex with Johnny-next-door and it would have done the same thing. Believe me. So please, no more ‘I kill people with my dick’ guilt, ok?”

Jensen glares at him. “It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not. And seriously, if that’s what you think... If Jared actually does show up one day, what are you gonna do? Just hold hands?”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“It’s Jared.”

And they’re right back at square one.

The first thing Jensen did when he got out was call Jared’s phone number. It wasn’t registered anymore. He’d stood there in the phone booth, staring out at the passing traffic, and with a bang realized that apart from the clothes on his back and a few dollars in his pocket he had nothing and no one.

He still doesn’t know what made him call Chris’s number except maybe that Jared gave it to him and somehow it had stayed stuck on his brain when so much else had been flushed out by two years of being locked up, drugged stupid and repeatedly told he wasn’t who he thought he was.

Chris hadn’t remember him. He hadn’t even remember Jared although he vaguely recalled some groupie girl saying some guy needed a ride to the Big Apple and then said guy never showed up. Later he admitted he’d been pretty smoked most of the time back then. “Sorry, man,” he’d said, his twang making Jensen’s chest hurt. “Can’t help you with that.”

Jensen had cradled the heavy phone in his hand, his forehead pressed against the glass and for a moment all he could do was breathe. And then that became too hard as well.

“Hey, man. You ok?” the voice had said on the other end of the phone, filled with what sounded like genuine concern. And just like that Jensen had started to cry.

He has no idea how long that went on and he can’t remember talking or feeding the phone more quarters but he must have because what seemed like an eternity later someone pried the phone from his hand and then he was being hoisted up from the ground at the bottom of the phone booth. Next thing he came aware of he was lying on a funky smelling couch, looking up at a short man with shoulder length hair and eyes the kind of blue he hadn’t seen in years.

To this day he doesn’t know what made Chris do that, or what twist of Fate had led him to be living in the very same city Jensen had ended up in. He likes to think it was Fate because damn if he has any faith in God anymore. God let him be in that place for so long, made him lose everything he loved, his family, his music, himself. And Jared.

He did go back to search for Jared, as soon as Chris deemed him fit enough to make the trip. The yellow house had been painted white and no one there knew what had

become of the Padaleckis. You'd think with a name like that they'd be easy to find but a year later Jensen had to resign himself to the fact that wherever they were he wasn't meant to find them. He still believed Jared would find *him* but that could take years. Which left him at a loss, having no idea what to do while he waited.

"What am I supposed to do now?" he'd asked Chris who hadn't answered, just pulled him tighter and they fell asleep like that, with Jensen's scrunched up face pushed into the crook of Chris's neck and Chris's arms tight around him. But the next day when he got home from his daily walk through the park a brochure from Juilliard lay on the kitchen table.

"That's where you were going, right?" Chris had said, all casual. "So go."

Jensen had stared at the brochure, a lump forming in his throat. "I'm too late," he'd said flatly. "You have to apply in December to get into the audition. And send them a recording of your playing and..."

"I'm not stupid, Jenny. I already did that. You have an audition on March 2<sup>nd</sup>." The smug look on Chris face would have been irritating under any other circumstances. "Now say 'Thank you' and start practicing."

"You already..." Jensen had blinked. "What?"

"I sent them a tape with the stuff I asked you to play, remember when we went to Steve's for Thanksgiving? He'd set up the recorder earlier." He'd grinned when he'd seen Jensen's memory returning, as obvious by his horrified expression. "Yes, with your drunken rambling and everything. You're not allowed to edit, you know. Apparently it was unusual but not unheard of, aspiring students needing a little Dutch courage. Plus they remembered you from two years ago. You made enough of an impression then and again now that they want you to come perform in person. Sober this time."

And then Jensen had had a panic attack and almost passed out from hyperventilation, but that's another story.

He'd come through the audition with flying colors. Well, not *actual* flying colors, he'd made sure of that. If two years of being considered a crazy case had taught him anything it was how to act normal. Otherwise he'd still be in there.

The first week he stayed at Chris's place he'd still been working the drugs out of his system. Not that he was supposed to do that, part of the whole agreement of his release was that he'd take his pills and show up at an appointed therapist once a week. He'd dumped the pills down the nearest drain along with the therapist's name and phone number before he even reached the end of the street. Then walked to the highway and hitched a ride for the next two days until he was close to passing out from hunger, drug withdrawal and repeated panic attacks. Which was how he'd ended up in New York and consequently on Chris's couch.

He hadn't realized his 'mojo' was back until Chris had startled him one day and got the whole collection of CDs flying at him at high speed for his trouble.



“What the hell was that?” Chris had asked once he’d stumbled back to his feet and was rubbing the v-shaped dent one hard plastic corner had made in his forehead. “Did you do that?”

Jensen had stood there, blinking, his face deadly pale. “Yes,” he’d finally said because he’d been lying for two years and he just couldn’t do it anymore.

“Huh,” Chris had said after a long eternity of silence. He’d turned around and walked out of the living room and Jensen had been wondering where the fuck he was gonna live now, when Chris came back, spoon in his hand, and said, “Bend this.”

And Jensen had rolled his eyes and flipped him the finger with a “Bend that, asshole,” and that was it. He was ‘out’ and it felt great!

Ok, no, it was a little more than that.

Chris had gotten Jensen drunk – which only took a couple of beers since he’d never had alcohol before in his life – and then made him recite his whole life story, beginning to end. Then – after Jensen had drunk a lot more, thrown up, passed out and woken up again feeling like grilled shit on toast – Chris took him to see his friend Steve. Who had spent the better part of his life convinced he was crazy because he could hear some guy whispering into his ear.

Jensen had smiled and told him he had a boy as his shape, a very mischievous looking one at that. It wasn’t something he’d seen often; most people had animals or birds or just plain shadows and colors. A couple of the schizos Inside had had people though, judging from what he’d seen before the drugs wiped everything from his world. Whether that had actually *made* them schizophrenic he didn’t know.

Steve’s relief of someone finally believing he *wasn’t* crazy led to another night of drunkenness – this time with tequila! – even more puking and the kind of hangover that would have convinced a wiser person to never touch alcohol ever again.

Now Jensen isn’t stupid, he’d just acquired bad *evil* friends who insisted that getting drunk occasionally was a part of a normal adulthood and he should really try it again before he decided to stay sober the rest of his life. He had – which results did nothing to change his opinion – and still somehow ended up shitfaced *again* a couple of weeks later. And so on and so forth until he learned to pace himself, or just got more resilient, he isn’t sure.

He’d been worried alcohol would make him lose control more easily but turns out it actually makes him mellow without killing all his senses like the drugs had done. He still does stuff he doesn’t mean to but nothing drastic. Just floating in air when he falls asleep or changing channels on the TV when he blinks. Stupid stuff like that.

For a while he’d considered a career as a drunk, seeing as it made everything both more fun and easier to deal with but then Chris had pointed out to him that 1) beer cost money which he didn’t have and 2) he’d get old and ugly real fast. Not to mention that 3) his precious Jared probably wouldn’t appreciate his soulmate having a beer belly and stinking like an ashtray. (Yeah, he might have taken up smoking for a

few weeks there. Not really for the nicotine fix but more because he loved watching the blue-grey smoke dance. It looked... cool.)

Chris likes to say Jensen is taking out his teenage rebellion ten years late. Maybe he is. He likes being young and reckless. Likes to swear and be obnoxious with rude gestures and bratty attitude. If there's one thing you learn from being in a mental institution it's how to swear like a crazy person. Add to that the influence of a devil-may-care cowboy and his stoner hippie friend and he's getting educated in Adolescence 101 faster than any teenager.

"Tsk, tsk, if your students could see you now," Chris likes to tease when Jensen is cursing up a blue streak as he's getting his assed kicked at Playstation, wearing ratty jeans and a t-shirt that announces the size of his penis. Jensen blows Chris's long hair in his face without turning around and gets ahead while Chris yells at him for cheating.



Yeah, that thing with not being able to control what he does? Turns out he can, quite well actually. Not everything, he's not there yet and probably never will be, but mostly he can handle it. The trick wasn't to *not* think, that's where they went wrong, him and his parents all those years ago. Instead thinking is actually what he *has* to do to let things happen. Or not happen. That's the key to the whole thing, what goes on inside his head.

"Jensen, my man. Still on for tonight?" a voice says and he jerks awake. It takes him a moment to remember he's at work, standing by the window with a cooling cup of coffee in his hand. Tom is watching him with an amused expression on his face, socked feet crossed and shoulder leaning against the doorway.

"Tonight?" he asks puzzled. "What's tonight?"

"Karaoke?" Tom sighs when Jensen just blinks confused. "You forgot. You're on my team, man. I need you there."

“Tonight?” Jensen frowns. “No, that’s on Thursday.”

“Today *is* Thursday, Jensen.” Tom rolls his eyes when Jensen just stares at him. “Yesterday was Wednesday, the day before that was Tuesday...”

“Haha, funny.” Jensen rubs one hand over his face. “Do I have to?”

“On my team, remember? Which consists of two people, you and me. If there’s no you there’s only me and that’s not a team, man. That’s a sad lonely loser singing karaoke.”

Jensen groans. “I hate singing. And I really hate singing in front of people.” He scowls. “When the hell did I sign up for this anyway?”

Tom grins. “You didn’t, I did. And then Mike bet me five dollars that you wouldn’t show up. So you have to or he wins.”

“I’m doing this for five dollars?” he asks incredulous. “That I won’t even get?”

“I’ll buy you a drink. And introduce you to some people. You need to get to know more people, Jensen.”

“I know people,” he says indignant, getting an even worse feeling about the whole thing.

“Other than work people. Or Chris. Real people that are interesting and fun and might actually lead to more fun. Like sex.”

“What is it with everyone trying to hook me up?” Jensen turns away, pouring the remains of his coffee into the rather droopy looking plant on the windowsill. ‘Stop giving me your rancid old coffee,’ it complains and he promises it a fresh batch of water later.

“I’m not interested, alright?” he continues. “I have no interest whatsoever in having random sex with random strangers so why don’t you just back off and let me handle my own love life the way I want, thank you very much.”

There is no answer and when he turns around it’s to reveal Tom gone, leaving the door open for a very embarrassed student that is trying very hard to look as if she didn’t hear a word of his, he now realises, very *loud* rant.

“Hi! Sorry. I was just...” He smiles and the girl hesitantly smiles back. “You’re not here for the drama class, are you?” he jokes.

“Uh, no. Piano. Like I am every week at this exact time.”

“Right. Of course. Katie.” He pauses. “What day is it again?”

“Thursday.”

“Oh. Yeah. Oh... *Thursday!* *That* karaoke.” He groans. “Damn.”

Katie just stares at him.

“Sorry. Come on in and sit down.” He walks over briskly, casting a quick glance into the hallway before closing the door and turning back to Katie who is now sitting in front of the piano. The blush is gone from her cheeks and she’s grinning.

“You know,” she says with a twinkle in her eye, “if you want them to back off just tell them you’re already seeing someone.”

“What? Oh. Well, I kinda am.” He smiles softly. “Or I will be. It’s complicated,” he adds when he sees the confused look on her face. “Now, where were we?”

He knows he has a rather unusual relationship with his students. Most teachers keep their distance, needing it to withhold their authority. It’s all ‘sir’ and ‘madam’ and Mr. and Ms. this and that. He usually introduces himself to new students as Jensen. “Ackles, but please don’t call me that.”

He’s not that much older than most of them anyway. Younger than some. And his lessons aren’t exactly what you’d call orthodox. There’s a reason why he’s the most talked about teacher at Juilliard.

It’s a whole lifetime away from the gossip he had to endure at school as a kid though. Yes, they still think he’s weird but everyone’s a little different around here anyway. And where his weirdness used to make the kids shun and fear him, here it gives him an air of mystery. At the start of every term there’s a buzz in the musical division as the students get their class schedule and news of who got into his class gets around. He’d be a liar if he didn’t admit it tickles his vanity, being wanted for once.

And then there’s that whole ‘not exactly ugly’ thing. Turns out Jared was right in his infinite teenage wisdom, people in general find Jensen... good looking. Jensen still doesn’t get it. He looks in the mirror and he sees a lonely young man with freckles and green eyes so sad it’s a wonder they stay open.

When he first got out he was... not alright. Part of it was the withdrawal from the drugs, his body desperately trying to deal with its addiction not being fed while his mind got assaulted by his senses slowly returning. He was sick as a dog, couldn’t keep anything down but spent most of his days huddled in bed, shaking and shivering and wondering if he’d made a huge mistake, throwing out all his pills. Wondering if maybe he should just go back. Slowly becoming convinced he was better off dead.

And then he felt something wet touch his cheek and he opened his eyes to see Minnalously sitting on his pillow, purring happily, and Jensen realized he could see again. Colors and shapes all around him so beautiful he almost started to cry. A few days later the music returned and that time he did cry. Two years of silence and it wasn’t until he got his sounds back that he realized how dead he was without them. Sometimes he wonders how he managed *not* to go insane in that place. He’d consider

thanking the drugs for making him too numb to care if it didn't feel like thanking a rapist for taking away his virginity.

"Earth to Jensen, are you there? Hello?"

He blinks his eyes open. Tom is standing by the couch Jensen got set up in his class room, looking down at him with a fond look of worry. He's got his jacket on and Jensen's own jacket draped over his arm, keys dangling from his fingers.

"You okay?" He reaches out and lays a palm on Jensen's forehead, frowning slightly. "Jordan said you got dizzy again and had to lie down."

It takes him a moment to remember. Oh. Right.

Jordan is a lanky young man with brown eyes and spiderlike fingers. He plays like there aren't enough tears in the world for his sorrow and if only some of what Jensen sees is true he has every reason to feel that way. He's got amazing talent but Jensen will be glad when the term is over and he can hand the kid over to someone else. Every lesson exhausts him and sometimes, like today, it gets too much and he feels too weak to continue.

He used to try and fake his way through whatever emotions he got assaulted with but after fainting twice, scaring the hell out of his students, he had to admit he had a problem. Giving his (made up) history they were very understanding. And more than willing to put up with a few fainting spells if they just got to keep him on board. The couch had been their idea – or possibly he made it their idea, he's not sure – and has proved itself to be a lifesaver. A little nap usually clears his head well enough that he almost feels fine.

"I'm fine," he says and sits up, realizing his mistake when Tom grins and holds out the jacket. "Dammit."

"Nuhuh, no trying to get out of it." When Jensen just scowls at him his face transform into a puppy look Jensen thinks only Jared could beat. "You promised."

Jensen grumbles. "No, I didn't."

"I'm sure you did. I said, 'Wanna team up for karaoke?' and you said 'Yes! I love karaoke! It's my favorite thing ever!' and I said 'Great! See you Thursday?' and you said 'You betcha!'"

Jensen snorts but he can feel a smile tugging at his lips. "You do realize that the only way that conversation could have taken place was if you just dropped acid. Were there by any chance unicorns there? Or big purple elephants?"

Tom frowns. "No, but you were naked... That was kinda weird."

That gets him laughing. "Ok, ok. Christ, shut up. So where is this again?"

Tom grins triumphantly. “Marlow’s like always.” He hesitates. “You wanna call Chris? Ask him to meet us there?”

Jensen shakes his head. “I’m fine.”

“I know. I just thought...”

“Tom, I’m fine. I just needed a little rest, that’s all.” He claps Tom on the shoulder and gives him a smile. “Let’s go make a fool of you in front of all our peers.”

“Of me?” Tom huffs. “You’ll be singing too, you know.”

“Ah, but see I’ll actually be *singing*. You’ll be on stage moaning like a moose. That’s where the fool part comes in.”

“I can sing!” Tom protests but he’s got red spots in his cheeks that are almost adorable.

“Sure you can,” Jensen says and laughs. “That’s why we call you Tomcat, because of your amazing singing skills.”

“Hey, that’s because of my way with the ladies!”

“Yeah, no.” He gives Tom a broad smile. “Sorry, buddy. I thought you knew. The yowling Tomcat? That’s you, my friend.”

Tom scowls. “I think you can forget that drink.”

“Dude! A gentleman never goes back on his promises. Especially not when it comes to alcohol.”

“Jerk.”

Jensen just smiles.

It’s starting to get dark outside so he must have slept longer than he thought. Not the first time. He feels safe within the isolated walls of his piano studio at work, which is probably why he’s not worried about his dreams affecting other people in the building.

The small bar is already half-full. It’s what Jensen supposes can be called the usual crowd although he doesn’t really go here often enough to know. Just because he’s learned to handle his liquor doesn’t mean he can always handle what it does to him, even in small doses. Plus he’s not really what you’d call social even if he does get out and among people a lot more now than he did when he was younger. And when he does it’s usually with Chris there to take the heat off him if the need arises.

See, the thing is, that metaphor? Is a little less metaphorical and a lot more literal than Jensen prefers. Another reason why he shouldn’t be drinking alcohol when there are innocent people around. He gets... affected. And what affects him tends to affect

those around him. He's not 'using his magic mojo', whatever Chris might say, because 'using' implies doing something on purpose. And this isn't like that. This is more like... yawning. Watch one person yawn and a heartbeat later you're doing the same thing. And so it spreads until half the room is yawning and hating the one who started it.

It's a little like that, except instead of yawns there's shortness of breath, hot flushes and an irrational urge to jump the next person and hump his or her leg. No wonder Chris wants him to get laid, seeing as he's usually the one in the nearest vicinity of all that.

"Fuck, Jenny, stop it! I'm not going gay for you, ok?" he'd groaned one night when Jensen was grinning stupidly around a bottle of beer, thinking about Jared.

He'd blinked and looked at his friend, noticing the blush staining his cheeks and the almost hungry look in his eyes. "What?"

"This... *You!*" Chris spluttered, waving his hands in frustration. "Stop it!"

"*What?*"

"Oh Christ." Chris had slammed his beer down on the table and stood up, awkwardly adjusting his jeans. "I'm going into my room to watch porn." He'd turned and glared at Jensen. "You are *not* invited!"

"What!?!"

He'd stared after Chris, completely bewildered, and then it suddenly hit him. Oh. Oh! He couldn't keep back his laughter, not helped by Chris yelling "Shut up!" from behind the closed doors of his bedroom. At least it wasn't his mama this time.

Tom leaves him to sign them up for no doubt the worst song available. God, he hopes it's not Britney Spears. It should help that Tom is still sober but it's no guarantee, he has awful music taste no matter what. Guess that's why he's with the drama department and not the music one, Jensen thinks with a smirk.

He buys a beer and takes a look around, nodding his head toward people he knows or recognizes. He always feels weird when he sees some of his students in there. Not because he feels it's inappropriate for them to see him drinking, they are more or less adults after all, but because the thought of 'affecting' them with his 'thing' borders closer to the kind of teacher-student relation that *is* inappropriate. At least when he's got the other teachers there to protect him the chances of anyone making advances at him are minimal. Because that's just plain awkward.

Talking about awkward...

"Hey, Jensen." Kristin's smile is radiant, her eyes sparkling. "Didn't think you'd make it."

He takes a small step backwards, keeping his smile genuine but restricted. “Hey, K. Oh you know me, nothing can keep me away from the stage.”

She laughs, reaching out to run her fingers up his arm. It looks innocent and he’d probably take it that way if this wasn’t her and he didn’t know that her fingers will soon be running up to his neck to play with his hair with her other hand resting on his stomach, just low enough to be intimate and still high enough to not look dirty.

“Where’s Mike?” he says, pretending to scratch his neck to get away from her touch. He realizes his mistake when she moves closer, making it impossible for him to lower his arm without either pushing her away or laying it across her shoulders. Thankfully someone bumps into him, trying to get to the bar and he steps away, giving her another awkward smile. Maybe he should have called Chris after all.

“Oh, you know. Getting drunk and hitting on everything within a five miles radius,” she says, still smiling although it’s strained.

“Right.” He laughs awkwardly. “So are you singing?”

She nods, her disappointment fading. Jensen doubts she actually has a crush on him. There just aren’t that many young teachers around for a single young woman to be interested in. Add his ‘thing’ and it might explain why she keeps hitting on him again and again, despite his obvious disinterest.. He’s contemplated just telling her he’s gay but to be frank he’s not too sure he is. If he had to describe his sexuality in any way it would probably be Jaredsexual. Which sounds more pathetic than it actually feels.

It’s just... Jared was the first person to evoke any actual sexual feelings within him that didn’t involve fake people or just the need to feel good. Even if it wasn’t the Jared he had but the Jared he will have. (He will. No matter what Chris says, he will. He’s got to.) Despite his brief and rather disastrous experimentation Inside there never has been anyone else for him. He guesses that’s what it feels like being gay, girls not having any affect on you. Except guys don’t affect him either. No one does. Except Jared.

Which makes him wonder, what if Chris is right and he and Jared never find each other? Will he just stay like this forever? Alone and as close to a virgin a guy who’s had sex can be? Because despite what he told Chris, that time Inside doesn’t really count. He was too drugged to remember half of it and he’s pretty sure he didn’t like the other half. The only reason he actually agreed to it was because somewhere in the back of his drugged up brain he thought he should know what it was like. Plus, the kid had been crying and begging and fumbling with the drawstring of Jensen’s sweat pants before he realised what was happening and he didn’t really know how to say no without breaking the poor kid even further. Only he did. Broke him so horribly he couldn’t face the world again.

The thought makes him grab his beer and swallow down half its content before he can stop himself. Kristin raises her eyebrows at him and he blushes.

“I should track down Tom,” he says and gives her a nod before slipping away through the crowd. The beer is giving him a light buzz, reminding him that he hasn’t eaten



much since that morning. Sometimes Chris calls him to remind him to eat, sometimes he just calls the sandwich shop across the street and has them send Jensen something without even checking if he has eaten or not. Usually he hasn't.

He's not really incompetent, he actually *can* take care of himself. Well, he probably could if he had to anyway. It's just that he gets very easily distracted or just slips away into his own head, forgetting that there is a world around him. A real world that demands he eats and drinks and interacts with other people in order to stay alive.

Thankfully, without really meaning to, he seems to evoke some kind of protective instinct in those around him, making them want to take care of him. From Chris to Tom to the girl in the coffee shop that puts sugar in his coffee even if he usually forgets to ask for it and slips him a blueberry muffin under the table when he looks hungry.

It took him a while to realize that there was something odd about that, people voluntarily looking after him without him asking them to. After all he'd gone from his mother's house to the nuthouse to Chris's house so to him it felt normal, always having someone there for him. Except people in general don't go out of their way to look after strangers, do they?

He'd been living in Chris's apartment for two months when he suddenly realized how weird that was, being taken in and cared for by a perfect stranger. And not just cared for in ways of being fed and given a place to sleep but actually *cared* for, like a friend or family.

Chris had been handing him a beer, eyes on the match currently playing on TV, and Jensen was about to give him the usual absentminded 'Thanks' when Chris asked if he was hungry, "I could make you something". And it suddenly hit him: This is not normal!

He'd stared up at Chris, horrified, and Chris had frowned back, asking "What?"

"Why are you doing this?" he'd blurted out. "You don't even know me! Why are you being so nice?"

Chris had blinked, looking confused for a moment before turning indignant. "I'm not after your pretty ass, if that's what you think. Not gonna sell you drugs or hook you up with some creepy porn guy." He'd looked mad enough that Jensen couldn't help jerking back, something that didn't go unnoticed. "Dude, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Fuck. "No. I didn't mean it like that."

"Then what the fuck *did* you mean?" Chris had shaken his head, looking disgusted. "Can't a guy do another guy a favor without everyone screaming 'ulterior motive'? What the fuck is this?"

Jensen had sighed. "It's just... Dude, you don't know me. I could be anyone. And still you took me in, looked after me when I was all fucked up..."

“You’re still all fucked up,” Chris had muttered but his anger was dissipating.

“...and you care,” Jensen had continued. “Like really care about what happens to me. Did I do that?” He’d swallowed. “Did I... hex you into doing that?”

Chris had stared at him for a moment and then it had suddenly dawned on him what Jensen was saying. He’d instantly relaxed and offered Jensen a smile that clearly spelled ‘you stupid moron’.

“Jensen, you didn’t hex me. Christ, you could hardly see any colors when you first got here so how the hell would you have hexed me?”

Jensen had shrugged. That still didn’t mean he hadn’t done anything. All he knew was that this wasn’t normal and usually when abnormal things happened they turned out to be his fault. “Ok. Yeah. I guess you’re right. But... don’t you think it’s weird? You really make a habit of taking in perfect strangers, especially someone as damaged as me? I don’t think so.”

“You’re not damaged, man. Don’t say that.” Chris had sighed. “I don’t know why, ok?” He’d looked almost embarrassed, rubbing his neck and scowling. “I guess... you made me want to. Not with your goddamn mojo but just by being you. Jen, you...” He’d clenched his jaw and shaken his head, obviously not comfortable with being caught as a sentimentalist. “You’re kinda like a drenched kitten, man. It’s impossible not to want to take care of you. And that’s not a hex, that’s just you, man. That’s just the way you are.”

“Helpless. Vulnerable. Pathetic,” Jensen had muttered, grimacing.

“Nah.” Chris had grinned. “Cute. Cuddly. Like I said, a kitten. A very scrawny, probably flea-bitten one. But still adorable.”

“Oh shut up.” But he’d felt slightly more at ease. “Just promise me, if things start feeling weird, if you think I’m doing something... You got to tell me, ok? Because half the time I have no idea.”

“Like giving me a happy every time you shower?” Chris had given him a pointed look. “That kinda weird?”

“What? I...? Oh. Oh! But I haven’t been... Shit.” He’d hidden his face in his hands, mortified. “God, I’m so sorry.”

It wasn’t until Chris started laughing that Jensen realized he’d been had. Just for that he *did* jerk off the next time he showered. When he came out of the bathroom Chris had been busy doing the dishes, flushed red and cursing under his breath. Jensen had just smirked, considering them even for now.

Someone bumps into him and he’s back at the bar, trying to remember where he’s headed. Right. Find Tom. That shouldn’t be too hard considering he towers over most. He makes Jensen, who’s way above average, feel short in comparison. It

reminds him of Jared, just like everything reminds him of Jared and always has. Ten years apart and he's never really been without him. Not even during those two years of hell, when he couldn't connect with anything or anyone, he never lost Jared. He wonders how tall exactly Jared is now, if he's actually reached the height Jensen saw. That would mean he's even taller than Tom. He'd probably be about as tall as that guy over ther-

The whole world decelerates. He can feel his own heart, beating sluggishly in his chest. The music slows down until it's moaning in his ears, drawn out and painful. People move like drunken mimes, hands and arms and hair blocking his vision. It can't be. It can't...

The man turns his head, shaggy hair sweeping aside to reveal a high forehead and a big nose and a smile that could brighten the darkest room.

Jensen blinks.

Everything explodes around him. All the lights go out, leaving everyone in shocking darkness as fine shards of glass rain over them. It's dead silent for a brief second and then people start screaming and shouting.

Jensen can't hear them. He can't see anything. There are warm bodies all around him, pushing and shoving him until he staggers and falls. He hits his head, hard, and ends up on the floor, dizzy and crawling in panic until he can't get any further and there he curls up, squeezing his eyes shut. Oh God! Oh God oh God oh God... Something wet is dripping from his nose and when he catches it on his tongue it tastes like copper.

He fumbles blindly in his pocket for his phone and finds #1 with his fingertips, breathing harshly into the receiver until he hears Chris's voice on the other end, hardly audible over the sound of chaos all around him.

"Jensen? What's that noise? What the fuck is going on?"

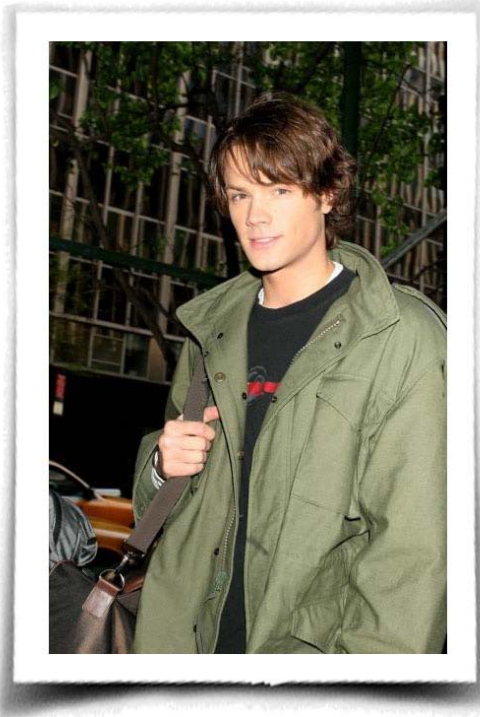
"Jared," he wheezes. He thinks he might be passing out. "I saw... I saw Jared."

"What? Jensen, what happened? Where are you?"

"Marlow's. I... I lost it." The world is tilting and he drops his head to his knees, fumbling for purchase on the wall behind him. "I can't... Chris, it's *Jared*. My Jared. He's here."

He thinks he hears Chris say, "Jesus fuck! Go... go *talk* to him!" before everything goes black.





“Ok, dude, that was just plain *weird!*”

As much as Jared *still* hates that word he can't deny it's a pretty accurate description. That had been weird. And kinda scary, not that he's admitting that.

“I mean, that wasn't just a blown fuse,” Chad babbles on, not noticing Jared's lack of response. “A blown fuse doesn't destroy every single light in the building. A blown fuse doesn't make the fucking windows explode. It was like a power surge went through the whole place or something. Except I didn't feel anything. Did you?”

Jared shakes his head. He did feel something though but it wasn't like an electric shock. More like... heat. Prickling at the back of his neck and then hitting him full blast in the face when he turned around, half a second before the lights went out. Something is nudging at the back of his brain but he can't grasp it and that kinda annoys him.

“You wanna go back to the hotel?” he asks to distract himself. “Or grab a bite maybe?”

Chad shrugs. “I could eat,” he says.

They stroll down the dark street, Chad chattering endlessly about how he's sure he has glass shards in his hair and ears and wondering if he should sue the damn place for emotional trauma.

“Only if you want them to think you're a pussy,” Jared says absentmindedly.

Something feels... off. No, that's not it. Something feels *not* off. Like a piece of a puzzle just fell into place except he's too close to see the final picture. What is it? He shivers, pulling his jacket tighter. For the beginning of May it's surprisingly cold,

much colder than it was when they were heading out. If he'd known it would get so damn chilly in the evenings he would have worn a long sleeve underneath.

He's standing at the counter of some late night Mexican diner, paying for his and Chad's burritos when he hears Chad say, "For fuck's sake. It's *snowing* now? What the hell is this, Alaska?" and he drops the food so fast it tumbles off the counter and on to the floor.

"What?" he whispers and turns around. White fluffy snowflakes are falling from the sky, heavy and wet and melting the second they touch ground. "Oh God."

"Man, I know we're not in Cali anymore," Chad prattles on oblivious, "but Jesus fuck, what the hell?"

"Oh. My. God!" Jared runs through the open door and outside, ignoring Chad's questions of "What's wrong with you?" and "Did you just drop my food on the floor? Hey, moron!" as he slip slides on the wet asphalt and comes to a halt, staring up at the dark and cloud filled sky.

"It's Jensen," he says dazed, feeling the light snowflakes melt on his face and in his hair. "Oh my God, it's Jensen!"

"What?" says Chad right behind him, sounding seriously worried by now. "Jared? What the fuck are you on about?"

"It's Jensen! Chad, it's Jensen!" He turns around and grabs Chad's arm, shaking him. "It's Jensen, man! I can't believe it. C'mon!"

"Where are we going? Hey man, slow down. You're not making any sense."

Jared waves down a cab and pulls Chad with him inside. "Marlow's, down on Columbus Avenue," he hisses at the driver then drops his head into his hands, fighting to breathe. He's freaking out. Holy shit, he's *totally freaking out!*

"Jare, c'mon," Chad says awkwardly. "Talk to me. You're totally freaking me out, dude."

He can't help it, he starts laughing hysterically, heels of his hands pressed into his eye sockets as he heaves for breath. "It's Jensen," he wheezes between his teeth. "Chad, it's Jensen. I know it. I fucking know it. God, I can't believe it."

"Ok, dude? Calm down. I know you think he's some kind of... wonderkid or whatever but no one can make snow but God and Santa, ok? You're delusional. What the hell did you drink at that bar?"

Jared doesn't answer but leans forward to knock on the plastic wall between them and the driver. "Sir? Sir? You ever seen snow like this in May before?"

The man eyes him in the rearview window. "Actually, I have..."

“See! It’s normal here!” Chad says triumphantly.

“...but it’s been a few years,” the driver continues, paying him no mind. “You boys interested in weird weather?” he asks when he sees the look on Jared’s face.

Jared nods. “Yes! Very.”

“Well, I’ve lived here all my life, close to sixty years, and I don’t know if it’s that global warming thing people keep talking about or the ozone layer or whatever but the last years... It’s been weird. Seriously strange.”

Jared’s heart speeds up in his chest. “Strange in what way?” he asks cautiously.

“Oh, I don’t know. Heavy rain clouds disappearing at the drop of a hat. Heat waves in January. That kinda thing. I’ve long since stopped listening to the weather report; those idiots don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”

“How long would you say this has been going on?” Jared asks, trying to keep calm. “Ten years, something like that?”

The man frowns, obviously thinking it over, then shakes his head. “Nah. Close though. I’d say eight maybe?” He eyes them curiously. “You boys meteorologists?”

“Something like that,” Jared says. “Anything else weird you’ve noticed?”

The man chuckles. “Son, this is New York. Everything here’s weird.”

Jared smiles politely back, resisting the urge to shake the man until he just tells him. “I’m sure it is. Anything in particular? Like... things changing color or maybe weird music?”

The cab driver shrugs, scratching the back of his neck. “I don’t know what to tell you, son. I’ve sometimes thought I saw things.... I’m sure it was nothing.” He scowls at them in the mirror. “Wouldn’t want that getting back to the boss, me seeing things on the job. I’m not a drinker, never drunk on the job.”

“I believe you. So... what did you see?”

The man looks embarrassed for a moment. “Flowers,” he finally says.

Jared blinks. “Flowers?”

“Nothing strange about that, right? Except when they weren’t there a moment ago. Swear to God, that bush was dead like everything else around it. It was the middle of December for Christ’s sake! And then I felt this warm rush of air and when I look over it’s blooming like it’s the middle of the goddamn summer. Weirdest thing I ever saw. Never told a soul until now.” He gives them another glare. “And if you tell my boss I’ll deny everything!”

“I promise, we won’t breathe a word.” Jared swallows. “Where was this bush?”

“Son, that was three years ago. And it’s May! Everything’s in bloom now. It won’t stand out.”

“I know. I know. Just tell me. Please.” He meets the suspicious eyes of the driver in the mirror, assuring him he’s not making fun.

“The Park,” he finally mumbles.

“The park?” Jared asks with a frown. “What park?”

The driver rolls his eyes. “Central Park, son. What other park is there? North entrance somewhere.”

“Ok, thank you.”

“You sure this is where you’re going?” the driver says and Jared looks up to see they’ve arrived at the bar. It’s dark except for the lights from the police cars and flashlights erratically sweeping the interior. “Doesn’t look like it’s open. What happened here? Some kind of bomb?”

“Something like that. Would you mind waiting?”

“The meter’s ticking, boy. It’s your money.”

“Thanks.”

He drags Chad with him out of the cab. It takes them a while to get someone talking to them but finally they find one of the bartenders who’s sifting through the mountains of broken glass at the bar, looking for his keys.

“Craziest thing I’ve ever seen,” he says when they ask him. “Not a single whole glass left in the place. A girl even got cracks in her glasses. You boys were lucky to not get hurt.”

“People got hurt?”

He shrugs. “A couple of cuts and some bruises, mostly from people panicking and bumping into each other. A few girls stumbled and fell to the floor, cutting up their hands and knees. High heels, man. Those just aren’t made for running. Oh and some guy hit his head and knocked himself out, we found him lying under a table. Needed a couple of stitches. Other than that no. Amazing really.”

Jared nods. “So what kind of people do you get here?” he asks casually. “Seemed like a very mixed crowd.”

“I guess. We get all kinds. Everything from businessmen to aspiring artists. You know how it is. After a while they all tend to blend together.”

Jared sighs. “Yeah.” Damn.

He's about to turn away when the guy adds, "Then there's half the school. Both teachers and students."

Jared raises his eyebrows. "School?" he asks confused.

"Juilliard. It's just around the corner."

Jared stares at him, frozen in place. Then a huge smile breaks out on his face and he grabs the man, pulling him into such a tight hug the air rushes out of his lungs with a squeak.

"Thank you! Oh god, thank you!" Jared pulls back, grinning like a maniac at the poor man who's staring back, looking startled. "You just saved my life!" He's laughing half-hysterically, ecstatic with excitement! "Thank you! A thousand times!"

"You're... welcome?" The man glances over at Chad who just shrugs.

"My man's a hugger, what can I say." He grabs Jared by the elbow and pulls him out the door. "C'mon, buddy, before you really start to embarrass me."

Jared's too busy smiling to be insulted. "He went to Juilliard!" he laughs. "I knew he could do it! Juilliard, dude!"

"Maybe we should check with them before you get your hopes up too high," Chad says cautiously. "I mean, I thought you'd already looked there years ago?"

"We did. Mom called them repeatedly for two years. He must have started later." He suddenly feels faint and stumbles to the cab, only just managing to get inside before collapsing.

"Dude, you okay?" Chad asks worried as soon as he's given the driver the address to their hotel.

"I can't believe it." He can feel tears stinging his eyes and he wipes at them with his fingers, breath hitching. "Ten years I've been looking for him and he's been here the whole time. I'm finally going to see him again."

Chad bites his lip, eyeing the driver who is pretending not to listen. "Jare, not to burst your bubble but... You don't know if it's him. And even if it is, who says he even remembers you?"

"He remembers me," Jared says firmly. "Why you think that happened tonight? The... whatever that was at the bar. And the snow! The first time I've ever been to New York and we end up walking into the same bar. If that's not Fate I don't know what is."

Chad sighs. "Ok, let's say he was there. Let's say he actually made that happen. Which, frankly, sounds completely fucking insane but alright. Let's say he saw you. He blew the fucking place, Jare! And now you wanna go after the guy? Are you insane?"



“He’s not like that. He just sometimes gets... upset.” Jared cringes at the word as it leaves his lips. “He had trouble controlling strong emotions, ok? And yeah, alright, I don’t know if those emotions were happy or it just shocked him, seeing me, or whatever but he felt them because of me, I know that.”

“Dude, I don’t know how to say this but... your obsession with this guy is kinda creepy. He was your teacher, man. For less than a year. And you’re acting like he’s your frigging Prince Charming. It’s kinda gay.”

“Chad, shut up,” Jared says annoyed. “He wasn’t just my teacher, he was my best friend. A way better friend than you were back then.”

“Hey!”

“Don’t be like that. You were always playing basketball and hardly ever spoke to me, dude. Besides it’s not just that. He was... different. He was Jensen. You have no idea what he was like.”

“He was weird and played the piano. And apparently makes snow and blows up buildings.” Chad shakes his head. “I know you think he was like some kind of wizard or something but dude, you’re not thirteen anymore. You got to wake up and face reality. There’s no such thing as magic, man.”

Jared glares at him stubbornly. “You didn’t see it. You didn’t... It was real, ok? He made the sun shine and flowers bloom and his music... you could *see* his music. You could feel it. It was real.” He looks up at the driver who’s pretending not to listen while shooting them confused glances in the rearview mirror. “Do *you* believe in magic, sir?”

“Who, me?” The man laughs but when Jared just continues to gaze at him expectantly he goes quiet and then says, “When you get to my age you don’t believe in anything anymore, son. But there have been times...” He looks Jared straight in the eye in the mirror. “If you think it’s real and know where to find it, I say go after it. If there really is such a thing as magic, don’t let it slip you by just because other people can’t see it.”

Jared smiles and nods, too overwhelmed for words. Beside him Chad groans and mutters something that sounds like, “Now he’ll never give up.”



His head hurts. That’s the first thing that registers, his head hurting like a sonofabitch. Hurts enough that he wants to scream but all he can manage is a low whimper.

“Lie still,” says someone that sounds like Chris but Jensen isn’t sure. His ears are ringing and they hurt. Fuck. Everything hurts. What the hell is going on?

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move!”

Move? He'd be happy if he could just stop breathing and die. Moving is so not on the agenda.

He lies gasping, pulling in shallow breaths that do nothing to help with the dizziness but he can't seem to expand his chest enough to make room for more air.

"Here."

Something cold lands on his forehead, making him flinch, which again sends another spike of agony through his brain. "Uhhgh," he manages on the intake, air rasping its way down his throat. He tries to push the cold away but his wrist is caught between strong fingers and forced back down by his side.

"Stop it. Calm down, Jen. You're gonna be fine." Chris's voice is soothing, the way it used to sound back in the early days of awful when Jensen wanted to die. The cool cloth sweeps his face before being put back over his forehead. He cracks one eye open, squinting against the soft light. He's back at home, lying in bed, with Chris sitting on the edge, gazing down at him with worried eyes.

"Whah..." He clears his throat. "What happened?"

Chris raises his eyebrows at him but his eyes are still wary, almost frightened. "You tell me, man. Your call got cut off and when I got there it looked like a freaking war zone. Found you passed out under a table, blood leaking from your nose and ears and a cut on your head. Scared the crap out of me."

Jensen frowns, which does nothing to sooth his headache and only makes the cloth slide down over his eyes. He reaches to push it up, mumbling, "I've got it," when Chris moves to do it for him. "Got where?" he asks, still too fuzzy to think. "I don't remember."

A strange look flashes across Chris's face that Jensen can't interpret. "Nothing?"

He closes his eyes, trying to think. Something stirs at the back of his mind, steadily pushing forward but he can't grasp it. "I was at work..." He breathes in and out, hating the familiar grogginess that he'd swore he'd never feel again. "Fuck, I can't think." He pauses, then opens his eyes and asks, "Did you give me something?" It comes out sharper than he intended.

"No." Chris sighs when Jensen distrustfully holds his gaze. "No, man. I didn't. Although I should because I bet your head is killing you right now. And you ruptured at least one eardrum, maybe both. Hell boy, you're a fucking mess."

"Don't want drugs," he says, shaking his head and gasping when the movement makes him almost black out from the pain. "Fuck."

"Christ. Jensen," Chris says softly, "I'm not talking anything heavy. Just a couple of painkillers while you're getting over the worst."

“No. No drugs. Don’t.” Just the thought has his breath quickening again and Chris lays a hand on his arm, squeezing it lightly.

“Alright, alright. I won’t, I promise.”

They sit in silence for a while, Jensen just breathing while Chris watches him.

“I want to take you to the ER, have them check you out,” he finally says in a quiet voice, raising his hand when Jensen opens his mouth to argue. “I know you won’t go but I still wish you would. Just thought I’d tell you that.”

“Can’t,” he rasps. “You know that.”

“I know. I just wish... You look bad, man. Almost worse than when you first got out.”

“I’ll get better,” he says, trying his best to keep his voice steady. “I always do.” The first step though would be to figure out what’s actually wrong with him. “What happened?”

For a moment Chris looks like he’s not sure if he should tell him but then he sighs and grabs Jensen’s hand. It’s such an uncharacteristic move Jensen almost snatches it back. He doesn’t though, just stares up at Chris, holding his breath. Chris’s fingers are calloused at the tips, rasping the back of Jensen’s hand as he tightens the hold.

“Do you remember being at Marlow’s? Some stupid karaoke night.”

Jensen frowns. “No. Wait... That’s on Thursday.”

“Today *is* Thursday,” Chris answers but he says it with a soft smile, used to Jensen losing track of the days or even months. He’d celebrate Christmas in June if people didn’t set him straight.

“Oh. Ugh, I hate karaoke,” Jensen sighs. “Did I at least get a good song?”

“I don’t think you even made it on stage,” Chris says, turning serious again. “Something happened and you... You kinda blew the joint. Literally. Windows, bottles, glasses, all the lights. Plus short-circuited the whole building and half the street.”

His mouth drops open. After a moment he closes it again, blinking his eyes slowly. “Did... did anyone get hurt?” he finally asks shakily. “Did I hurt anyone?”

“No.” Chris shakes his head. “Nothing serious, I promise. Just a few cuts and bruises. Think you got the worst of it. You fell on something, a table I think, cutting your head. You probably have a concussion. Plus you popped your ears. You don’t remember any of this? You were awake when they stitched your head. Nothing?”

“No.” The reality of it is starting to dawn on him and he feels sick. “What happened? You said something happened. What the fuck happened?”

Chris hesitates. “Promise not to freak out again? Because fuck if we can afford to replace our windows one more time. Not like our insurance covers witchcraft.”

Jensen clenches his jaw. He hates that word. “Chris, cut the bull and just tell m-.”

“You saw Jared,” Chris cuts in. “When you called me you said... You said you’d seen Jared, Jen. That he was there.”

Jensen blinks. The lights flicker and the glass of water on the bedside table trembles. Chris tenses, grabbing it before it falls off. “Jensen,” he warns but the danger has already passed, leaving them in silence. “You okay?”

Jensen just stares at him. He feels... God, he has no idea. Jared was there? Did he see him? Did he talk to him? “Did he see me?” he asks, hating when his voice cracks. “Jared, did he see me? Did he even know I was there?”

Chris shakes his head. “I don’t think so.” He sighs at the devastated look on Jensen’s face. “I tried to look around for him but Jen, you were out cold and it was all chaos, man. I couldn’t... Maybe he was there, maybe not. I don’t fucking know.”

“So I lost him. Again.” His breath hitches and he squeezes his eyes shut, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “Fuck! He found me and I *lost* him!” This can’t be happening. What is he supposed to do now? What the hell is he supposed to do now?

“Jensen...”

“He was there! He was there and I... God!” Pain shoots through his head when he grinds his fists into his eyes but he doesn’t fucking care.

“Stop it!” Chris growls and grabs his wrists, forcing his hands away. “Calm down for fuck’s sake. If he really was there that means he’s in New York, right now. And if he’s in fucking New York, we’ll fucking find him. I’ll fucking find him for you, man, I promise.”

And now he’s laughing. A hollow laughter that makes his head hurt even more. “When did you turn into fucking Cupid?” he asks brokenly. “You don’t even believe in him. Fuck, Chris, you’ve never believed in us.”

There’s silence for a long time and when Chris’s voice returns it’s quiet. “I never said that, Jensen. I just...” He pauses, swallowing audibly. “It scared me, ok, thinking of what it would do to you if he never found you. I just wanted you to be prepared for that.”

“He *did* find me. And I *blew* it.” He clenches his jaw in frustration. “Literally. Fuck!”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, will you let it go?” Chris snaps. “You got caught off guard. You’ve been waiting for this for ten fucking years, man. You’re allowed to freak out

a little when it finally happens. Besides, they're insured. They'll be compensated. Stop worrying about it."

"I don't care about fucking Marlow's, ok?" he growls, even if that's not true. He'll probably never be able to go there again without feeling guilty as hell. "Don't you get it? I *saw* him and BAM! Fucking Hiroshima. What you think is gonna happen if I actually *talk* to him or, god forbid, *touch* him? What if..." He gives out a shaky laugh. "What if my mom was right, huh?"

Chris grimaces. "About what?"

"That I shouldn't feel things. That I'd hurt people by allowing myself to feel. What if he finds me and I...I..."

"Jensen, c'mon. Your mother... She was..." Chris sighs. "Dude, she was a goddamn psycho."

Jensen can feel his lips thinning. "She wasn't," he says as calmly as he can manage. "She was just... too normal. And scared. She didn't know how to handle me and so she screwed up. I don't blame her."

"Well, I do," Chris says coldly. "She screwed *you* up, man. And then she got you locked up and left you there to rot. How the hell can you not blame her?"

"Because she's my mom and I love her," he says.

He knows Chris doesn't understand but he remembers his mom from before his grandmother died. Neurotic and worried and constantly holding him back but always loving him, always doing it *for* him *because* she loved him.. He remembers her holding him tight when he'd come home from school, crying because he felt so lonely and left out. He remembers her hopeful face when he told her he wanted to learn to play the piano and the faith she'd shown in him by making sure he got one.

And now that he knows why she changed, why everything changed between them, how can he blame her? A mother's worst nightmare, her son being a killer, or so she thought. And she still cared for him, in every way she could. She still fed him and clothed him and did everything a mother is supposed to do for her child. Everything but love him and believe in him.

"Jensen."

But he's got enough to worry about without brooding over that as well. Like Jared being somewhere here in New York, lost to him. And whatever control he thought he had over this damn thing obviously being shattered. Not to mention the fact that apparently he's hurting himself as well as other's now. He's starting to feel better though, the headache is subsiding and his ears are only throbbing dully. Whatever damage he'd done to them it's not affecting his hearing too much, just subduing it, like he's got water in his ears. As long as his music is still there he can deal with that.

“Jensen,” Chris repeats and when Jensen looks up Chris raises his eyebrows at him. “Hi. You back?”

He nods and gives Chris a small smile in apology. “Sorry. Did I zone out?”

Chris grins but his eyes look worried. “Only about ten minutes. You should probably try and get some sleep. I’ll come wake you up in a couple of hours, make sure you’re still with us.” He shakes his head when Jensen opens his mouth to argue. “Nothing we can do right now anyway, it’s the middle of the night. Tomorrow I’ll start asking around, I promise.”

Jensen swallows. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. And Jensen?” Chris touches his shoulder lightly with his fingertips. “Don’t worry about hurting him, ok? No way that’s gonna happen.”

“How do you know that?”

Chris smiles. “You said it yourself, it’s Jared. You saw it ten years ago. I think if there were blown up heads involved, your vision would have mentioned that, Jenny boy.”

“Don’t call me that,” he mutters but he’s smiling and that’s how he falls asleep, moments after Chris closes the door.

“I already called you in sick,” Chris mumbles around a spoonful of cereal as Jensen stumbles into the kitchen the morning after, feeling like a train ran him over. “So you can get your pretty little ass back to bed.”

“I’m okay,” Jensen rasps and only just manages to grab a chair before he falls over. He sinks down on it, letting his forehead rest on his arm on the table. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, I can see that. You’re the picture of health,” Chris says sarcastically. “Dude, bed.”

Jensen flips him the finger without even looking up. “Dude, fuck off.”

“I think I preferred you when you said ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’ and thought the middle finger was for scratching your nose,” Chris says and sighs dramatically. “Kids today...” He grins when Jensen scowls at him but it looks strained.

“Funny.” Jensen rubs his temples with his thumbs but it does nothing to relieve the aching pressure in his head.

“Oh, and Tom called,” Chris adds. “He wants to come see you after school’s over.”

Jensen's head snaps up, the sharp movement turning everything white for a moment. "Why?" he breathes through the nausea that follows, panic rises in his throat. "Did he see something?"

"Don't be so paranoid. What would he have seen?" Chris says, rolling his eyes. "He's just worried about you. You should have seen him last night, he was freaking out, man. You'd think he'd never seen an almost dead guy before. Talking about which," he adds, pointing his spoon at Jensen, "You. Should. Be. In. *Bed*."

"You. Should. Suck. My. Dick," Jensen bites back. "Seriously, Chris, back off. I'm fucking fine. Have you called Marlow's yet?"

Chris scowls and stands abruptly up, pouring coffee into two mugs and handing one to Jensen. "Their phone's not working," he says and takes a sip, grimacing like he always does. Chris drinks coffee for the caffeine and company while Jensen drinks it because in his opinion it comes closest to ambrosia.

"We have to go there," he says impatiently before taking a big gulp himself. Instead of the usual relief he only feels more nauseous. "See if they remember seeing Jared."

"You're not going anywhere," Chris says harshly. "Seriously, Jen, don't even try it."

"Fuck it, man..." Jensen starts but that's as far as he gets before Chris slams his mug down on the table, splashing brown coffee all over it.

"No, fuck *you*!" he growls. "Fuck you, man!"

Jensen jerks back, staring at him. "What? Chris..."

"Don't you fucking Chris me," Chris hisses. "You could have died, ok? I got there and I thought you were dead! I thought you were dead, man! You had blood all over your face and you wouldn't wake up and I thought, 'That's it, Jensen's gone.'"

He lets out a shuddering breath, his eyes a startling blue in his pale face. "They wanted to take you in after they stitched you up and you passed out again but I wouldn't let them because I *knew* you'd freak out if you woke up in a hospital and whatever happened at Marlow's would be *peanuts* compared to that. Knew you'd *kill* me for risking other people like that. And so for two hours I sat by your bed, waiting for you to wake up again, scared to death that I'd made the wrong decision and you'd be braindead or something. So don't you fucking Chris me! Don't you fucking dare!"

Jensen stares at him in shock. "Chris, I'm sorry. I never... Hey, man," he says helplessly and reaches out for him.

"Don't," Chris warns and stands up, fetching a rag to clean the table. Because he knows what a neat freak Jensen is, that's the only reason he even bothers. Just like everything else he's changed in his life to accommodate Jensen and his fucked up needs. Jensen bites his lip, feeling like a complete asshole.

He watches silently as Chris wipes the table clean and then walks over to the sink, rinsing the rag before folding it neatly and laying it over the spout. He waits for Chris to turn around but he doesn't, just keeps standing there, shoulders tense and his breathing ragged.

"I'll go lie down," Jensen finally says in a quiet voice. "I promise. Hey... C'mon, man. Will you just look at me? Please?"

The moment seems to hang on forever but finally Chris turns around. The anger is gone from his eyes, leaving him looking worn-out and dejected. "What?" he grumbles.

"I'm sorry. Ok? I know..." Jensen swallows. "I know it's not easy, living with me. I know I'm... I'm fucked up and selfish and..."

Chris sighs. "Jensen," he says tiredly. "Don't..."

"No, listen. Fuck, Chris. My own family gave up on me but you... You don't. You didn't even know me, man. You just took me in with every fucked up shit that came with it and I..."

"Christ, will you just shut up?" Chris pushes himself off of the kitchen bench with a growl. "You're such a fucking girl sometimes, Ackles."

"Don't do that," Jensen sighs.

"What?" Chris bites back. "Call you a girl?"

"Make it out to be nothing. You think I don't know what you've given up for me? You don't go on tours anymore, you never bring anyone home except Steve. You haven't been to visit your folks in three years, man. Not to mention you let me stay here without paying anything those first years. You bought me food and clothes and... You saw me through four years of college, for Christ's sake! And all you get for your trouble is stuff like this. Me being... me. Blowing things up and scaring the shit out of you."

"Are you done?" Chris asks sarcastically, "Or do we need to bring out the emo music and ice cream?"

"I'm trying to thank you, you prick."

"Yeah, whatever." When Jensen just glares at him he sighs and looks away. "Alright, I hear you. But you're wrong. I might have changed some things, partly because of you, but it's not like I'm crying into my pillow about it. And whatever I've given up it's been more than worth it."

"Yeah, right," Jensen snorts. "Because living with me is like a dream come true."

"Jensen, will you just shut up? Do you have any idea what a... *privilege* it is, knowing someone like you?"



When Jensen just frowns at Chris, he closes his eyes for a moment before fixing them on Jensen. “Most people...” he says quietly, “they go through life thinking this is all there is. Just work and sleep and popping out some kids and then one day you wake up and you’re old and dying. That’s it. But you... you’re everything people wish their life was like.”

“Screwed up?”

“Magical.” Chris’s cheeks turn slightly pink but he doesn’t look away. “You brought fucking magic into my life, man. Literally. Which means that whatever happens I will have known there *is* more to life. And that... that makes it worth it and a whole lot more.”

Jensen blinks. “Oh,” he says, feeling stupid and having no idea how to respond.

“Plus,” Chris adds as an afterthought, “you’re a decent lay.”

Jensen looks at him sharply but then the corner of his lips start turning up and before he knows it he’s grinning and then chuckling before finally laughing out loud, clutching his head as each sucked in breath sends spikes of white pain through his brain.

“You wish!” he wheezes out when he finally gets his breath back. “Because sex with me? It’s to *die* for.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Chris mutters but he’s smiling and the tension is gone. “See if I ever blow you again.”

“You love my dick,” Jensen says with a grin. “It’s... what’s that word? Magical. I bring *magic* into your life.”

“Fuck off,” Chris says, crimson faced, and Jensen starts laughing again. “Barbarian, ruining my beautiful emotional moment.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you feeling ‘unprivileged’?”

Chris picks up the wet rag and throws it at him. Then spends the next ten minutes cursing and looking guilty as hell for ‘making’ Jensen stop it midair and throw it back, before going suddenly white as a sheet and falling sideways in his seat, tumbling onto the floor.

“No more mojo for you,” he mutters as he supports a stumbling blinded Jensen to his room. “No talking, no getting out of bed, no nothing.”

“Jared...” Jensen moans painfully as Chris tugs him in. “You promised...”

“I did and I will,” Chris says with a sigh. “But I’m not leaving you alone. Steve’s gonna be here in half an hour, I’ll go then. And I’ll call Tom and tell him you’re not up to seeing anyone until later. Ok?”

“Uhm,” Jensen mumbles. He feels dizzy and thinks he might be passing out again. “Jared,” he says again, struggling to keep his eyes open. “Tall. Really tall. And... and beautiful.”

“I know. I know what he looks like, Jen,” Chris says softly. “You’ve told me a thousand times.”

“Happy. He smiles like...” Jensen closes his eyes, smiling. “So amazing,” he sighs.

“Yeah, Jen. I know. Go to sleep.”

“Love him.”

“I know.” Chris sighs. “I know you do.”

He stands watching Jensen sleep until the doorbell rings.



“Sandy... Yes, I know. I’m not bailing! Will you just listen to me? No. Fine. Yeah. Talk to you later.” He snaps his phone shut with a curse and slips it back into his pocket. Women!

“Trouble in Paradise?” Chad asks, looking more gleeful than worried. “The little woman not too happy about you pursuing your long lost boyfriend?”

“Will you just stop?” Jared sighs. “He’s not my boyfriend. That’s not why... Fuck, why am I even talking to you?”

“Because I’m the only one you’ve got?” Chad suggests and Jared flips him the finger.

It’s true though, right now Chad *is* all he’s got. Sandy is not happy. Even if last night’s ‘girls night out’ was her idea, now she’s acting as if he’s the one leaving her alone for half their brief stay in New York. Which is just stupid. For one thing, this whole weekend was supposed to be just the two of them, finally getting a little romantic alone time. She’s the one who didn’t even *try* to argue when Chad and Sophia invited themselves with, just grinned and said it could be fun. Then hit his arm as soon as they were out the door and accused him of not finding an excuse to say no. What the hell?

Second, before he even mentioned he wouldn’t be able to meet her for breakfast since he was already half across the city, Sandy had interrupted to tell him she and Sophia had shopping plans. Romantic trip quickly turned into shopaholic fest. It’s not like he even *fits* into that plan, except to carry bags and hand out money when Sandy runs short. Having to carry bags at the mall back home is bad enough; tracking around fucking New York with them is his idea of Hell.

He just doesn’t get women. They are just as much a mystery to him now as they were ten years ago, except instead of just worrying about the physics of kissing, he’s now

got to balance that whole relationship thing. Which, turns out, is a lot more complicated.

“Besides, I didn’t tell her what we were doing,” he adds, realizing his mistake as soon as the words leave his tongue.

“Wait, what?” The mocking look in Chad’s eyes is gone, replaced by wariness. “Are you just stupid or is there something you’re not telling me?”

Jared sighs. “She never liked Jensen, ok? I don’t know why, she just never did. So I didn’t tell her he was the reason I couldn’t meet her right away. It’s just not worth the hassle.”

Chad sighs. “Dude, you know I love your girl but you are so whipped, man. I’m surprised she lets you see me.”

Jared doesn’t tell him sometimes she won’t. “I’m not whipped!” he argues instead. “I’m just sensitive to her needs because I’m an awesome boyfriend. Something you wouldn’t know anything about.”

“Whipped.”

“Shut up.”

He turns to look up at the tall building in front of him. There’s a steady run of people going in and out of it, smiling and talking and looking like they’re finally somewhere they belong. Maybe they too always felt weird, like Jensen. Well, not *like* Jensen. He doubts there’s anyone in the whole world like Jensen.

He still can’t believe it. Jensen made it to Juilliard! Ten years ago he had dreaded Jensen going, even if he knew how much it would mean to him. But now it almost makes him tear up, thinking of Jensen finally getting to do what *he* wanted.

He must have started late if he’s still a student, Jared realizes. Thinking of where he might have spent the in-between years brings back memories of worrying himself sick, imagining Jensen somewhere locked up in a room even drearier than the one he’d had at home, with no piano and no one to talk to. It seems silly now, standing out here in the sun, knowing Jensen is *here* where he always wanted to go, and probably feeling fine and happy.

Maybe his mother had been right, that he was being paranoid. Maybe he misunderstood Jensen and they’d just wanted to take him somewhere he could be in peace and learn to live with his gift.

Maybe.

But he’d sounded so scared...

“Are we just going to stand here or what?” Chad says impatiently. “Jared?”

Jared nods to himself. It is time.

They walk up the steps and step into the large lobby. A middle aged receptionist looks up with a reserved smile as they walk up to her. “Yes?” she asks when Jared smiles down at her, turning his charm up to a hundred.

“Hi.” He checks her nametag and smiles again. “Lizze. I’m looking for a student I’m pretty sure goes here,” he says, keeping his tone sincere and hopeful. “Old friend of mine, I haven’t seen him since high school. We lost touch, you know how it is.”

She nods but her face is politely guarded. “I’m afraid there’s a limit to how much information I can give you,” she says, smiling in apology. “School policy.”

He nods sympathetically. “I understand,” he says, scrunching up his eyebrows in what Chad likes to call his orphan puppy look. “It’s just... We were very close and then things happened and... Well, I’ve been looking for him for so long and when someone told me he went here I just had to give it a shot.” He tilts his head, his smile sad and pleading and she melts before his eyes.

“I can check our register, see if his name comes up. But I can’t let you into the dorm without checking with him first.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem,” he says, gripping the counter tight to keep from bouncing on his feet. “Bet he’ll be surprised to see me after all this time.” He smiles, allowing a fraction of his excitement to show and she smiles back, captured by his enthusiasm.

“Now what did you say your friend’s name was?” she asks, pushing wire-rimmed glasses up on her nose before clicking the mouse for her computer. “And would you know what division and year he is in?”

“Ackles. I don’t know which year but he plays the piano.”

She nods, frowning slightly. After a while she shakes her head, giving him a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry. I don’t have any student registered by that name.”

Jared’s face falls. “What? No, it can’t be. I know...” Something prickles behind his eyes and he blinks furiously. “He’s got to be here!”

“I’m really sorry,” she repeats, obviously taken aback by his reaction. “I wish I could help you.”

“Dude, c’mon,” Chad says and tries to pull him away but Jared shrugs him off.

“No. I know he’s here. Maybe he changed his name. Maybe... Can you look up birthdays?” he asks desperately. “Or first names?”

“I’m sorry, no, I can’t do that.” She gives him a sad smile. “Maybe whoever told you he was here got it wrong. There are other music schools...”

“No. He was going to Juilliard,” Jared says stubbornly. “That’s what he always wanted. If he’s anywhere it’s here.”

“Many people apply but there are only a few who get in...” she starts but he cuts her off with a wave of his hand.

“No. There’s no way he wouldn’t have gotten in. He... He’s unique, ok? He’s... He creates worlds with his music.” A lump is forming in his throat and he tries to swallow but it won’t go away. “There isn’t a person on Earth like him.”

“Jared...” Chad sighs, tugging at his arm, and he turns vehemently around, jerking himself free.

“No. He’s here! I know he’s here. It was Jensen. Last night... It was Jensen!”

“You’re looking for *Jensen Ackles*?” Lizzie says surprised and he freezes. When he turns around she’s smiling again, looking almost awed. “You’re *Jared*? Oh God. Of course you are. I should have seen it, I just didn’t connect.”

He blinks. “You know me? Wait... You know Jensen!?! But you said...”

“He’s not a student here, he’s a teacher,” she explains and laughs at his astonishment. “Youngest we’ve ever had. And you’re right, he *is* unique.”

She sighs softly as she smiles, like she just can’t help herself, her eyes warm and filled with affection. It reminds Jared of his mother, the way she sometimes looks at him, proud and protective, like she would do anything to make him happy, and the realization makes his breath hitch.

He found Jensen! And he’s not somewhere alone and suffering but exactly where he always wanted to be, surrounded by good people, like this sweet woman, who care for him and don’t think he’s weird but unique. After all the nightmares and years of imagining Jensen in the worst of places, *this*, knowing he’s here and happy...

Jared lets out a short broken laugh, then covers his face with his hand, fighting to compose himself. He hadn’t realized how scared he’d been that he was wrong before he was proven right. ‘Thank you,’ he offers to whoever is listening. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’

“Are you alright?” Lizzie says worried and he laughs again and nods, wiping at his eyes with his fingers.

“How did... My name. How did you recognize my name?”

She tilts her head and looks at him, like she doesn’t quite believe he’s there. “His first day here, I think before he checked out his classes or found what room he had or anything... He walked up to this desk, so shy but so determined, and he told me that if someone named Jared ever came looking for him, he needed to be let known right away.”

He just stares at her, the lump in his throat growing. All these years when he'd been looking for Jensen, Jensen had been waiting for him.

"Every now and then he'd stop by, making sure we remembered and had his number and room and knew how to reach him. Even after he graduated and started working here, he still made sure to tell us. As if we'd forget." She shakes her head, smiling softly. "I don't think there's a single staff member here who hasn't been hoping for you to show up. We were starting to think you were a figment of his imagination."

She straightens up, suddenly serious. "It's been seven years, young man, where have you been all this time?"

Jared blushes but he's too happy to really feel admonished. "First I had to grow up," he says and laughs shakily, "but after that... Looking for him, ma'am. I swear. Always looking for him."

Her eyes turn soft again and she looks up at him with that same wondrous gaze. "You look just like he said you would," she says, almost awed. Then adds with a grin, "Well, he also keeps repeating you'd be magnificent and amazing but I don't know you well enough to know if that's true."

Jared can feel himself blushing deep red. "He's still saying that?" He can hear Chad snorting behind him but ignores it. "Well... he always did have a flare for the dramatic."

"In a way, I guess," she says and shrugs. "Mostly I think he just tells things as he sees them. And he sees things differently than most."

For a moment he wonders if she knows. If it's possible that Jensen is actually out and open about what he is but she looks so calm, like it's nothing more strange than a matter of eccentricity, so he brushes that thought aside.

"Is he here?" he asks instead. "Can I see him?"

She frowns as if in thought. "You know, I haven't actually seen him this morning but that doesn't mean much, he's often late. You know how he is," she adds and winks. Jared really wishes he did. "Let me check though. I was on a coffee break earlier, he might have gotten in then."

She picks up the phone and taps in a number, seeming oblivious to Jared's sudden nervousness. "Hey, Tom," she says after a short pause. "Have you seen Jensen this morning?" He hears someone talking on the other end and Lizzie's eyes widen in sudden shock. "Oh God, is he alright? What happened?"

Jared's stomach jumps up to his throat. "What? Is something wrong?" he asks in panic but she doesn't answer, just lifts her hand to shut him up and shakes her head a little.

"I knew there was some kind of accident but... Yeah. No, I hadn't heard. So you don't know... Why? But if he was... Oh my! Well, no. It's..." The worried look is

replaced by the old smile. “You’ll never believe who just walked in here. Jared! Yes, *that* Jared! Jared Padalecki of all people, who’d have ever guessed?” She doesn’t even hesitate around his latter name, which usually has people stuttering. Jensen must have really drilled it into her.

“Well, I don’t know. Yes, I’m sure.” She rolls her eyes then gives Jared an apologetic smile. “He says I need to see an ID.”

Jared raises his eyebrows but doesn’t hesitate, just pulls out his wallet and hands it over. She looks through it, pausing at the picture of him and Sandy squished together in a photo booth that they had taken together last year.

“That your girlfriend?” she asks, sounding strangely guarded.

He blinks. For some reason he doesn’t want to say yes but she is, isn’t she? “Kinda,” he settles on and Lizzie gives him a strange look. “Yes,” he rectifies. “Yes, that’s Sandy, my girlfriend.”

She sighs and hands him back his wallet then turns her attention back to the phone. “It’s the real one, alright. Jared Padalecki, no question about it.” She listens a bit longer than says, “I’ll get back to you on that,” before hanging up and looking back at Jared, “How long are you in New York for?”

“Just this weekend.” Except now he’s found Jensen he doesn’t really want to leave. At all. “I mean, that was the plan. But... I don’t know.”

She smiles, the reservation gone from her eyes, but she still looks a little sad, as if somehow he let her down. He wishes he knew in what way.

“Well, here’s the deal, Jared. Jensen was in some kind of accident over at the local bar last night. There was an explosion...”

“I know, we were there,” Jared cuts in. “That’s where I... heard he was here.”

“Ah, I see. Well, then you might have guessed some people got hurt and seems Jensen was one of them. Tom doesn’t know how serious it is but he’s not in the hospital so I guess that’s good news.” She smiles at him in encouragement and he tries to smile back.

“So he’s home? Where is that? I want to see him,” he says, aware that he’s talking way too fast and nervously. “I have to... I *need* to see him. Especially if he’s hurt.”

“Tom... that’s Tom Welling,” she explains, “he’s an assistant coach at the drama department. Well, he’s going over there later today and he offered to take you. He talked to Chris who said Jensen is going to be sleeping most of the day anyway, so barging in on him now and unannounced probably wouldn’t be such a great idea.”

“No. I guess not.” He bites his lip, trying to not show his disappointment. Something suddenly strikes him and he looks up at her, frowning. “Who’s Chris? You said he talked to Chris. Who’s that?”

“Jensen’s roommate. I mean,” she adds, looking slightly awkward, “they share an apartment. Chris is... Well, I guess you could say he takes care of Jensen. You know how he is,” she says again and once more Jared wants to yell that no, he doesn’t. He doesn’t really know him at all. “He lives in the clouds that boy. He’d leave his own head there if no one reminded him.”

Jared smiles then because yes, *that* he does remember. Jensen zoning out, lost in his own head, as he liked to call it. If he still does that then maybe it had nothing to do with the drugs. Maybe it was just Jensen, losing himself in his own magical world.

“Give me your phone number and I’ll let Tom call you before he heads over.”

He writes it down carefully, making sure his usual scribble is clear and easily readable, even asking her to read the numbers out loud to be sure she got it right. “Please don’t forget,” he begs her and she assures him she won’t.

“After all these years, you really think I’d do that?” she says and shakes her head in amusement. “Jared Padalecki. Well, I’ll be damned.”

He gives her a strained smile and turns away. Chad is already by the door, looking impatient and kinda freaked. At the last moment Jared stops and goes back and when she looks up in question he asks, “Is he happy? Do you think he’s happy?”

Her face softens and she gives him a fond smile. “I think he’s been content,” she says in earnest, “but now you’re here...” She hesitates but then her eyes turn serious and she leans forward, fixing them on him. “He’s been waiting a long time for you, Jared Padalecki. Please don’t let him down.”

He swallows. “I won’t,” he says even if he has no idea what it is she expects of him. What Jensen expects of him. But whatever it is, he’ll do his damndest to live up to it.



“Jensen. Hey, man.”

Someone is shaking him lightly and he struggles his eyes open. They’re crusted and feel swollen and his head is thudding dully. “Wha’?” he chokes out, the words rasping through the roughness of his throat.

Chris stops shaking him but he keeps his hand on Jensen’s shoulder, heavy and tired. “Sorry for waking you but...”

Jensen’s instantly awake, trying to sit up but Chris pushes him gently down again. “Did you find him? Jared, did you find Jared?” he asks, hating how desperate he sounds.

Chris watches him silent for a moment but then his lips tug up into a smile. “He found you,” he says. “Showed up at Juilliard this morning.”



“What?” He blinks and the lights flicker. Chris tenses slightly but when nothing else happens he relaxes and gives Jensen a small grin.

“Tom is bringing him over in an hour. I thought I’d give you a warning. Allow you some time to shower and shave and try not to look quite so dead.”

“He... he’s coming over?” Jensen chokes out. He expects to wake up, for real this time, and find out he’s just been dreaming again. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s dreamed of Jared suddenly showing up on his doorstep or that he’d wake up in the park to find Jared lying by his side, sleeping. He licks lips that feel cracked and dry under his tongue. “Jared? My Jared?” he asks, just to be sure.

Chris’s grin turns soft and he nods, squeezing his shoulder. “Yeah. Yeah, Jen. He’s coming over. Lizzie says he’s exactly like you described him.”

“I...”

It’s too much. He rubs a palm over his face then moves it up to cover his eyes and he keeps it there, trembling fingers digging into his skull. Chris doesn’t say anything, just keeps his hand on Jensen’s shoulder, a tighter grip the only indication that he knows Jensen is crying. They stay like that for a while, silent except for the small hitches of Jensen’s breathing, his chest jumping with every one, quicker and quicker and then finally slowing down again. He’d feel embarrassed but Chris has seen him through worse and at least this time it’s for a happy reason.

With a final deep breath he nods his head slightly, biting his lips though he is still covering his eyes. “Shower... shower sounds good,” he says and laughs shakily.

“I figured it would,” Chris says gently and squeezes his shoulder one last time before standing up. “You need help?”

He wants to say no but the truth is he’s not feeling much up to anything. “I don’t know,” he admits and rubs his face again, wiping away most of his tears before lowering his arm and staring up at the ceiling. How unfair is it that after ten years of waiting for Jared to find him, he’s a fucking wreck when it finally happens? He feels like shit, probably looks like crap and judging by his reaction just now he’ll probably break down and cry again when he finally sees Jared. Or do something worse. Oh Jesus.

He sits up slowly, waving Chris away when he moves to help him. The room is spinning but at least he doesn’t feel like throwing up. “Just let me...” he says and takes a few more deep breaths before looking up, eyes pleading.

“He doesn’t know,” he says quiet, “about me. And Tom will be there so...”

Chris nods. “I’ll try and cover for you,” he says, “but Jenny, you need to tell him. Jared, I mean.”

“I know. And I’m gonna. I just...” He swallows. “Not when I’m like this. I don’t want him to see me like this and think that’s what it means. That... that I’m dangerous.”

“It was a fluke, Jen.”

Jensen gives him a sad smile. “Why should he believe that?”

Chris hovers nearby as Jensen slowly stands up and stands swaying on his feet for a few seconds before taking a step forward. That’s as far as he gets before he’s being caught by Chris, the whole world tilting. “Fuck!”

“Take it easy. Your balance is probably off because of your ears.”

“Well, that’s just great! Goddammit!”

“Hey, stop that,” Chris says in a sharp tone. “You’ll be fine. We just have to get you cleaned up and some caffeine in your veins and you’ll be dancing the fucking polka before you know it.”

Jensen scowls but he doesn’t argue. He’s having trouble enough just breathing through his nausea. He imagines this is what being seasick must feel like.

“It wasn’t supposed to go like this,” he hisses as they make their way slowly to the bathroom. “It’s not fair.”

“Life ain’t fair, Jenny boy.” Chris kicks open the bathroom door and grins at him. “Now stop bitching and get naked.”

Jensen starts laughing without even wanting to. The sweat-damp t-shirt hits the floor and his boxers soon follow. “Christ,” he chuckles as he steps out of them, stumbling slightly. “Is sex all you think about?”

“With a pretty ass like yours in my face all the time, what do you expect?” Chris huffs as he shoves him into the shower and turns on the water. Jensen shudders as the cold spray hits his skin but it gets warm soon enough and the short burst of cold does help wake him up.

Chris smirks, offering to wash his back, and Jensen tells him to stick it up his ass. He has the wall to lean on and the longer he stays on his feet, the better he feels. The hot water feels good on his back and shoulders, unknotting muscles he hadn’t even realized were hurting until the pain starts to fade away.

He hasn’t really taken the time until now to think about what happened. Not the seeing Jared part or even the blowing up a whole place part but this, the aftereffect. Some can be written up as caused by the cut on his head but bursting his eardrums and whatever made his nose bleed? He’s never had that before. Plus his whole body hurts, like he’d been run over by a train. In all his years as a freak the main trouble has been that he keeps doing things without even noticing. Well, he fucking noticed this!

“Chris?” he says out loud and a shadow moves quickly on the other side of the curtain.

“You need help?”

“No. I was just wondering.” He lets the water rush over his face, buying himself some time before he continues, “Nothing like this has ever happened before. Popping my ears and stuff, I mean.”

Chris stays silent and Jensen is starting to think he didn’t hear him when he suddenly says, “Never?” sounding eerily calm. Somehow that only makes Jensen feel more nervous.

“No. Not even a headache. And I’ve done some pretty drastic shit, man. I’ve held storms over a whole city for days and... nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Huh.” He can see Chris moving on the other side of the curtain, hovering near as if he’s waiting for Jensen to collapse. “Why you think that is? That it happened now, I mean?”

“Fuck if I know.” He sighs. “Maybe whatever it is in my head causing this is finally malfunctioning.”

“I don’t know, man. That’s pretty darn sudden.” He can hear Chris tapping his fingers on the sink, like he’s contemplating what to say. “Maybe it’s Jared.”

“What?” Jensen turns off the water and pulls the curtain aside, ignoring Chris’s raised eyebrow as he reaches for a towel. “How would he do that?”

“No, I mean, maybe the shock of seeing Jared after all this time gave you an extra buzz ... Or,” he says, pointing a finger at Jensen’s head, “electric shock”

“What?” Jensen wraps the towel around his waist before stepping unsteadily out of the shower, for once not really caring that he’s dripping water all over the floor. “Dude, you’re not making any sense.”

“You blew the whole place, man,” Chris says patiently, moving over to sit on the toilet so Jensen has some space by the sink. “Zing! Maybe some of that power fried your brain.”

Jensen frowns as he lathers his face with one hand, the other gripping the sink to keep himself steady. “Don’t you think that would have affected other people as well then?” He stills. “It didn’t, right? You weren’t lying about no one getting hurt, were you?”

“No one got hurt. Relax.”

Jensen nods, relieved. He picks up his razor, ignoring Chris’s doubtful look and faces himself in the mirror for the first time since he came to.

Damn, no wonder Chris is so worried. He looks like death warmed over. His skin is grey, there are blue smudges under his eyes and a bruise circles a small cut near his hairline. Only two stitches so at least it wasn't too deep. Hurts like hell though.

When he lifts the razor his hand trembles and he lets it hover in front of his face before determinedly sliding it down his skin. His hand jerks on the downturn and he hisses as he nicks the skin. "Fuck."

"You wanna ask me to help you now or wait until you've cut half your face off?" Chris asks casually. "Because either way is fine with me."

"I can do it mys- Fuck!"

"It's kinda funny," Chris muses, as if the drops of blood raining down into the sink don't bother him at all, "how you can create rainstorms and literally make the sun shine out of your ass but you can't admit you need help."

"I don't need help shaving my own fucking face," Jensen says coldly but when he lifts his hand again the trembling intensifies the closer he gets to his skin and at the last second he stops. He stands staring stubbornly at himself in the mirror for a moment willing his hand to stop but it doesn't work. In the end he drops his hand and leans onto the sink, breathing deeply. "I hate this," he says defeated.

"I know." Chris sighs as he stands up and picks the razor from Jensen's hand, pushing him to sit on the toilet.

"Fucking useless," Jensen growls. "Christ."

Chris rolls his eyes. "You know, those first months aside, you haven't been sick once since you got here," he points out. "Never. Hangovers don't count," he adds when Jensen raises one eyebrow at him.

"So? What's your point? I told you I never get sick."

"My point is," Chris says as he lets the razor glide smoothly over Jensen's skin, "that in those eight years you've lived here I've had the flu at least four times, food poisoning twice, fucking pneumonia last winter, plus various bugs and shit." His moves are sure and steady, rinsing the razor under the running hot water in the sink between each stroke. "And every single time," he continues, "you've been here to take care of me. And I know I'm a fucking jerk when I'm sick."

"More of a whiny bitch, but ok," Jensen mumbles, trying not to move his face too much. Chris is pretty good at this but it pays to be careful. "Still not seeing what that has to do with anything."

"Just saying, if I can take you cleaning up my vomit and making me the worst chicken soup ever and pretty much playing Nurse Nancy to my whiny bitchy ass, I think you can handle me shaving your goddamn face one time." Chris rinses the razor for the last time and steps back to admire his handy work. "It doesn't make you any less of a

man, you know.” He smirks as he hands Jensen a clean towel to dry his face. “Your collection of fruity hair products on the other hand...”

“Haha, funny.” He touches his face gingerly but the only cuts are the ones he made himself. Other than that he’s smooth as a baby’s bottom. He quirks his eyebrow, giving Chris a surprised look of appreciation. “Dude, you are *good!* Something you wanna tell me. Like... you used to be a barber in Seville?”

“I sometimes shaved my dad,” Chris says and shrugs. “He had Parkinson’s.”

“Oh.” He feels stupid. He knew Chris’s dad had died a couple of years before they met but he’d never really asked what happened. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” Chris shrugs again and Jensen takes it for the brush off it is. As much shit as Chris gives him for bottling things up he never wants to talk himself. “So...” he says instead, “what’s the plan? Dress to kill?”

“What?”

“Clothes? I’m thinking the dark jeans and that black shirt I made you buy.”

“And you call *me* gay,” Jensen snorts and stands up slowly. He feels a little dizzy but his legs are a lot steadier and he shrugs off Chris’s hand, making his way to his room by himself. Chris hovers in the doorway, ready to catch him if he stumbles but he manages to get dressed without too much trouble.

“Coffee?” Chris asks and Jensen pauses with his shirt half-buttoned and closes his eyes in blessed anticipation.

“God, yes,” he groans and Chris laughs.

“You good here?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” He gives Chris a smile. “Thanks, man.”

“Don’t mention it. Oh,” he says and turns back in the doorway, “Steve is asleep on the couch. Just so you know.”

Jensen nods. “He stay here all day?”

“Yeah. And he was working last night too so we should let him get his rest.”

That does make him feel guilty. “Ok. Chris?” he says as Chris is slipping out the door.

“Yeah?”

“I’m... What if...” He swallows, hating himself for feeling so vulnerable. “What if I was wrong? About Jared, I mean. What if he’s not...?”

“Jenny,” Chris says patiently. “He found you. I have no idea how but he found you. Which means he’s been looking for you. Hell, I bet he’s been thinking as much about you as you have about him the last ten years.”

Jensen shakes his head. “Why? Why would he? I was just this guy who taught him to play the piano and then disappeared one day.” He looks away, biting his lip. “I never told him what I saw. What if he was just walking by the school and that reminded him of me and he decided to check if I was still there?”

“Dude,” Chris says and snorts, “he cried when he found out you were here.”

Jensen’s head whips up and he stares at him. “What?”

Chris looks almost embarrassed but he’s still smiling. “I was *not* supposed to tell you this but Lizzie says he cried when she told him she knew you. Not kidding. Your gentle giant broke down and cried. Does that sound like a guy who doesn’t care?”

He doesn’t know what to say to that but something lifts from his chest and suddenly the nervousness is fading, leaving him buzzing with anticipation. A butterfly pops out of thin air and he laughs, waving it away with his hand.

“I’ll go make some coffee,” Chris says with a smile and leaves him sitting there on his bed, feeling overwhelmed and giddy, like a girl waiting for her first date.



“And he’s been living here, with Chris?”

“Yeah. Well, he lived at the dorm the first year at school but other than that... I think so.”

Jared nods, eager to hear more. “So how did they meet? Is he a musician or...?”

Tom sighs. “Listen, I get you’re curious but shouldn’t you be asking Jensen all this? Honestly, I don’t know. I only started working there this fall and Jensen is a pretty private guy.”

Jared looks down, straightening his jacket awkwardly. “Sorry. It’s just been so long. I’m a bit nervous, I guess, not knowing anything about what he’s been up to.”

“Well, you’ll find out soon enough because here we are,” Tom says and pulls up to the sidewalk.

Jared stares up at the tall building. It isn’t fancy but it’s not run down either. Just a nice non-descriptive apartment building. Somehow he had been expecting...

“There are no flowers,” he says confused.

“What?” Tom is looking at him like he’s got two heads and none of them human.

“There are no...” He catches himself at the last minute and shakes his head. “Never mind. What floor are they on?”

“Way up high.”

They get out of the car and Jared follows Tom to the door, watching him push the top button labeled “Ackles/Kane” and something clenches in his chest. Is Chris Jensen’s boyfriend? He knew Jensen had been wondering if he was gay but there had been so much else going on at the time, Jared hadn’t really taken it seriously.

“Yeah?” a tinny voice says over the caller and Tom yells, “It’s us,” which seems to be enough because the buzzer sounds two seconds later and Tom pushes the door open. It’s hard to tell but Jared doesn’t think that was Jensen, which means Chris is home. What does that mean? What does any of this mean?

They take the elevator up and with every added floor the butterflies in Jared’s belly flap their wings faster and faster. Why is he so nervous? It’s just Jensen. Not like he’s going on a blind date or anything. It’s Jensen...

Oh God, he’s going to see *Jensen*!

“Are you alright there? You look a little pale.”

Jared gives Tom a strained smile. “I’m fine. Jeez, how high is this building?”

Just then the elevator stops with a ping and the door opens. Tom steps out and then turns around, smiling encouragingly. “You coming?”

“I’m... yeah. Of course.” He steps out, following Tom to a door on the right. He almost yells at Tom to wait when he reaches out to knock on the door but manages to hold himself back. What the hell is the matter with him? Why is he so damn nervous?

He holds his breath when the door opens but it’s not Jensen. Instead it’s a guy that looks slightly familiar, with long hair and blue eyes that are staring up at him like he can’t really believe what he’s seeing. Jared has an urge to rub his face to make sure he hasn’t got anything stuck there since him and Chad had burgers earlier. Sometimes he gets a little overzealous with the ketchup.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the man says finally and laughs. “Jared fucking Padalecki. Man, you *are* tall.”

“Er... thanks?” Jared says, although considering the guy is on the shorter side he probably didn’t mean it that way.

“Sorry. I just meant you’re exactly like Jen...” He stops, suddenly looking awkward. “But hey, you didn’t come all this way to see me. C’mon in. Jensen’s inside, playing.”

Jared hears it now, music playing somewhere inside the apartment, muffled to the point of being hardly audible. It makes his heart speed up and he wants to ask Chris if

he knows, if he's *seen* Jensen play. If they live together – what does that mean? – he has to know, right?

“How is he?” he asks as he steps inside. “I heard he got hurt.”

“Small concussion,” the guy says casually but Jared's pretty good at reading people and he can see the worry on his face. “He'll be fine. I'm Chris by the way. Kane.”

Jared nods, then stops and looks at him, suddenly realizing why the guy looks so familiar. “Chris Kane? The one who was gonna give him a ride to New York?”

“Yeah, that would be me.” He grins. “He got here on his own in the end.”

“Looks like it,” Jared says slowly. Why the hell hadn't he made the connection? “So how did you two meet?” he asks, trying to sound casual but judging by the look Chris gives him he's not succeeding.

“You should ask Jensen about that,” Chris tells him. “C'mon, I'll take you to him. Tom, my man, go grab yourself a beer if you want,” he says, throwing the guy a knowing look. “I'll be back in a minute.”

“Sure.”

Chris walks ahead through the apartment and Jared follows him, throwing glances around the kitchen and living room – briefly wondering who the guy sleeping on the couch is – as he tries to see something that says ‘Jensen lives here’. Apart from how neat and tidy the place is and the familiar thick glass windows, there's nothing. He's so busy looking for clues of Jensen's life that he almost crashes into Chris when he stops at a door in the small hallway. Chris smirks at his embarrassed apology then knocks hard on the door. After a moment he knocks again, waiting until the music stops before giving Jared a nod. “Go ahead. He's expecting you.”

Jared swallows, hand hovering over the doorknob. He can't really believe it's finally happening.

“Go on,” Chris says again, gentler this time. “It's okay.”

“I know. It's just...” He bites his lip. “He's really okay?”

Chris looks at him, like he knows Jared isn't talking about the concussion. “It's been tough sometimes,” he says, “but now you're here I think he'll be alright.”

It sounds so similar to what Lizzie, the woman over at Juilliard, said and Jared can feel his stomach tightening. Everyone seems to be expecting something of him and he doesn't really know what. How can they believe he's so important to someone he hasn't seen or spoken to in ten years? And what if he can't live up to it? What if he fails and lets Jensen down?



He's about to reach for the door when Chris suddenly puts a hand on his arm, stopping him, and when Jared looks down, he's met with dark serious eyes. "He doesn't know about Sandy," Chris says in a low voice. "I didn't tell him."

Jared blinks. "Oh. Ok?" What?

"Just... don't be an asshole, alright?"

Before Jared has time to ask what he means Chris has pushed the door open for him and then turns and walks away, leaving Jared staring through the doorway at the familiar figure sitting by the piano, still as a statue. The room is filled with so much tension Jared imagines he can see it vibrating the air. Or maybe he isn't imagining it at all.

He walks slowly inside and closes the door behind him, eyes fixed on Jensen's tense back and shoulder. He's reminded of the time Jensen's mom called his house and how Jensen had frozen, refusing to stand up or even turn around. Is this like that? Maybe Jensen doesn't really want to talk to him after all. Maybe he's angry it took Jared so long to find him.

"I'm sorry," Jared blurts out before he has time to think. "I'm so sorry, Jensen."

The tension slips away as the hunched figure straightens up and then Jensen is finally turning in his seat, staring up at Jared with wide eyes.

"Jared?" he says as he slowly stands up, swaying on his feet, and Jared realizes he's not angry or hurt or even annoyed. He's scared.

"Yeah, it's me." Jared smiles softly and then does what he's wanted to do ever since he was thirteen years old. He walks over and pulls Jensen into his arms, hugging him tight. "God, I've missed you. So much."

For a moment Jensen is stiff in his arms and Jared is half a second away from awkwardly letting him go and stepping back, blaming his embarrassing behavior on being drunk or something, when suddenly Jensen wraps his arms around Jared's waist and pulls him in so tight Jared can hardly breathe.

"It's you. You're here. You're really here," Jensen mumbles into Jared's neck, warm breath tickling the skin, and then he's laughing. He's laughing and squeezing Jared tight and the whole room goes blindingly bright. Jared glances up to see rays of sunshine streaming through the thick glass window, filling the room, and something inside him breaks.

He clutches Jensen tighter, burying his face in the short blond hair. Jensen smells exactly the same as he did. He looks almost exactly the same too, just older and more muscled. Not a boy anymore. He's solid and strong in Jared's arms and Jared suddenly feels thirteen years old again, small and clumsy and awestruck.

"I'm really here," he whispers. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

“It’s okay,” Jensen says, his voice shaking. “It’s okay. You’re here now. You’re here now, Jay.”

Jared loses track of how long they stand like that, just holding on to one another, clutching so tight they are both having trouble breathing. Or that’s what he tells himself is the reason for it, because two grown men might hug, but hell if they cry on each other’s shoulders.

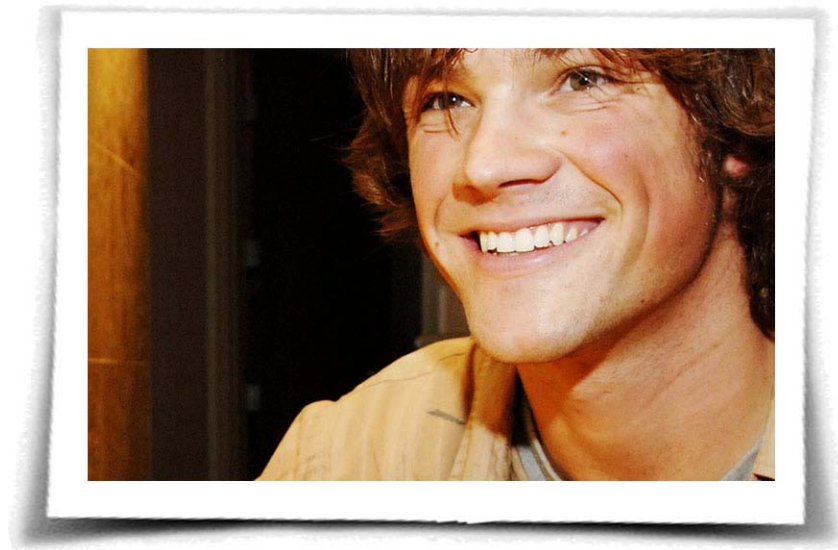
“You’re totally crying, aren’t you?” Jensen says suddenly, his voice bright and happy if a little shaken, and Jared starts laughing.

“Like a baby,” he admits, breath hitching and nose sniffing.

“Oh good. Then this won’t be as awkward,” Jensen says and reluctantly pulls back, his eyes shining and red and his face wet when he gazes up at Jared, looking like he’s close to bursting with happiness. “Hey. You grew up.”

“Yeah.” Jared grins back and wipes at his face with the back of his hand. “Just like you said I would,” he adds.

“Tall like a tree,” Jensen says, eyes wide with wonder, and takes Jared’s right hand, tracing the downside of the fingers with his fingertips. “Twigs and branches.”



Jared nods, unable to take his eyes off Jensen’s face. He’s got a bruise and a cut near his hairline and he looks pale and tired but even so he’s the most beautiful person Jared has ever seen. Not that he didn’t remember Jensen being good looking all those years ago, but it’s different now. Maybe because he’s matured; there’s a rougher edge to him than what Jared remembers. Maybe it’s the eyes that hold something more and deeper than they did before, like he’s seen too much and it’s left its mark on him. Or maybe it’s Jared, finally seeing what he only glanced at before.

“I tried to find you,” he says. “When you left. And... and after. A long time after. Where did you go?”

Jensen's smile falters and he looks down at Jared's hand that he's still holding in his own. "I..." he begins and then stops. He licks his lips, blinking repeatedly like he's not sure what to say. "I had to go away. I wasn't alright."

Jared swallows. "Jensen, don't. Don't lie. I'm not a kid anymore. Tell me. Please."

Jensen doesn't look up. He rubs his thumb over Jared's palm, following the lines up and down and across, slow and gentle. "I was in a mental institution," he finally says, his voice quiet. "For two years. Please don't ask me why."

Jared breathes out. So he was right. They really... Oh God. He blinks, his eyelashes wet and clingy.

Then something Jensen said suddenly hits him and he almost smacks his own head for not having realized it before. He curls his fingers around Jensen's thumb and wrist and squeezes tight. "Jensen, will you play for me?"

Jensen looks up surprised, like of all the responses he'd been expecting for his confession, it wasn't that. "Now?"

"I've been waiting ten years," Jared says and grins.

"Oh. Ok." Jensen glances at the piano and then back at Jared, looking unsure. "I guess..." He bites his lip, worrying it with his teeth. "You should sit down."

Jared smiles and walks obediently over to the couch by the window, stretching his long legs in front of him when he's sitting comfortably. Jensen smiles hesitantly and goes over to the piano, pausing for a moment before sitting down. He touches the tangents lightly, staring at his own reflection in the polished surface of the piano before clearing his throat and saying, "You should close your eyes."

Jared shakes his head. "Just play, Jen."

Jensen looks at him startled. "But..." He swallows. "Jared, please. I know I'm not your teacher anymore but..."

"Jensen, play." Jared leans forward, holding Jensen's gaze steady. "It's alright. Just play, ok?"

They gaze at each other a long time, the fear and confusion in Jensen's eyes slowly making way for what looks like relief, mixed with hope. Finally he nods and turns to face the piano again. He lifts his hands, letting them hover over the tangents for an extended moment before slowly lowering them.

He plays.

*Lichner : Forget Me Not / Lars Roos (4:08)*



The last note dies down and Jensen sits back, hands in his lap. He doesn't dare turn his head and look at Jared. A few birds are still circling the room but they will soon fade away, like the blue sky and the green grass and the shadow of the lovers that lingers long after they're gone. A choked off sound makes him finally dare a glance Jared's way, heart beating fast in his chest.

Jared is gazing at him, eyes glittering wet and his nose tinted pink. His lips are parted, chest rising and falling slowly with every deep breath he takes.

Jensen swallows, quickly averting his eyes to continue staring at his hands. He opens his mouth but no words come out so he just closes it again, licking his lips nervously. When Jared suddenly stands up Jensen jumps slightly in his seat but he still doesn't dare look up.

"You..." Jared starts, his voice hoarse, and Jensen closes his eyes, bracing himself for what's to come.

"You're amazing! Look at what you can do. Oh wow, Jen, look at what you can do!"

Jensen blinks his eyes open and slowly raises his head to see Jared staring at him in wonder. "Yes," he says surprised. "This is what I can do." He smiles hesitantly. "You knew," he says. "How did you know?"

"I didn't close my eyes," Jared says. "When you called to say goodbye, I didn't close my eyes."

"Oh."

He thinks back on that day, the worst day of his life. His dad, looking haggard and almost crazed with grief, telling him they couldn't do this anymore. That it was for his own good, that he had to come with them, that they were going to get him help. And Jensen had seen the lie in his father's eyes, seen everything he was thinking in the black shadows and howling shapes, twisting and turning around him and slowly choking him to death. So he hadn't argued, hadn't pleaded or begged. Hadn't even cried. He'd just nodded and asked to please be allowed to play his piano one last time. His dad had broken down then, tears streaming down his face as he nodded, too choked up to be able to talk.

He'd passed a stricken Mac on his way up the stairs and she'd slipped him the phone, her hand shaking so much she'd almost dropped it in the process. He'd given her a reassuring smile and continued up, one step at a time, feeling like he had no strength left in his bones when he finally made it to the top and could slip into the studio and close the door behind him. He hadn't taken the time to think, to plan what he was going to say. He'd just dialed Jared's number and prepared himself for goodbye.

"I saw..." Jared says shakily, bringing Jensen back to the present. "And everything fell into place. I still can't believe I was that stupid, that I didn't see it before."

"I wanted to tell you," Jensen hurries to say. "I never wanted to keep secrets from you. You were my best friend, Jare. Are. You *are* my best friend. Right?"

“Definitely. But not your only friend,” Jared says and smiles. “Not anymore.”

Jensen grins, his face heating. “No, not anymore.” He hesitates then looks up at Jared and asks, “Is that alright?”

“God, Jensen, how can you ask me that?” Jared takes a step forward, his hand reaching out then awkwardly falling down by his side again. “I’m so happy for you. You won’t believe...” He swallows, looking like he might start crying again. “All these years, I kept having nightmares where you were all alone and there was no one to wake you up when you had nightmares or got lost in your head. It terrified me.”

Jensen’s heart clenches. “I’m sorry.”

Jared shakes his head. “No. I didn’t mean...” He takes a deep breath, then starts again, “That woman, Lizzie, we were talking about you and I could just see how much she cares about you. It really hit me then, how much it had weighed on me, thinking you didn’t have anyone. And then I met Tom and he obviously likes you very much and he told me how much your students adore you, not that that surprises me.”

He smiles and Jensen can feel himself blushing. It’s not as if he doesn’t know they care, it just feels weird, hearing someone else say it.

“And then you have Chris.” There’s a slight difference to Jared’s tone but his smile is the same, open and happy. “Tom told me you’d been living together for a long time.”

“Yeah.” Jensen scratches at his neck. “Chris... he saved my life. After I got out...” He stops. He’s not ready for that yet. “Can we maybe talk about that later? It’s kind of a long story.”

Jared nods, his eyes looking sad for the first time since he got here. “Sure,” he says. “Whenever you want.”

Jensen smiles gratefully then leans back on the piano bench, taking the time to really look Jared over. “You look amazing,” he says, smiling softly when Jared blushes. “I mean, I could see it back then, but it was more like a reflection in a window. Not this clear.” He shakes his head in wonderment. “Look at you.”

“You really *could* see me,” Jared says, like he’s still trying to take it all in. “I mean, I guessed, after I figured out your secret, that that was what you meant when you kept telling me I would grow tall. It’s just weird, hearing you actually confirm it.”

Jensen shrugs. “I *am* weird, Jared,” he says, trying to hide his discomfort.

“I didn’t... No.” Jared shakes his head firmly. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant... I *knew*. I knew but no one believes in magic, you know. Even my mom stopped believing and convinced herself she’d imagined it. She came into my room while you were playing over the phone,” he explains when Jensen gives him a confused look. “She saw it and she saw how your garden died the minute you left. She saw all that

and still she couldn't believe it. So it was just me, *knowing* that what I had seen was real, but no one else knew. No one else believed."

"It's not supposed to exist," Jensen says gently. "You can't really blame people for not believing in something that isn't supposed to exist. Magic, it's..." He furrows his brow, trying to find the words to explain. "You know, my parents never called it that. They never called it anything. It was always my 'problem' or 'it'. I don't think they ever did believe in magic, even if they saw it every day. Because they just really didn't want to."

Jared nods, the sad look back in his eyes. "How are they? Your parents, I mean."

Jensen goes still. "My dad died," he says quietly, "shortly after I was put Inside. I think... I think it was *because* I was Inside. My mom... she saw it a little differently. So she left. She and Mac. I don't know where they are now."

"God, Jen, I'm so sorry. I... I really liked your dad."

Jared looks like he wants to say more but stops himself at the last minute. Jensen's relieved. He can't really deal with finally seeing Jared again and talking about his family, all in the same day. Especially not when he still feels like hell. He scratches at his forehead, wincing when his nail catches on the end of a stitch.

"That happen last night? At the bar?" Jared asks and Jensen looks up in surprise. Jared just grins at him. "How did you think I found you?" he says. "That, combined with the snow? Pretty much spelled out 'Jensen was here'."

"Yeah, I..." Jensen laughs nervously. "I fell and hit my head." He frowns. "It snowed? Seriously? I wasn't even conscious."

"I'm thinking that hasn't stopped you before."

"No. Not really." He bites his lip, worrying it for a while before looking up at Jared. "What happened last night... It was a fluke. I don't do that. Never. I... I have much better control now. I swear. It's not like before. I'm..."

"Jensen, relax," Jared says gently. "I believe you. Besides, I'm guessing half the blame lies with me, right?"

"What? No! It wasn't your fault. It was me. I did it. It's always me."

"I only meant that the reason you got upset was because you spotted me. Am I right?"

"Oh."

Jensen blushes. Fuck. He's reverting back to his old socially awkward self, rambling like an idiot and trying too hard. He's not a teenager anymore, for Christ's sake. Just because he's got Jared all grown up and real right in front of him and his heart is so filled with love he's worried it might just burst open, doesn't mean he has to act like a goddamn retard.

“Yeah. I kinda flipped. When I saw you. Wasn’t really expecting it. Not then.”

Jared nods slowly. “But you were expecting me to find you?” he asks. “Some day.”

“It wasn’t like I just sat back and waited, you know. I looked for you too. I tried, I really tried.” He rubs at his temples. His headache is coming back. “In the end I figured it wasn’t meant to happen until later.”

“But you knew it would. You saw it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Jare, I saw it.” He doesn’t mention his doubts and fears that he was wrong. That maybe he was waiting for something that would never happen.

“I wish I’d known that. I thought I’d lost you forever,” Jared says quietly. “I hated being so... so *helpless*. I couldn’t do anything.”

“You were only thirteen, Jared. I don’t blame you.”

“I know. I just hated it, being a useless kid. And by the time I was old enough to go look for you the trail had long gone cold.” He looks up at Jensen with a sad smile. “I didn’t think to check Juilliard again. Mom called there every now and then for two years, asking about you. After that we wrote it off as a dead end. I should have had more faith in you.”

“Dude, I didn’t have any faith in me. Only reason I even got into Juilliard was because Chris went behind my back and got me an audition.” He smiles at the memory. “He and Steve got me drunk and recorded me playing. Man, talk about embarrassing. I blabber like an idiot when I’m drunk.”

Jared laughs, the sad look gone from his eyes and Jensen mentally pats himself on the back. He doesn’t want Jared blaming himself for anything that went wrong. None of it was his fault.

“But what about you?” he asks. “What have you been up to?” Jensen laughs. “I don’t even know how you got here.”

Jared seems to hesitate, his eyes shifting unconsciously as he thinks, and Jensen is just about to ask him what’s wrong when there’s a knock on the door and Chris’s head pops through the doorway.

“We’re ordering pizza. Mushrooms and pepperoni ok with you guys?”

“Sure. Right, Jared?”

There’s again that look of hesitation but then Jared smiles and nods. “Sounds good,” he says.

“Great.” Chris turns to Jensen again, tilting his head in question. “You doing ok?”

Jensen smiles. "I'm great," he says and nods happily toward Jared. "He knows. He'd already figured it out."

"Really?" Chris looks at Jared again with new appreciation. "Huh. All that and brains too." He grins when Jared blushes then looks over at Jensen again, more serious. "You look beat, man. At least sit somewhere more comfortable than that old bench."

Jensen flips him off which has Jared staring at him in surprise while Chris pretends he doesn't even notice.

"Also, you kinda need to talk to Tom. He's still freaked about last night and has convinced himself I'm lying about you being more or less fine to hide that you're actually dead and decomposing in here."

Jensen sighs. "Yeah, okay. I'll be out in a minute." He gives Jared a tired look when Chris has closed the door. "Tom was with me last night when... Well, when I saw you. Apparently I scared him half to death." He pauses. "He doesn't know," he says quietly, "about me. No one knows except you and Chris and Steve. Ok?"

"Ok." Jared seems unsure for a moment but then he blurts out. "I told Chad."

Jensen freezes. "What?"

"Chad. Remember Chad? Basketball Chad? I kinda told him."

"Oh." Jensen doesn't know what to say about that.

"I'm sorry. It was a few years ago. I was drunk and... Of course he didn't believe me. But after last night... I think he might. But I let him swear not to tell. He might be a jerk sometimes but he won't tell, I promise."

"It's alright." It doesn't *feel* alright, someone he doesn't know and remembers as being kind of an ass, knowing his most intimate secret. But it's not like he can do anything about it and he hates seeing Jared looking so distressed. "Really, don't worry about it," he says, voice more firm this time and stands up. Then promptly sits back down when the sudden change in altitude makes him lose his balance. "Fuck."

Jared is instantly by his side, one heavy hand clutching his shoulder, steadying him. "Shouldn't you be in the hospital?" he asks worried. "You don't look too good."

"Hate hospitals," Jensen grinds out, waiting for the room to stop spinning. "Freak me out."

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't think."

Jared sounds so stricken Jensen reaches up to grasp his hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

He sits breathing for a while longer, Jared's hand warm and bony under his own, the strong fingers holding firmly onto his shoulder. He wants to lean until he's pressed



against Jared's side, drawing more strength from the solid heat he can feel radiating from Jared's body, but he doesn't. They only just met again and even if Jared knows what Jensen is he might need a little more time to figure out what *they* are.

Instead he gives Jared a light squeeze and says, "I'm ok," before attempting to stand up again. It goes better this time, he only sways on his feet for a few seconds before finding his equilibrium.

"Shall we?" he says lightly, not even noticing he's still holding Jared's hand in his own until he's halfway to the door. Awkwardly he loosens his grip but Jared obviously misunderstands and simply adjusts his hold, smiling down at Jensen in reassurance.

"I've got you," he says firmly and Jensen has to avert his eyes, because God yes, does he ever.

After years of being in love with only a vision, having the real thing right *here* is like being swallowed whole, consumed by feelings of love and warmth and safety. He knows he's just projecting his own feelings onto Jared, that this is not how *Jared* feels but how Jensen *wants* him to feel. It's a bit embarrassing, bordering on pathetic, but at the moment he can't bring himself to care. Just having Jared here is a start, everything else is still only a possibility.

What's more important is that he's fine. He's so happy he's bursting and he's *fine!* If his mother was here he'd flip her the finger and smugly tell her 'See, you were wrong. *Wrong*, mom. I love him and I'm *fine*. Where's your frigging apocalypse now?'

He looks up at Jared with a smile and Jared smiles back. He's got a butterfly hitching a ride in his hair, orange and red like fire, and Jensen stops to reach up and brush it away with a chuckle. Jared stares at it startled when it flutters away, his eyes wide when he looks back at Jensen.

"Wow," he says, awed, and it's so simple but means so much that Jensen beams. Just this, being able to be himself and not hide it from Jared anymore, because he *knows* and he *accepts* and he thinks it's *wonderful!* Another butterfly, a blue one this time, pops out of thin air, hovering between them and they both giggle like schoolboys.

"Shoo," Jensen says, waving it away, then takes a deep breath and grins at Jared. "Time to act normal."

Jared's smile halts at that, like he'd forgotten the need to hide, but his eyes are still wide with wonder and he shakes his head in amusement when Jensen gives him a wink.

Steve smiles at them tiredly when they enter the living room and Jensen smiles back. He knows once Tom is gone they're going to talk about what happened and why and how they can keep something like that from ever happening again but for now they just acknowledge each other with a smile and a nod, Jensen grateful for Steve being there for him, Steve grateful for Jensen being there at all.

“Damn, you look like shit,” Tom says, eyeing him worried. “I really wish you’d let us take you to the hospital.”

“I’m okay, Tom, really.” Jensen smiles and grips Jared’s hand tighter to keep from swaying as much. He can see both Steve and Tom glancing at their clasped hands, Tom surprised while Steve only smiles softly, and again he tries to loosen it but Jared just walks him over to the couch and pulls him down to sit beside him.

“Want something to drink?” Chris asks from the doorway and Jensen looks up, slightly taken aback by the hardness in his eyes. “We’ve got beer. Not for you,” he adds and gives Jensen a pointed look.

“Oh c’mon...” he whines.

“Jenny, you have a hole in your head. Don’t even think of arguing.”

“Christ, fine!” He rolls his eyes, annoyed. “Give me some fucking Coke, you overbearing asshole.”

Jared turns to stare at him. “Dude!”

“What?” Jensen asks, slightly alarmed.

“Wow.” Jared shakes his head, then grins. “Just you, swearing. It sounds funny.”

Steve laughs out loud at that. “That’s nothing. You should hear him when he’s drunk.”

“Steve,” Jensen warns, his face heating, but Steve only smirks.

“Yeah?” Jared asks, grinning. “Got any good stories for me?”

“Oh plenty. He got us thrown out of a biker bar once for being too obnoxious. Seriously, he made those leather guys blush like a bunch of schoolgirls.”

“Steve, shut up. You,” Jensen says, pointing at the rest of the guys, “stop laughing!”

Jared laughs and lets go of his hand. Jensen hadn’t realized he was still holding on to it until it’s suddenly gone and for a short moment he feels lost. But then Jared’s arm comes around his shoulder, squeezing him tight and everything’s alright again.

“Man, I can’t wait to get to know you again,” Jared says in a low voice. “Ten years. I’ve missed so much.”

“What, me learning to drink and swear and be an obnoxious asshole?” Jensen asks with a smile. “Not really that much to miss.” He looks at Jared fondly. “I missed you growing up, Jare. I’m thinking there’s a lot more to you than I ever saw back then.”

Jared shrugs, looking embarrassed. “Maybe,” he says. “I hope I haven’t changed too much,” he says hesitantly. “I’d hate for you not to like me anymore.”

“I’ll never not like you, Jare,” Jensen says and if he leans a little closer they can both chalk it up to him having a concussion and being very, very tired.

Someone coughs and they both look up to find Steve, Tom and Chris watching them. Tom mostly looks uncomfortable while the other two bear a mixed expression of fondness and worry.

“So,” Tom says, breaking the awkward moment, “you two knew each other as kids?”

Jensen tenses but Jared’s arm is solid around his shoulders, silently telling him not to worry. “Jensen was my piano tutor,” he says calmly. “That’s how we met. We became friends. Best friends,” he says and gives Jensen a fond look. “Awesome friends.”

“*Awesome* friends,” Jensen repeats and grins. “*Dude.*”

They both laugh while the others stare at them in confusion.

“Sorry,” Jared says, waving his hand in dismissal. “Private joke.”

Tom nods. “And then, what? You lost track of each other?”

Again Jared squeezes Jensen’s shoulders lightly and before Jensen can get a word in he says, “Yeah. Jensen moved away and then I moved and we just lost track. Took me forever to find him again.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot to ask, where did you move?” Jensen says, frowning. “Not exactly easy to hide with a name like yours but I couldn’t find you.”

“My parents divorced,” Jared says like it’s nothing but a blue shadow dances around him and Jensen puts his hand on Jared’s knee squeezing it lightly.

“I’m sorry,” he says before moving his hand away again even if he really wants to keep it there. “Talk about change. You must have hated that.”

Jared smiles at him gratefully, like he’s surprised that Jensen remembers. “Yeah. Wasn’t easy. I didn’t even know anything was wrong until suddenly he moved out. We were all kinda shocked, especially Meg.”

He clears his throat, “Anyway, Mom moved us to Florida, got remarried and took his name,” he elaborates. “And Dad moved up to Canada. So yeah, no Padaleckis registered in the phonebook until I moved out a couple of years ago. I’m sorry, I should have thought of that,” he says, biting his lip.

Jensen shakes his head. “I didn’t. I’m not even in the phonebook. Chris only got me a cell phone to keep track of me,” he adds and throws Chris a grin. He’s surprised at the almost sad look he catches in Chris’s eyes but it’s gone before he can analyze it.

“After all the times you’ve wandered off and gone missing for hours, are you surprised? Plus,” Chris adds, his smile more genuine this time, “it was pink. It was just so much *you*.”

“You have a pink cell phone?” Jared asks, smirking, and Jensen wants to hit Chris.

“It’s not pink, it’s light red.”

Chris shakes his head. “Pink. And it plays the theme from Friends every time I call him. It’s so sweet,” he says and smirks.

“I hate you,” Jensen says. “And as soon as I figure out how to work the damn thing I’ll change it to something more appropriate. Like ‘Fuck you’ with 50 cents.”

“You don’t know how to work your phone?” Jared asks, amused. “Aren’t you supposed to be a genius?”

“Shut up.” Damn, he’s really blushing now. “Better be nice or I’ll let Chris chose yours. He’ll probably put in something even worse.”

“Better not risk it,” Jared says and holds out his hand. “Give it over, I’ll do it myself.”

Jensen digs in his pocket and hands over the red – not pink! – phone.

“Wow, that’s really pink,” Jared says and laughs when Jensen elbows him. “Sorry, but it is.”

“Matches your shirt,” Jensen points out and now it’s Jared’s time to blush.

The doorbell rings just then and Chris goes to answer, returning two minutes later with two pizzas and drinks. He hands Jensen a can of Coke, Tom and Steve beers and then gives Jared an innocent look. “I wasn’t sure if you were old enough,” he says and Jensen shoots him a glare. “What? I’m just sayin’, he looks awful young, Jen.”

“He’s older than I was the first time you got *me* drunk,” Jensen points out. “Give the guy a beer and stop being an asshole.”

“Actually I probably shouldn’t,” Jared says, looking awkward when Jensen quirks an eyebrow at him. “I have to be back at the hotel in about an hour or Sandy will kick my ass.”

Jensen freezes. He turns his head to stare at Chris, suddenly realizing what the strange looks he’s been getting mean. Guilt and sadness and anger, all wrapped up in worry meet him head-on.

“Sandy?” Tom asks curious and Chris looks like he wants to shoot him.

“Yeah, my girlfriend,” Jared says awkwardly and the can of Coke explodes in Jensen’s hand.

“Whoa!” Tom jumps to grab napkins from the table, throwing some at Jared before starting to wipe up the puddles of sweet brown liquid from the table and floor. “How did that happen?”

No one answers. They all sit frozen, staring at Jensen. Steve looks shocked. Chris looks like he wants to kill someone, preferably Jared, then grab Jensen and build a fortress around him. Jared looks totally confused.

“Jensen?” he asks hesitantly, not seeming to care that his jeans and shirt are soaked through. “Hey, you okay?”

Jensen blinks and meets his eyes. He feels suddenly so very tired. “Yeah,” he says slowly and smiles. “I’m just... I don’t feel so good.”

He stands up and Jared is on his feet, grabbing him a second before he falls over. “Dude, you should have said,” Jared tells him and for a moment Jensen thinks he means he should have told Jared he was in love with him but then he realizes Jared is talking about his physical state, not the emotional one.

“Sorry,” he says blankly. “Guess it caught up with me.”

“Where’s the bedroom?” Jared asks and Jensen nods his head in the right direction. He can’t meet Chris’s and Steve’s eyes but keeps his head lowered, focusing on moving his feet and soaking up as much of Jared’s heat as he can.

Jared has a girlfriend. Of course Jared has a girlfriend. How could he have been so *stupid*?

The glass in a frame on the wall cracks as they walk by and Jared looks at it in alarm but doesn’t stop. They reach the door to Jensen’s room soon enough and Jared helps him inside and lowers him onto the bed.

“You want help undressing?” he asks quietly and Jensen shakes his head.

“Just gonna rest a while,” he says, trying to keep his voice neutral but just ends up sounding broken. “Sorry for being... Sorry.”

“Don’t. It’s not your fault.” Jared sits down on the edge of the bed. “Just rest. Get your strength back.”

Jensen tries to smile but he can’t. Not with Jared looking at him like that, like he loves him. It just makes everything worse.

“Where’s Slipper?” Jared asks suddenly. Jensen blinks. He hasn’t thought of his old rabbit in years.

“Lost,” he mumbles. “Got lost when...” He swallows. “That day.”

Jared looks horribly sad at that. He reaches out, his hand hovering a moment before settling on the slope of Jensen’s neck. “I’m sorry,” he says. “He was a good friend.”

Jensen closes his eyes. His heart is breaking and he's so fucking *stupid*!!

"Hey," Jared says, moving his hand to brush a thumb over Jensen's cheek. It slides easily over his skin and Jensen realizes to his horror it's because it's wet with tears. "Jen?"

"Yeah?" he whispers hoarsely.

"I'm so glad I found you. I... I was terrified you might be dead. Or locked away somewhere. Instead you're here and you're happy and good and have awesome friends." Jensen can hear him swallow. "I'm glad you've got Chris, man. He obviously loves you very much."

Jensen nods. "Yeah," he repeats, mind blank.

"I'll come back tomorrow." Jared runs his fingers through Jensen's hair before standing up. "But you've got my number now so... Call me, man, if you want to. Whenever. Middle of the night, doesn't matter. Doubt I'll be able to sleep anyway."

Jensen can hear the smile in his voice but he can't open his eyes, no matter how much he loves that smile. Because he loves Jared. And Jared... Jared doesn't love him. Not like that. Not like that.

"Sleep tight," Jared whispers and Jensen feels warm lips on his forehead, inches from his cut.

He doesn't answer, fakes sleep, and after a moment's hesitation Jared walks out and closes the door softly behind him.

A moment later the first raindrops start leaking down the glass windows.

"Jensen?"

"Don't."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know how to tell you."

"Doesn't matter." His voice is flat, the words breathed out without feeling. "It was just a stupid dream anyway."

Chris sighs. "C'mon, man. It doesn't mean you two will never happen. You might just have to wait a little longer."

"He's got a girlfriend, Chris, not a goddamn plant. He's not gonna just..." Jensen's voice trails off. Why are they even talking? This whole conversation is pointless.

"He might. Jenny, I've never seen anyone look at another person the way he looked at you. He loves you, man. He just doesn't know it yet."

“He loves me as a friend. That’s all.”

“Jensen, I love you as a friend and I never look at you like that.”

Jensen blinks and thin cracks run through the ice surrounding him. “Chris, don’t. Just... leave. Please, leave.”

There’s silence for a while and then Chris stands up, patting his shoulder gently. “You want me to tell him not to come tomorrow?” he asks quietly.

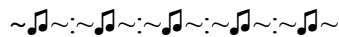
“No. It’s... It’s Jared, Chris.” His voice breaks and he stops, sucking in his breath. “It’s Jared. I’ll take what I can get.”

Chris nods, squeezing his shoulder. “I’m really sorry.”

“I know.”

The door closes, leaving him staring out into the darkness.

After what feels like forever he drifts off to sleep. The rain outside slows down to a light drizzle, dark drops trickling down the windowpane. Jensen mumbles in his sleep as the piano starts playing across the hall, something soft and sad that has Chris clutching the bottle of beer in his hand, jaw tight as he gulps half its content down. On the TV screen in front of him Stallone is screaming and gunning down people by the dozens. Strangely enough it doesn’t make him feel any better.



“Jensen?” Sandy is staring at him like he’s crazy. “Jensen from back home?”

“How many Jensens do you know?” Jared asks tiredly. “Yes, that Jensen. He’s here. He lives in New York.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going to see him?”

Jared rubs his temples with his thumbs. He feels drained and for some reason like a complete fool. “Because you never liked him, Sandy. For no good reason. I just... I was nervous enough about seeing him again without dealing with that as well.”

“I’m not a kid anymore,” Sandy says patiently. “I don’t know why I didn’t like him back then but it doesn’t matter. He’s your friend, Jared. Of course I’m not going to be a jerk about you meeting your friends. Especially not since I know how much you’ve missed him.”

Jared looks at her in surprise then leans over and kisses her on the cheek. “Sorry,” he says and gives her a grateful smile. “I was an idiot, ok?”

“Yeah, you were. So,” she says and moves closer, putting her arm around his waist. “How was he? What’s he been up to?”

“He was... good. Well, considering.” He shrugs when she looks at him in question. “He had an accident last night. Fell and hit his head. Got a nasty cut and a concussion so he wasn’t too perky. But other than that, good.”

He wants to tell her that Jensen is even more beautiful than he remembered. That he’s funny and wonderful and so amazingly magical. He wants to confide in her that going back to LA without Jensen feels like ripping a part of his soul out and leaving it behind.

He doesn’t, because it sounds insane even in his own head. Seriously, he just left Jensen an hour ago and already he’s itching to see him again. Tomorrow feels like light years away, the half hour distance like galaxies. It’s like being back in that year when his whole world revolved around his next piano lesson, his next chance to see Jensen. All jittery anticipation and feeling that all other places and persons were wrong.

“Not weird?” Sandy says with a quirk of her eyebrow and he stiffens. “I’m kidding, baby. Relax.”

Jared doesn’t think it’s funny but it’s not worth a fight so he lets it go. “He’s teaching over at Juilliard. And he’s got a nice apartment and a really great boyfriend. I think he’s pretty happy.”

“Jensen is gay?” Sandy looks genuinely surprised. “Wow. I had no idea. Did you?”

He frowns. “Yeah. I mean, he told me back then.”

She makes a face at that. “You were only thirteen.”

“So?”

“So, do you really think it was appropriate for him to talk to you about his sexuality? Especially since he was your teacher.”

He just stares at her. “Sandy, I was his best and only friend. Who else was he supposed to talk to? Plus, it wasn’t like that. It just came up.”

She frowns. “I still don’t think it was appropriate. It’s not something you should be discussing with your students.”

Once again he becomes blatantly aware of how little she knows about Jensen and he can’t help wondering why he never told her. Probably because he was sure she wouldn’t believe him. Or maybe because he knew it wasn’t something Jensen wanted people to know. He still feels bad about telling Chad, even if he was drunk and kinda high on weed and had just needed to tell *someone*.

“Whatever,” he says annoyed and shakes his head. “I’m meeting him again tomorrow. Hopefully he’ll feel better then.”



“Tomorrow?” Sandy looks at him incredulous. “Jared, this is supposed to be *our* weekend. I’ve hardly even seen you.”

He wants to tell her ‘And whose fault is that?’ but considering he got Jensen out of the deal it hardly seems fair.

“Sandy, I’ve been looking for him for ten years,” he says instead. “I want to spend time with him. You and I can always have a weekend together later.”

“You’re seriously going to spend *our* weekend with Jensen instead of me?” She stands up abruptly, shrugging him off when he reaches for her. “Fine. Go be with your *friend*, Jared.” Her voice is icy cold and Jared just stares at her, wondering what the fuck is her problem. “I’m sleeping in Sophia’s room tonight.”

“What?” Seriously, what the hell? “Why are you being like this?”

“If you can’t figure it out I’m not going to tell you,” she says which is the stupidest reasoning ever, Jared thinks. “Enjoy the rest of your stay in New York, Jared. I’ll see you on the plane home.”

“Sandy...” he tries but she’s already leaving, slamming the door behind her. He’s left staring at her vacated space, wondering what on earth just happened.

A few minutes later someone knocks and he hurries to the door, but when he opens it’s not Sandy coming to apologize, but a pissed off Chad glaring at him.

“What the hell is your girlfriend doing in our room?” he asks. “We were about to have some awesome sex, dude, and suddenly I’m out in the hall with a fucking hard-on and my girlfriend’s cooing over yours instead. What the fuck, man?”

“Sorry,” Jared sighs. “I told her I went to see Jensen and that I was going over there again tomorrow and she just flipped, man. I don’t know what the fuck is her problem.”

Chad rolls his eyes. “No?” He pushes Jared out of the way as he stalks into the room. “Let me give you one hint. Green.”

Jared frowns, thinking of Jensen’s green eyes. “What?”

“She’s jealous, man. She thinks you’re gonna hook up with wonderboy and dump her ass.”

Jared can’t help it, he starts laughing. “Are you serious? I’m not gay!”

“Dude, everyone’s a little gay.” Chad flips open the minibar, frowning at the slim pickings. “We should have beer. And tequila.” He slams the door shut again and straightens up. “Let’s go out. I’m pissed off and horny and I want some fucking booze, man.”

“Shut up.” Jared frowns at him. “Why are you saying that?”

Chad rolls his eyes. “Because it’s Friday night, we’re in fucking New York and I just got ditched for The Notebook and a tub of Ben & Jerry’s.”

“No, not that. About everyone being a little gay.” He laughs awkwardly, feeling unsure all of a sudden. “Like... are *you* gay?”

Chad looks at him like he’s stupid. “Dude, hot girlfriend? No, I’m not *gay*. Doesn’t mean I’d kick a guy in the face if he wanted to blow me.”

Jared stares at him. “Ok, who are you and what have you done with Chad?”

“What?” He’s blushing a little now, like his brain suddenly caught up with his mouth. “I’ve got layers.”

Jared grins. “Apparently you do. In all the colors of the rainbow.”

“Fuck you.” Chad stalks to the door, throwing him a challenging look. “You with me? Beer, bitches and b...b...”

Chad frowns, no third b-word obviously coming to mind, so Jared helpfully suggests, “Bromance?” then laughs when Chad flips him the finger.

A lot of beers, no bitches and definitely no bromance later, Jared’s still considering Chad’s words. Not about Sandy being jealous because that’s just stupid. What reason has he ever given her to be jealous? If anything he’s the one who should be keeping an eye on *her*. Sandy attracts guys and girls alike wherever they go and it’s never bothered him, just made him feel kinda smug about having such a hot girlfriend.

So no, he’s not worried about that. She might be pissed about him spending time with Jensen when she’d anticipated having him all to herself but she’s bound to see reason once she’s had some time to think. Sandy doesn’t usually hold grudges – except apparently against Jensen, a small voice in his head points out – so come morning she’s bound to be back to her old self.

The other thing though, about everyone being a little gay, *that’s* definitely food for thought. It doesn’t bother him, after all he’s known about Jensen for ages and never looked at him differently, it’s just not something he’s ever considered for himself. Definitely never considered for Chad but that’s pretty much consistent with never putting Chad and any kind of sex together in the same sentence. Which he just did. Damn. That calls for another shot. Or two.

“What’s up, bro?” Chad yells over the loud music as he slides back into their booth at least four shots later. “You’re all broody.”

“Not broody. Thinking,” Jared shouts back. “Promise me, if you have gay sex, don’t tell me about it. Ever.”

“Yeah, I’m cutting you off,” Chad says, rolling his eyes, and fishes Jared’s wallet out of his back pocket.

Jared scowls at him. Why are they here again? He doesn’t like clubs and he doesn’t like loud music and he *definitely* doesn’t like the overpriced piss poor excuse for a beer they serve here. “I hate this place!” he yells in Chad’s ear. “I wanna go back to the hotel.”

“Aw, man, don’t be like that. We’re in fucking New York, dude!”

“I’m going back,” Jared says determined and slides out of the booth, only stumbling slightly when he stands up. “You coming?”

“Nah, it’s early night yet,” Chad says and Jared checks his watch. It’s just past midnight. Huh, it feels a lot later. “You’re actually ditching me, dude? I hate you.”

“You love me. But I definitely don’t love *you* enough to stay,” he says and slaps Chad affectionately on the cheek. Yeah, maybe he had a little too much to drink he realizes when Chad’s head reels back from the blow. He kinda lost count after a while there. “Night, man. Don’t cheat on Sophia!”

“Would I do that?” Chad looks offended, rubbing his blushing cheek, but his eyes keep sliding to the dance floor where there are pretty and scantily clad girls grooving to the music.

“I mean it.” Jared shakes his finger in Chad’s face, almost poking his eye out. “She’s too nice for that.”

“Go home, asshole,” Chad mutters but at least he’s not ogling the half-naked women anymore. However long that lasts. Jared sighs and decides he’s too drunk to be Chad’s keeper and waves him goodbye.

Once outside he breathes in the probably polluted but surprisingly cool New York night air. There’s a light drizzle, a big improvement from the heavy rain earlier, and Jared moves to pull his jacket closer, only to remember he isn’t wearing one. Ok, so maybe he’s a little drunker than he thought he was when he discovered he *was* drunk. Or something like that.

He starts walking, not really paying attention to where he’s going. New York, New York, the city that apparently never sleeps. There are couples walking to and from parties and bars, snuggling close under umbrellas or laughing as they run through the rain, wet newspapers over their heads. He feels awfully lonely all of a sudden. Maybe he shouldn’t have left the club on his own. It feels kinda stupid now. He doesn’t even remember why anymore.

Thinking about being lonely gets him thinking about Jensen again. *Again*, he thinks and snorts to himself. As if Jensen ever left his mind for even a minute. Truth is, he’s kinda worried. If kinda means a lot and worried means feeling sick in his gut. Not just because of the whole concussion thing, even if seeing Jensen so pale and weak was pretty fucking scary, but because he’s leaving again in two days and he’s

pretty sure Jensen hasn't realized that. From everything he said it seems as if Jensen thinks he's here to stay.

Fuck, he wants to stay. Wants to stay so bad. Somehow he never imagined it like this, finally finding Jensen only to leave him again. What the fuck is that about? It's just not fair. How's he suppose to go back to LA when Jensen is *here*? It's just stupid. No, it's worse than stupid, it's inconceivable. Like leaving without taking half his limbs. Kinda like when Jensen left ten years ago and Jared felt like someone had ripped out a piece of his heart.

It's strange, that someone he hardly knows can have such a hold on him. They only did know each other for about seven months and that was ten years ago. He's never felt that way about anyone. Not even when Sandy went away for college for four years did he miss her as much as he missed Jensen. And now that he's living miles and miles away from every single member of his family he still thinks more often of Jensen than he does them. No wonder Chad says he's obsessed.

There's just something about Jensen that makes it impossible not to think about him, like all the time. Not just the whole magic thing, which in itself is unique enough to make him impossible to forget, but Jensen himself. Something no one back home got, but here... people get it here. Jensen's friends and colleagues, they get it. They feel it. That somehow they're in the presence of someone very special, someone who's so different they will never again meet anyone like him. And instead of shutting him out or avoiding him, like the kids back home had done, they embrace it. They embrace him and take care of him and love him and Jared? Jared, his supposed best friend, he's leaving. He's leaving to fly to fucking LA where there is no Jensen and no one even knows what they're missing out on. No one even cares that Jared has a big Jensen shaped hole in his heart because he's here and Jared isn't and it's all a big goddamn mess!

"He was my friend first," he mutters to whoever might be judging him, mostly himself, which only makes him feel more stupid. "I'm supposed to be his best friend and I don't even know him anymore. I don't even live here! I'm leaving him again in two days for... for... I don't even know what!"

"Are you alright?" a voice asks and he jumps. A man is watching him warily, seeming to contemplate whether talking to the gigantic drunk man was maybe a big mistake.

"Yeah. Yeah. Sorry." He tries to smile but it comes out all crooked. "I just... Never mind."

"Maybe you should go home, son. Get some sleep," the man suggests, not unkindly, and Jared nods, more to himself than anyone else.

"Yeah. Yeah, I should do that." He looks around, realizing he has no idea where he is. Damn. When a cab comes driving up the street he hails it and then stumbles inside, rattling off the address before promptly passing out.

Next thing he knows he's being shaken awake by a rather pissed off looking taxi driver. "You cannot sleep in my cab, man. Get out."

Jared blinks. He doesn't feel so good. "Ok, ok," he mutters and pulls a couple of bills out of his pocket, not even checking the meter. The guy huffs but takes the money and drives off the minute Jared's slammed the door shut. Which is when he realizes he's not in front of his hotel but Jensen's building and he just blew his last dollar.

This just isn't his night.

For a while he tries to figure out what to do but it's kinda hard when he feels like he might pass out again any second. In the end he stumbles to the door to Jensen's building, finds the right button and pushes it. He waits for a long time and when no one answers he pushes it again, harder and longer this time.

*"Who the fuck is this!?! What the fuck do you think you're doing!?! It's the middle of the fucking night, you fucking asshole!"*

Whoa, what happened to 'a city that never sleeps'? 'New York, New York, my ass,' Jared thinks.

"Hi!" he says and tries to sound cheerful. "Hey, Chris. It's Chris, right? Hey. It's Jared. I... have no idea what I'm doing here. I think I got lost. And... and I don't have any money. Also I'm very, very drunk. And wet. Did you know it's raining?"

There's silence for a long time and then a very tired voice says over the intercom, *"Come on up, you fucking moron."* The buzzer sounds before he has time to respond and he pushes the door open. The trip up the elevator seems to take forever and he snoozes a bit, waking up with a jerk when it comes to a halt on the top floor. When the door slides open he's met with a grumpy Chris, giving him a wary look.

"Dude, why are you here?" he says tiredly. "It's the middle of the fucking night. Shouldn't you be in bed with your girlfriend?"

There's something weird about the way he says that, like he's torn between being pissed off and just plain sad and for a moment Jared doesn't know how to respond.

"She's mad at me," he says at last, sucking his lower lip in between his teeth when he realizes he's pouting. "She's watching Ryan Gosling and eating ice cream. Also she thinks I'm gay for Jensen. Which... I don't know, man. Girls. They're weird."

Chris's eyes go dark. "Don't say shit like that unless you mean it," he says angry and Jared frowns.

"You don't think girls are weird?" he asks confused and Chris closes his eyes briefly before shaking his head.

"I meant... never mind. Get in here. And keep it down."

“I’ll be vewy vewy quiet,” Jared whispers and trips over the threshold, crashing into the wall and ends up sprawled on the floor.

“Jesus!”

“Think I’m just gonna sleep here,” Jared sighs and starts to curl up on the surprisingly soft floor. Except the floor apparently doesn’t like that but shoves him off and moves away.

“Fucking drunk giant,” it says and pulls him to his feet. “You’re not sleeping on the floor. Or me. Here.” He’s being pulled along and then shoved down and this time he lands on what feels like a couch.

“Puke on my couch and I’ll make you clean it with your tongue,” the grumpy floor, that he now realizes is Chris, says and then something soft and warm is thrown over him and that’s the last thing he remembers.



“Jen?”

“Nngh?”

Jensen rubs a hand over his face, blinking against the soft light by his bed. His head feels better but his heart feels about two pounds too heavy and that’s when everything that happened the day before comes rushing back to him. Jared. And Sandy. And being the biggest idiot on the face of the Earth. Waking up is really not anything he wants to do now, if ever.

“How you feeling?” Chris asks but Jensen just closes his eyes again and pulls the covers over his head. That should be answer enough.

Chris sighs. “Yeah, man. Believe me, I get that. But here’s the thing... Jared is here.”

Jensen pulls the covers slowly away from his face. “What?” he croaks out and checks his watch. It’s barely eight in the morning. “Already?”

“Actually he showed up at one o’clock this morning, drunk off his ass. He’s sleeping on the couch. Just thought I’d give you a warning before you got up.”

“What?” Jensen sits up slowly, trying to make sense of that. “Why’d he end up here? Shouldn’t he be with... you know?” God, he can’t even say her name. Idiot.

“Don’t ask me. I gather he got drunk with some guy named Chad then somehow ended up here instead of at his hotel. I only let him in because he’d lost his wallet or something and I knew you’d kill me if he died in his own vomit in an alley somewhere.” Chris shakes his head. “You really pick your friends, Jenny boy.”

“You should know, you hick,” Jensen retorts but it’s more of a reflex than a conscious answer, his brain too busy thinking of Jared, asleep out there. And about to wake up with possibly the worst hangover ever. “Fuck.”

“You can say that again.” Chris is watching him, face shadowed. “If you want to hide in here while I get him out I won’t blame you.”

Jensen is about to throw some annoyed insult back at him when he really looks at his friend and it strikes him how tired Chris looks. Like he hasn’t slept at all the last couple of nights. Damn.

“Scared you last night, didn’t I?” he asks quietly.

Chris shrugs but his lips are thin and his jaw clenched tight. “Kinda, yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. I’m just...”

Chris waves his hand like he’s trying to find the words and it’s just not happening. Finally he pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers before looking back at Jensen, raw and open.

“You wanted to know why I never got on the Jared train? This is why, Jen. Chances were he’d never show up. And if he did...” Chris shakes his head, jaw tight. “Not what you expected, right? So yeah, Jen, it scares the shit out of me thinking what he could do to you.”

“Chris...”

“No. Last night... Jensen, the walls were leaking. I was mopping the floors half the night. And the piano, it sounded... It broke my heart because I knew it was how you felt. And that’s nothing compared to... Goddammit, Jen, if he marries that girl, what then? I’m fucking terrified, ok?”

“Chris, if he never... If *we* never happen?” Jensen swallows. “Yeah, I’ll be devastated but it’s not going to kill me. I’ll be alright.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m not. I’m not sure at all.” Chris shakes his head as he stands up.

“C’mon, I’m stronger than that,” Jensen argues even though at the moment he doesn’t feel strong at all.

“You’re the strongest person I know,” Chris agrees, “but you’ve always had hope to cling to. I don’t want to see what happens to you if you don’t have any hope left.”

“Chris...”

Chris shakes his head. “Whatever happens,” he says in a quiet voice, “Don’t... don’t go away, ok? With this... I’m not sure you’d come back.”

Before Jensen can answer Chris is gone, closing the door softly behind him.

Fuck.

Jensen lets himself fall back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Chris has seen him in all kinds of emotional states, from high on life to so low he can hardly crawl out of bed, so for his friend to be that worried...

That thought alone is enough to help him get out of bed. His head gives a warning throb when he stands up but he shushes it and it slinks away.

His clothes lie wrinkled on the chair even if he doesn’t remember taking them off. Chris must have done it sometime during the night. He throws on some old jeans and a t-shirt instead. Not like dressing to kill had done him any good, he’d rather just be comfortable and plain.

He stops by the studio, soothingly stroking the piano’s smooth tangents.

“I’m okay,” he whispers. “I’ll be okay, don’t worry. Sleep now.”

Minnalousse slinks around his ankles and he gives her a pat too. He felt her lying in bed with him during the night, curled up by his knees, but she’d been gone before Chris came to wake him up this morning. She doesn’t like other people, never stays around when they enter the room.

In the bathroom he stands staring at himself in the mirror a long time. His eyes look even greener than usual in his pale face, the freckles a golden contrast to the almost grey skin. His bruise is starting to turn yellow and green already and the cut skin is knotting together, rapidly healing. That’s nothing new, cuts and bruises never stay with him long. Another thing that makes him different.

“You know how you never get sick?” Chris had asked once when they were sprawled half-drunk and mellow on the couch, pretending to watch some basketball game on TV when really, they were just too lazy to get up and find the remote to change channels. Jensen had tried blinking but of course that never worked when he *wanted* it to.

“Mmph,” Jensen had muttered as he swallowed his last drops of beer.

“And how if you hurt yourself it’s just... pfft gone, just like that, the next day?” Chris had continued, waving his hand for emphasis.

“So? What’s your point?” Jensen had grumbled, shaking his empty bottle and wondering if he had enough energy to get up and fetch another. Maybe he could learn to fetch beer with his freaky brain. That would be cool.



“I was just wondering,” Chris had said after a while, suddenly sounding a lot more sober. “Do you think you’re maybe immortal? Like, you can never die?”

Jensen had abruptly turned his head to stare at him, frozen, then rolled off the couch and run to the bathroom, hand over his mouth.

They never mentioned it again.

For the first time in his life Jensen wishes he did scar. Wishes he’d get one, right there on his forehead.

“You’re being a moron, you know that?” he tells himself and the green eyes close down, staring back blank and empty. “Yeah, because that’s so much better,” he says and rolls his eyes.

He has light stubble but he ignores it, instead running wet fingers through his hair after he’s done brushing his teeth and that’s it, he’s ready. He smiles at himself in the mirror, trying out different versions until he finds one that looks normal. The smile of a man that doesn’t care that he just lost the love of his life to a pretty girl.

He heads to the kitchen first, careful not to glance in the direction of the couch when he walks by. Chris already has a cup of coffee ready for him and he takes it gratefully, giving Chris a sample of the smile.

Chris shakes his head but he smiles back, laying a hand on Jensen’s shoulder and squeezing it tight. “You gonna be alright?”

“I’m fine. See, healing already,” he says and points to his head.

“Not really what I was talking about but that’s good, Jen.” He looks worried but he doesn’t mention what they talked about earlier, something Jensen is very grateful for.

“Just take it easy, ok?” Chris says instead. “Don’t overdo it. Eat something.” He furrows his brow in thought then adds, “If you go out don’t forget your phone, ok? And call me if you need me.”

“I will. Go get some sleep, man. You look like hell.”

Chris flips him off but he doesn’t argue, just squeezes Jensen’s shoulder one last time before heading for his room.

After finishing his first cup Jensen fills it up again and another one for Jared, then walks slowly into the living room. Jared is lying curled up on the couch, a blanket thrown over his long legs and trailing down to the floor. His shirt is rumbled and his hair stands up in all directions. He looks so much younger than his twenty-three years, like he’s barely out of high school. He also looks so goddamn beautiful Jensen’s heart breaks all over again.

He sits down on the sofa table and puts the cups of coffee aside before leaning over and laying his hand gently on Jared's shoulder. He smells of rain and alcohol and confusion. Jensen frowns. He closes his eyes and moves his hand to the bare skin on Jared's neck but either Jared is too deep asleep or he's just very good at burying his emotions because Jensen can feel nothing but warmth and the steady beat of Jared's heart under his fingertips.

"Jared?" he says and shakes him gently. "Hey, man, wake up."

"Ubuh?" Jared's voice is like gravel. He coughs and turns his head, burying his face in the sofa cushions. "G'way, Chad," he mutters. "Sleep'n."

Jensen smiles. Jared might be ten years older and hell of a lot taller but he still sounds like the thirteen-year-old boy Jensen used to shake awake after falling asleep on the couch in his studio back home.

"I brought you coffee," he says and the heavenly scent dances in the air around them, sneaking its way between the cushions to reach Jared's nose. "C'mon, Jay. Rise and shine."

"Wha?" Jared lifts his head slightly, eyes blinking groggily. Then he turns around abruptly, almost falling off the couch in his flailing. "Jen? What you doin'ere?"

Jensen grins. "I live here. What are *you* doing here?"

Jared blinks slowly, then squeezes his eyes shut and groans. "Having the most embarrassing moment ever?" he mumbles. "Not to mention being hung over as hell."

Jensen laughs then puts his hand on Jared's forehead and closes his eyes. When he opens them again Jared is staring at him and Jensen awkwardly pulls his hand back.

"Better?" he asks and Jared nods, dumbfounded. "Oh good. That almost never works." He laughs embarrassed. "Can't do anything about your bad breath though but you can borrow my toothbrush if you want."

Jared's face goes even redder and he covers it with his hand. It's a big hand, almost gigantic. Jensen thinks Jared could easily swallow his both in the cradle of one palm. Yesterday when Jared had held his hand it felt like when he was a child, small fist clutched in his father's strong grip. Felt like he could do anything, go anywhere, as long as he had that hand to hold on to. He wonders where he could go with Jared, what he could do. 'You could travel the world,' Jared had once said and in Jensen's mind he'd added, 'with me'. He thinks he could do that, travel the world with Jared.

"Jensen?"

He's always wanted to see Vienna. Wanted to walk the streets of the great composers, breathe in their air and listen to all the music they left behind in the trees and cobblestones. They could do that. Him and Jared. Together. Jared's big hand clutching his own. Music, all around them...

“Jensen, hello?”

...and the smell of old Europe. All those memories. Such tragedies and terror and yet there was always hope. The sun never stopped coming up in the morning, the flowers didn't stop blooming, the seasons kept changing. Everything changes and everything comes back to the same. Like them, here. Lost for a decade and still here they are again.

He blinks and finds Jared sitting up and watching him, concerned.

“Jensen?”

“Sorry.” He smiles embarrassed and scratches at the back of his neck. “Was I gone long?”

Jared shakes his head, looking unsure. “Just a few minutes. You do that, like a lot?”

Jensen shrugs. “It happens. Don't worry, I always come back.” He smiles again and Jared smiles back, but his eyes still look uncertain. “Like you,” Jensen adds and grins.

Jared blushes again. “Yeah,” he says awkwardly. “Didn't mean to do it like this though. How much of a pain was I?”

“Don't ask me, I was sleeping. Chris on the other hand didn't look too happy this morning.”

“God, I'm sorry.” Jared rubs at his face, his stubble scratching against his dry palm. “Way to make a good impression.”

“You wanted to make a good impression on my friends?” Jensen asks, still grinning. “Aaww, that's so sweet.”

“Shut up.”

Jared yawns and stretches, his shirt riding up to reveal a sliver of skin. It's tanned golden, a hint of dark hairs showing right above the waistband of his jeans. Jensen's hand starts reaching out but he snatches it back at the last second and it's resting innocently on his thigh when Jared re-opens his eyes and squares his shoulders.

“I liked your old couch better,” he says, grimacing. “This ones too small.”

“Or maybe you're the one who's grown all big,” Jensen points out.

“Excuses, excuses,” Jared says lightly, waving his hand. “Did you say something about coffee?”

Jensen hands him the mug and takes his own. They sit sipping for a while, the glazed look in Jared's eyes slowly clearing. He's looking around the room, curious, his gaze traveling back to Jensen from time to time, just watching him. Jensen keeps his eyes

on Jared, smiling whenever their eyes meet, but otherwise just drinking in every little detail of the man in front of him.

“How are you feeling?” Jared suddenly asks and when Jensen frowns he points at Jensen’s forehead. “It looks better.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He shrugs. “I heal fast. I’m good, don’t worry.”

“Oh, ok.” Jared looks as he wants to say something more but instead he takes another sip of his coffee. He looks around the room again, a slight frown of confusion on his face. “Somehow I imagined it differently,” he says. “Your home, I mean.”

“Oh?”

“There are no flowers,” Jared says, looking awkward. “I always imagined you having lots of flowers. Like your garden back home.”

“Oh that.” Jensen smiles. “Chris has the worst hay fever. But it’s alright. There’s a huge park close to work, I just go there.”

Jared grins. “So I’ve heard. There was a cab driver...” he starts when Jensen gives him a confused look, but then he laughs and waves it off. “Never mind. So you teach at Juilliard,” he says after a moment’s awkward silence.

“Yeah, I... yeah.” Jensen laughs softly. “It’s a little weird, working next to people who used to be my teachers but it’s nice too. They know me and I don’t freak them out.”

Thankfully Jared doesn’t ask what he means about freaking them out. “But they don’t know about your magic,” he says instead, raising his eyebrows.

Jensen shakes his head. He always feels strange, hearing what he does referred to as magic. “No. It’s not easy hiding it but I take precautions and so far it’s been alright.”

Jared nods. He keeps gazing at Jensen like he’s afraid he might disappear again. “I’m happy for you, Jen,” he suddenly says, his voice quiet. “I was so worried, you know. It’s awesome to see how great you’ve made your life.”

Jensen holds the smile but it must look forced by now. “I didn’t make it. It just happened to me,” he says and shrugs.

Jared shakes his head. “Lots of things happened to you, Jensen. Some pretty bad I imagine. But you made a life out of them. A much better one than I would have managed.”

Jensen doesn’t know what to say to that. He doesn’t feel like he did much at all except fight to stay above the waters when the world seemed to be flooding. If anyone is to thank for his life it’s Chris. Apart from taking him in and keeping him sane Chris got him into Juilliard and is still now, years later, looking after him. Taking the credit for any of it feels like lying.

“I didn’t do it alone,” he says, averting his eyes. He might not want to lie to Jared but he’s not sure he wants him to know all the details either. Frankly, being so dependent on someone when he’s supposed to be an adult, it’s embarrassing. “I had a lot of help. Still do.”

“It’s okay to need help.” Jared laughs, his eyes softening. “I’m a total klutz by myself. I fall over my own two feet, I forget things all the time, I get drunk. Obviously.” He grins. “Just as well we have good people around that are smarter than us.”

“Yeah.” Jensen gives him another smile. He doesn’t think Jared has ever needed help remembering where he is or where he was going. Doubts he goes days without eating if no one tells him to. Or needs help being pulled out of his own head when his thoughts go too deep. And he’s pretty sure Jared has never woken up in the middle of the night to find his friends sitting by his bedside, wondering if this is the sleep he’ll never wake up from.

“Are you hungry?” he asks to change the subject. “We could go have breakfast somewhere.”

A small grimace starts forming on Jared’s face but then it changes into a look of surprise. “Actually, yeah. I’m starving.”

“Great!” This time the smile is genuine. “You probably need to eat a lot to uphold your giant status, right?”

“Funny. You’ve gotten funnier with the years,” Jared deadpans as he gets up of the couch, stretching to his full length. “No, no really, you’re hilarious.”

“Or maybe you’re finally mature enough to understand my advanced humor,” Jensen says, trying to keep his face straight and failing completely.

Jared bites his lip to keep from grinning. “Whereas you’ve still not grasped the meaning of sarcasm.”

Jensen frowns. “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. My ears don’t reach that high.”

“That’s cos you’re a midget,” Jared says smugly.

“That’s what I should have called you all those years ago? A midget? Huh.” He ducks from Jared’s gigantic hand aiming at his head, laughing happily.

He’s putting his jacket on when Jared says, “Uh... Jensen? Guess this is for you,” and pulls off a note that’s taped to the front door.

*‘Keys!’* it says. *‘Wallet! PHONE!! And for fuck’s sake eat something.’*

Jensen rolls his eyes and stuffs the note in his pocket. He’s already got his keys, the wallet is in the pocket of his jacket and the phone is... somewhere.

“Dude, did you see my phone?” he asks, looking around the living room. Maybe he left it in his room. Or kitchen. Or bathroom. He walks from one room to another, finally retrieving it from the kitchen counter. When he comes back out into the hall Jared is waiting, a strange look on his face. “What?”

Jared shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says but he’s looking uncomfortable and as Jensen closes the door he adds, “He really does take care of you. Chris, I mean.”

Jensen blushes. He’s so used to it, hell everyone he knows is used to it, so he sometimes forgets it’s not exactly normal. “Yeah,” he says and shrugs. “I guess he does.”

“How did you meet? Is he...?”

“Can we eat something first?” Jensen cuts in, giving him a tired smile. “I’ll tell you everything, Jared, I promise. It’s just a rather long story and I’d rather not get into it here in the hallway.”

Jared looks like he wants to argue, the same impatience Jensen remembers from when Jared was a kid, but he just nods and together they walk to the elevator. It pings open just as they reach the door and Jensen steps inside, looking back when he realizes Jared isn’t following. “What?”

“Did you do that?” Jared asks wide-eyed. “Make it just... open?”

Jensen blinks. “Uh... Maybe? I don’t know.”

Jared shakes his head, like he doesn’t know what to think, and when he steps inside he glances around. It takes Jensen a moment to realize he’s looking for motion sensors, shaking his head again in wonderment when he sees there are none. Jensen watches him worried. What if he freaks Jared out with stuff like this, stuff that he doesn’t even know he’s doing?

“There’s this coffee house by the park I go to sometimes,” he says to distract them both. “But we’d have to take the subway.”

Jared nods. “Sounds good,” he says then adds awkwardly, “Oh, I have no money.”

“What?”

Jared blushes. “I know, it’s so moronic. I’ll pay you back, I promise. I left my wallet with Chad last night for some... weird reason. I was way too drunk to make sense. Which reminds me.” He fishes a phone out of his pocket and starts punching the buttons. “Just gonna send him a text message or he’ll freak out when he wakes up. Whenever that is.” He finishes up and slips the phone back into his pocket before flashing Jensen a smile. “So can you spare a stupid poor man some change?”

Jensen chuckles and shakes his head. “Yeah, I think I can manage that.”

They get outside and the traffic lights change to red as soon as they get to the street, the little green man blinking impatiently on the other side. Jensen tenses. Did he do that too?

The same thing happens at the next street they have to cross and when Jared looks at Jensen he shrugs and makes a face like no, he doesn't know either. He's starting to panic. Does he do this every day? How the hell come he's never noticed?

The subway train arrives just as they get there (he couldn't have done that, could he?) and when they step inside people instantly move away so he can get to his regular seat, most of them without even looking up. A huge bald man with a skull tattooed on the back of his head, vacates it for him and Jensen nods gratefully, smiling when the teenage girl beside him gives way for Jared. He thanks her, bewildered, giving Jensen that same odd look. He just shrugs because yeah, this he knows is his doing. Somehow.

They sit down, Jared's thigh hot where it presses against his own, his broad shoulders pushing Jensen toward the window. Jensen drums his fingers on his thigh, wanting to turn to look at Jared but he stares out the window instead, studying Jared's reflection in the glass. He tries to see signs of Jared freaking out but even if he's stopped grinning he doesn't look freaked, just thoughtful. Jensen isn't sure that is much better.

He doesn't realize how fidgety he's gotten until Jared suddenly lays one huge hand on his thigh, stilling his bouncing knee and wrapping a fist around his manically drumming fingers.

"It's alright," he says quietly. "Don't worry."

Jensen breathes out and gives a jerking nod, eyes fixated on the window. Jared's hand is so warm it sends waves of heat through his body and he's afraid if he turns his head he will do something incredibly stupid like lean over and kiss him. He can feel someone watching him and when he raises his eyes he meets Jared gaze, reflected in the glass. Somehow it makes it all feel so unreal. Like he's watching Jared on the other side of a mirror. Like he's not really there. His eyes are dark, passing lights making them flash like a cat's. The longer they look, the darker they get, like he's trying to read Jensen's soul and he can't find it. Jensen abruptly looks away. He feels awkward and different and weird.

'Not weird, *unique*. I'm unique,' he tries to tell himself but it just sounds like 'I'm alone'. Because he is. He's always alone. There is no one like him and never will be. His chest aches and he closes his eyes. The sound of the train starts fading away along with the dark smell and the desperate voices. In his head there's a field and a blue sky and everything smells like summer. He's lying in the high grass, eyes closed against the bright sun. Music surrounds him and beside him ...

Jensen blinks awake, lifting his head from where it had come to rest against the window, his cheek tingling from the cold glass. He looks down and there is Jared's hand, still holding his. His grip is warm and strong and solid and... still *there*. As he

stares down at it Jared tightens his hold briefly and when Jensen raises his eyes he finds Jared watching him, smiling softly.

“It’s okay, we still have a few stops left,” he says. “You can rest a while longer if you want.”

Jensen blinks slowly but Jared doesn’t disappear. It’s amazing.

“I’m okay,” he says, surprised. Jared smiles and Jensen finds himself smiling back. When Jared turns his head away Jensen keeps watching him. He can see by the small smile tugging at the corner of Jared’s lip that he’s aware of it but he doesn’t say anything.

When they’re closing in on their stop Jared nudges him before standing up, fingers slipping away from Jensen’s. He gets up as well, his hand tingling where it hangs by his side and he flexes his fingers in wonder. It’s strange how much it affects him, Jared’s touch. It’s not as if no one else ever does, in fact people touch him all the time now. Something that still amazes him.

After his mother stopped touching him he felt starved for that kind of attention. Mac hugged him sometimes when he got upset but mostly she just poked him or slapped his arm in play. The few times his dad hugged him those last years are bittersweet memories because it only happened when everything seemed so dark and hopeless. And then there was Jared. Jared who would sometimes wiggle closer until their arms touched. Or he’d put a hand on Jensen’s shoulder, awkward but sincere, like he wanted to do more but wasn’t sure he was allowed. And then of course the time Jensen hung onto him like a drunk, drugged up to his eyeballs. He wishes he remembers what it felt like but mostly he remembers how ashamed he was for embarrassing Jared like that.

This Jared though, he isn’t afraid to touch. The first thing he did when they met again was to pull Jensen into a hug. And since then there have been touching hands and fingers stroking his face. Jensen can’t help wondering if it’s really Jared that’s changed or if it’s just the same as with everyone else around him.

Jensen knows he has this weird vibe about him that just... attracts people. Where everyone seemed to scramble to get away from him wherever he went when he was a kid, now they actually seek him out. Sometimes, when he’s at the park and feeling exceptionally good, children run over to touch his face, laughing in delight until their parents hurry over to pull them away, blushing and offering their apologies while all the time looking like they’d love to reach out and feel for themselves. Thankfully they don’t. He doesn’t mind the kids but adult strangers petting him are a little too much.

And then there are his co-workers and friends that never seem able to come near him without touching him somewhere, on the arm or shoulder, sometimes just nudging his hand if they can find no other excuse. This is especially true of Chris.





Steve once told Jensen Chris used to be a cynical bastard that couldn't care less what people thought of him and in general preferred it if everyone stayed far away from his grumpy self.

"I tried to hug him when his dad died and I thought he was gonna punch me," Steve had said and chuckled. "And then you came along and look at him now."

The Chris Jensen knows has hands as gentle as his words are brass.

He always makes sure to touch Jensen's shoulder lightly if he looks distracted and might not have noticed Chris approaching. Of course he has first hand experience in just how dangerous a startled Jensen can be, but it's not just that. Like when he gets lost in his head Chris pulls him out with a firm grip that never gets brutal no matter how tough it can be. Chris doesn't slap him like his parents used to do or twist the skin on his arm between strong fingers like they sometimes did Inside. Instead he just holds on, talking whatever shit pops up in his head into Jensen's ear until he finds his way back to reality.

And then of course there are the nights they don't talk about, when Jensen can't sleep alone. Or the times his music grabs him so tight he can't stop or let go and by the time Chris catches on and forcibly pulls him away he's so exhausted he sometimes passes out in his arms. Or when...

Someone touches his elbow. "Where are we going?" Jared says, sounding unsure.

Jensen jerks awake, stopping in his tracks. He looks around, trying to figure out where they are. They should have come up from the subway right by one of the park

entrances but now they're standing on the sidewalk on some street that looks familiar but not enough that he can place it. He offers Jared an embarrassed smile and pulls out his phone. He can feel Jared watching him and his face turns even redder.

"Sorry," he mumbles. "I got distracted."

Jared comes closer, looking over his shoulder. "Wow, you've got GPS?"

"Yeah." He frowns as he tries to figure out where they're supposed to go. "Chris's idea. Guess he got tired of me calling him all the time, asking where I was." He snorts but when he looks up Jared isn't smiling. In fact he looks dead serious. "What?"

"You weren't like this before. I mean, right? You weren't this..." He waves his hand, obviously at a loss for words.

Jensen bites his lip. "Helpless?" he offers, feeling stupid and weak.

"No. Not that. I mean, you never used to zone out so much. Is it...because of what happened to you? In that place? Did they do something?"

He looks back down at his phone, buying time while he finds the right route. "This way," he says finally and points back the way they came. They start walking silently side by side, Jared throwing occasional glances his way as if he's expecting Jensen to zone out again.

"I don't know what they did," Jensen finally says in a low voice. "I don't really remember much. I was on a lot of drugs and seemed to just go from one nightmare to another with a few lucid periods in between."

"Jesus!" Jared's voice shakes and when their hands bump he grabs Jensen's, seemingly without even realizing.

Jensen breathes in deep, drawing strength from that touch, his fingers tightening around Jared's like a lifeline. "I had no colors, no sounds. I had no music. Two years without music. I think... I think maybe I actually did go a little mad."

"God, I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry." Jared sounds so broken that Jensen stops short and tugs on his hand to halt him.

"Hey, it's okay," he says even if it's anything but. "There was nothing you could have done."

Jared nods but he doesn't look any calmer. "I know, I just..." he says, "I don't know where I thought they were taking you but not a place like that."

Jensen shrugs. "It wasn't so bad. The place, I mean. It was nice enough. They just didn't know what to do with me. According to the doctors I'm schizophrenic, delusional, manic-depressive and have a slight case of narcolepsy," he counts on his fingers.

“Narcolepsy?” The look on Jared’s face is almost comical. “Like River Phoenix?”

Jensen frowns. “What? The dead one?”

“Ok, not River Phoenix but this guy he played in a movie, he had narcolepsy. He kept having seizures and falling asleep when he was...” Jared stops, his face going red. “Doesn’t matter. So why did they think you had that?”

Jensen quirks his eyebrow at Jared’s embarrassment but doesn’t ask him to elaborate. “Because of the whole zoning out thing,” he explains instead. “They couldn’t wake me up a lot of the time. And the nightmares I had when I was drugged, they put me into pretty deep sleep too. So I guess they thought that was the reason.”

“And these people had doctor degrees?” Jared says, incredulous.

Jensen smiles a little. “I’m not an easy person to analyze, Jay. I don’t think they have Magical Madness 101 as a part of their education.” He shrugs. “It’s not such a bad idea actually. Like at work. I hate freaking my students out but if they have an explanation for what it is they don’t get as scared. So I tell them about that and if something happens I have a couch in the classroom and just sleep it off there.”

“So it happens a lot?”

Jensen shrugs again, feeling awkward. “It’s an emotional thing, I guess. When I have trouble handling emotions I zone out or sometimes even pass out. Music is very emotional, you know. What some of those kids play... It’s pretty heavy stuff.”

Jared nods. “I can imagine,” he says, all serious, and Jensen looks away.

They start walking again. Jared is still holding his hand but it seems to be an unconscious act. He’s deep in thought, brow furrowed and mouth slightly twisted. It’s not until they finally reach the small coffeehouse that he lets go of Jensen’s hand, blushing slightly as he just realized what he’d been doing. Jensen just smiles and pretends it’s perfectly normal, like he walks around the city holding hands with guys all the time.

“Hey, Jensen!” the girl behind the counter says happily as they walk in the door and he gives her a bright smile. “Where have you been?”

“Hey, Susie,” he says. “Oh, you know, somewhere.” She laughs. “How are you? How’s art?”

“Oh you know, being a bitch.” They laugh again, the joke old but never tired.

“Susan’s an aspiring artist,” Jensen tells Jared, suddenly remembering his manners. “Susie, this is Jared.”

“Hi, Jared.” She grins at him, wiping her palm on the apron before offering him her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too, miss,” Jared says, smiling widely, as he envelopes her small hand in his.

“Oh, I like him. He’s a handsome one,” she tells Jensen and winks. He blushes and steals a glance at Jared, feeling slightly better when he sees he’s not any better off. “So what can I get you?”

“Uh…” Jared looks at Jensen and he grins.

“Jared had a tough night last night. And he’s a growing boy. Just feed him what you’ve got. It’s on me.”

“Not sure how much more growing he should do but whatever you say, Jensen. And you, the usual?”

Jensen hesitates, then nods. “Yeah, that’d be good. Thanks.” He looks around, unsure.

“You two look like you need to talk,” she says, smiling. “The corner booth is free and I’ll keep the next one clear. Just go sit down, I’ll bring you your food and coffee.”

He gives her a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

He’s starting to feel nervous and wonders if it’s that obvious. All the words he needs (but isn’t sure he *wants*) to say are crawling under his skin, itching like fire ants. He’s already spilled more than he feels comfortable with but he’d promised Jared he would tell him everything and it’s not like he could lie to him anyway.

He smiles at Jared across the table, the distance it forces between them weird after being so close. He can feel the heat from Jared’s legs on his bare ankles under the table, which is when he realizes he forgot to put socks on. His feet are gonna stink, being bare in those sneakers. Maybe he should ask Chris to add that to the check list, ‘Make sure you’re wearing all your clothes!’ The thought makes him chuckle, suddenly picturing himself running out in nothing but his underwear. He’s not quite *that* crazy.

“What’s so funny?” Jared asks, bringing him back to the present. “Share the joke, dude.”

“Just picturing myself in my underwear,” Jensen says without thinking, then freezes when Jared just blinks. “Uh… I mean… I forgot to put on socks.”

Jared blinks again then shakes his head, smiling slightly. “So what’s your usual?” he asks curious.

Jensen shrugs, shooting a glance to make sure Susan can’t hear him before whispering, “I have no idea. I’ve never really paid attention.” He frowns when something suddenly occurs to him. “Shit, I hope it includes coffee.”

Jared stares at him for a moment before suddenly bursting out laughing. “You are so...” he shakes his head, words obviously escaping him.

“Weird?” Jensen suggests, smiling to make sure Jared knows he doesn’t mind.

“No, *funny!* You are so funny.” He looks absolutely delighted so Jensen doesn’t think he means it in a bad way. “To quote a cliché, *you* are like a box of chocolates, I never know what I’m gonna get. You keep surprising me, all the time.” Jared reaches across the table and grabs his hand, squeezing it slightly. “I can’t wait to get to know this you, this grown up you.”

Jensen blushes, averting his eyes. “I’m not always fun, you know. I can be a real pain. To be honest I’m surprised Chris hasn’t thrown me out a long time ago. I’m not exactly easy to live with.”

“Well, he obviously loves you,” Jared says and smiles. “I guess that makes it easy.”

Jensen doesn’t have anything to say to that except to wonder what that says about his parents. Like maybe they didn’t love him enough.

“Talking about Chris, how did you two meet?” Jared asks suddenly. His voice sounds a little on edge but when Jensen looks up there is the same encouraging smile and a genuine interested look in his eyes.

Jensen gets a short break from answering when Susan shows up with their food. Jared gets bacon and eggs and toast and hash brownies with fries on the side. Jensen gets blueberry waffles and a fruit salad. They both get orange juice and coffee. Jensen’s is black with two lumps of sugar resting on the saucer. Jared gets a latte with chocolate sprinkles on top.

“How did you know?” he asks her with a grin and she grins back.

“You looked like you could use some calcium,” she says and then lays a warm hand on Jensen’s shoulder. “You okay, Jensen?” she asks concerned.

Jensen looks up, trying to smooth out the frown between his eyebrows. “I’m good, thank you.” He smiles at her. “I do like waffles.”

“Duh.” But she smiles and Jensen suddenly gets the feeling they’ve had this conversation many times before. She gives him a small pat on the shoulder before leaving them with a promise to holler if they need anything.

He’s halfway through his stack of waffles when he feels someone watching him and when he looks up he meets Jared’s eyes, waiting. Jared raises his eyebrows in question and Jensen swallows the suddenly huge piece of waffle in his mouth.

“You want to know about Chris,” he says and despite his trepidation he finds himself grinning. “Chris is... an obnoxious overprotective rude asshole. And yeah, he does love me.”

“And you love him.” It’s not a question.

Jensen smiles. “Oh, I do. He... I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. Not in New York, not at Juilliard, not... not alive. I wouldn’t be alive.”



Jensen keeps his head lowered, voice quiet and detached, as he talks about his time inside or what he remembers of it. That’s what he calls it, inside. He never mentions the name of the place or what kind of establishment it was, just ‘inside’, like he’s talking about a prison. Which it must have been to him.

It hurts Jared physically to think of Jensen in a place like that. Hurts him more than it did all the times he imagined it, because despite his fears he never really believed it. Jensen locked up and kept away from his family, his friend, his *music* is bad enough. Thinking about him drugged up to his eyeballs with all kinds of pills that were supposed to fix his problems but instead trapped him inside the darkest corners of his mind, that’s horrifying.

Jared can still remember the utter terror in Jensen’s eyes when he woke up from his nightmare all those years ago at Chad’s basketball game. Like he’d faced Hell itself and didn’t dare hope he was out of it. Thinking of Jensen alone, trapped in nightmares with no one to wake him up...

He doesn’t realize he’s crying until Jensen reaches out and touches his face. Jensen’s fingers tremble, the pads of his fingertips warm and damp with perspiration. His face is flushed with heat, the kind that builds up in your belly and spreads out to the furthest corners of your body, all anger and shame and embarrassment. And it makes Jared so angry, that Jensen thinks this is something *he* should feel ashamed of. Makes him so sad that he can hardly breathe.

“Hey,” Jensen says, looking devastated and guilty. Like his own pain doesn’t matter except how it’s making *Jared* hurt and that alone breaks Jared’s heart all over again.

“Hey, don’t,” Jensen says, quickly getting up and moving over to the other side. “Jare, it’s okay. I’m okay.” He puts his arm around Jared’s shoulders, his fingers digging almost painfully into Jared’s bicep while his left hand comes up to lay softly against Jared’s cheek.

“Hey, look at me,” he says, like Jared’s been doing anything else than look. Just stare and wonder how can Jensen be like this after everything? How can he be so normal, so goddamn beautiful after all that ugliness?

“Look at me, Jare,” Jensen repeats firmly, all shame and fear and sorrow suddenly gone from his eyes and instead they’re sharp with determination. “Dude, I’m still here. And I’m alright.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s so weak and lame and *useless!*

“It’s okay. Jare, it’s okay. I’m still here. And now *you’re* here.” He smiles, eyes filled with wonder. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. You’re here. Ok? You’re *here* now.”

Jared swallows and nods, ignoring the voice prodding at the back of his head saying he’s agreeing to more than he actually has to offer. Right now, in this minute, he’d bring Jensen the moon if that’s what he wanted. If that’s what it would take to make everything alright.

Jensen takes Jared’s hand where it’s been resting on the table, curled into a tight fist. He turns the fist over and forces it gently open with his thumb, like Jared’s thirteen year old again, worrying about the shortness of his fingers, of not being good enough. Where his hand used to look small compared to Jensen’s, it now completely obscures it, roles reversed. Jensen lays it against his own chest, his heartbeat steady and strong where it pounds under Jared’s palm.

“You were always here,” Jensen says, holding his gaze. “You’re the only thing that never went away, not even in there.”

He smiles softly and Jared finds himself smiling back despite everything. A crooked and trembling smile in a flushed and probably teary face but still a smile and it makes Jensen’s eyes crinkle at the edges. Like that’s all he wants from life, for Jared to smile at him.

“There you go,” he says, teasing, and Jared breathes out a shaky laugh. “You okay?”

‘I should be asking you that,’ Jared thinks. ‘I should be holding you and telling you everything will be alright. I should be the strong one.’ But he just feels thirteen again. Small and confused and so grateful that he has someone to lean on.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice hoarse. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Jensen suddenly looks embarrassed. “I should have warned you. It’s like yawning.”

Jared frowns. “What?”

“You know, when you see someone yawn, you do too. They’re kinda like that sometimes, my emotions. They... bleed.”

“Are you saying these are your feelings?” Jared asks bewildered. Because it sure as hell doesn’t feel that way. They feel very much like his own, breaking heart and all.

Jensen shakes his head. “No, they’re still your yawns, or you know, feelings. I just... make them come out or something.” He ducks his head, his ears turning red. “I know, it’s creepy. But hey, better tears than, you know, other... uhm...” He glances quickly down and then up again, quirking his eyebrow. “... stuff.”

It takes Jared a moment to realize what he’s talking about. “No! You haven’t! Really?”

“Uhm, yeah.” Jensen bites his lip. “Not exactly my proudest achievements,” he says but even if his face is red his grin is mischievous.

“Oh God.” Jared’s laughing despite himself. “Who?”

“Oh, pretty much everyone. Chris of course. That one’s pretty inevitable. And Steve a couple of times. Some people at work. And... uhm, my mom.”

That does it. Jared’s laughing so hard he’s crying again. His stomach hurts and his throat burns and his lungs feel like they’re bursting. Jensen punches him in the arm but he’s smiling, looking delighted with himself. He leans back on the bench, feet kicked out in front of him, sneakers bumping into Jared’s Nikes.

“Yeah, you just laugh, jerk” he says in an annoyed voice but he’s grinning and when a yellow butterfly suddenly pops out right in front of his nose he chuckles and shoos it away.

It’s amazing, now that Jared knows what Jensen is, to watch all the little things he does without even seeming to notice. The elevator, the traffic lights, the train... These are all things that no one sees as odd unless they know what Jensen is. And then there are things like this, butterflies popping out of thin air. True magic.

Jensen had touched a tree as they were walking toward the coffee house, just stroking his fingers absentmindedly over the rough bark in passing. Jared had heard a sound, like wind blowing through leaves, and when he’d looked back the tree was blooming white flowers. He’d stopped short, breath caught in his throat, but Jensen had just walked on, completely oblivious and after a moment’s awe Jared ran to catch up with him.

There were other incidents as well. A crying baby growing quiet, much to its tired mother’s surprise, when Jensen hummed a melody as they passed. Leaves lifting up and twirling in tiny whirlwinds around them. Rays of sunshine breaking through the clouds every time Jensen looked up and smiled when he saw that Jared was still there.

Jared wants to know so much. He really wants to ask, ‘What else can you do?’ but it feels rude. Like asking someone how much they weigh or what kind of sex they like.

He wants to ask about Chris. Not just to know where they met but what he’s like, what they are like together. Not... *that* way, but what they do together. Like does Jensen play the piano for him the way he used to play for Jared? The thought makes him feel stupidly jealous, like the time he didn’t want to share their bench with Danneel all those years ago. Somehow he always felt Jensen played differently for him, that he used the music to show Jared the world he couldn’t talk about. Imagining him doing that with other people... He just doesn’t like it.

He wants to ask what it was like growing up like this. Wants to ask when Jensen first realized he could do things and how his parents reacted. How they managed to keep it a secret for so long and what Jensen had to sacrifice for that secrecy. He wants to learn about little boy Jensen with his big green eyes and his freckled skin and a whole world of his own that no one else understood. He wants to try and understand



Jensen's family and how they managed to go so horribly wrong in the decisions they made to keep him hidden.

He wants to ask, 'Why didn't you ever tell me? Why? Do you have any idea what it would have meant to me, you sharing this secret? Do you know how many times I questioned my own sanity for believing what I saw when no one else did? Do you know how much I missed you and how much I blamed myself for not getting there in time to stop them?'

He wants to say, 'I haven't played at all since the day you left and now I feel guilty because you look at me like you think I'm amazing and really I'm just a college drop out, living in a shitty apartment and working as a bouncer in a place I would never ever bring my girlfriend. Or even Chad.'

But most of all he wants to lay his arm around Jensen's shoulders and pull him close and tell him, 'I wish I didn't have to leave tomorrow.'

Instead he asks quietly, "So what happened? How did you get out?"

Jensen stills, his smile slipping away so fast it makes Jared wish he hadn't said anything at all. "It's okay," he quickly says. "We don't have to do this now. Or ever."

"No. We do. I don't..." Jensen pauses, licking his lips nervously. "That was the bad part. I don't want you to just know the bad part, Jared. I don't want that to be the only thing you think of when it comes to those years, before you came back. Ok?"

Jared nods. "Ok. Yeah. Thank you."

Jensen just smiles but his eyes are dark and serious. He shifts on the bench and for a second Jared thinks he's going to stand up and move over to the other side again. He almost reaches out to stop him but then Jensen turns and pulls his feet up on the bench instead, his back leaning against Jared's shoulder. He reaches across the table for his coffee mug and cradles it in his hands even if the coffee must be getting cold by now. Jared catches Susan watching them. He recognizes the fond look in her eyes, the same as he saw in Lizzie's yesterday and Steve's last night. Like there's nothing she wouldn't do to protect Jensen and keep him safe. Jared thinks if he looked in a mirror right now that's the gaze that would meet him.

"I told them there were no voices anymore," Jensen suddenly says, startling him. "No voices, no music, nothing. I'd been saying that ever since the drugs kicked in but they weren't interested until I could say it with a smile instead of crying about it." He looks at Jared over his shoulder, his lips turned up in a mock grin. "I got very good at smiling when I was inside. I never really knew how before, you know."

Jared gives him a confused look.

"Oh, I don't mean real smiles," Jensen says. "The other kind. The ones you use when you can't smile for real. Mom tried so hard to teach me how to smile like that but I never was any good at it. I just wanted to smile my own smiles, you know. But they

scare people. All that brightness. I was only allowed to use those outside when the sun was shining anyway.”

He laughs softly to himself. “Remember the first time we met? I’d been practicing in front of a mirror. It seems so stupid now, but I was so scared that if I didn’t smile you would think I didn’t like you. And if I *did* smile you’d be scared and run away. Like the kids at school used to do.”

“So you fake smiled?” Jared’s not sure why that bothers him so. “For me?”

“I tried but you made me too happy,” Jensen says simply. “Sunniest winter we’d ever had, remember?”

Jared remembers. “You really... the weather? How do you do that? It’s the weather, dude. It’s like... messing with Nature or...”

“God?” Jensen suggests, shifting in his seat. His back feels hot against Jared’s arm and his neck is flushed red.

Jared shakes his head. “I don’t really believe in God,” he says. “I don’t like him enough to believe in him.”

“But you believe in him enough not to like him?” Jensen asks, sounding slightly confused.

“No. I mean. I don’t really know. I just think if he’s up there, he’s doing a lousy job. And he’s God, he should be perfect at everything he does, you know. Ergo, he can’t be real.”

“I guess that makes sense in a way,” Jensen says, his sneakers slipping on the bench’s vinyl surface as he shifts even closer.

It’s not a particularly long or broad bench, even with Jared pushed into the corner and the heels of Jensen’s sneakers barely catch hold on the end. He’d be much more comfortable in the seat across but for some reason he prefers it like this and Jared’s not about to push him away. Instead he shifts slightly sideways so he can slip an arm across Jensen, right under his collarbone, to keep him from falling off. There’s a moment when Jensen goes absolutely still and Jared suddenly realizes how odd it must be, the two of them sitting so close, practically embracing, but then Jensen breathes out and relaxes against him and Jared realizes he doesn’t care about what other people think as long as he can make Jensen feel a little bit better.

“Anyway, that did it,” Jensen says after a while, clearing his voice before continuing. “I smiled and they let me go. Well, no,” he quickly corrects himself. “It took six months of evaluations and reevaluations and staring at ink blobs and convincing them I still felt the same way even if they tried to make me believe it gave me a lesser chance of being released. You know, trying to trick me to admit I was only doing what I thought they wanted me to do. But I wasn’t stupid. Drugged and a little crazy, but not stupid. I stuck to it for those six months, grinning like an idiot, so happy they’d cured me. Oh yeah, I got really fucking good at smiling.”

He shudders and Jared briefly pulls him tighter, the lump in his throat too big for him to be able to offer anything more comforting.

“They assigned me a therapist outside that I should go to every week, filled my pockets with pills, and then finally opened the gates. I smiled, said goodbye and started walking. Threw the drugs down the next drain and hooked a ride as far out of there as I could. Then I called you.” He looks down, stirring his coffee with his spoon. “You weren’t there anymore.”

Jared swallows. “I’m sorry. Jen...”

Jensen shakes his head. “Not your fault. It had been two years, I shouldn’t have expected you to just be there. I guess I wasn’t thinking straight.” He laughs softly. “God, I was so fucked up. I hadn’t eaten in two days, I was in serious withdrawal from the meds. I didn’t even realize I’d been inside that long. I mean, it felt longer but at the same time I couldn’t accept that I’d wasted two years of my life in that place. That my mother had left me there for so long.”

Jared’s fingers curl against Jensen’s shoulder. “How could she do that? You must hate her so much.”

Jensen looks back at him startled. “God, no. She’s my mom, Jare. I could never hate my mom.”

“But she... She left you there to rot! How could she? I just don’t get it.”

“You and Chris would make awesome allies,” Jensen mutters. “I know you don’t get it but she had her reasons, ok? She didn’t just dump me there because she got tired of me. She thought she had to. That I was too dangerous to be outside.”

“How? How could she think you were dangerous? Not like you were walking around killing people.”

Jensen squirms in his arms and it takes Jared a moment to realize he’s trying to shield his face from Jared’s eyes. “Jensen?” he asks hesitantly.

“You didn’t know her,” Jensen says in a low voice. “What she was like before... before Nana died. She loved me, you know. I didn’t like everything she did, like pulling me out of school or locking the door to my room at nights, but I always knew she did those things because she loved me. She was always hugging me, holding me so tight I could barely breath, and she told me over and over again that she loved me.” His voice breaks a little but he doesn’t stop. “She wanted me to be happy. She bought the piano for me even if we couldn’t afford it, because she believed in me. She loved me. She really, really loved me. And then my grandma died and she... stopped. She couldn’t anymore.”

“Why?”

Jensen goes silent and Jared's about to tell him it's alright, he doesn't have to say anything if he doesn't want to, when Jensen starts talking again, his voice so low he can hardly hear it.

"She thought I'd killed her," is what he says, his breath hitching. "My Nana. She thought I'd used my magic to kill my Nana."

His chest jerks under Jared's arm as he draws in one shallow breath after another. "And then my dad died after I went inside and she thought... she thought..."

He stops again, sucking in his breath, and then covers his eyes with his hand, head bowed. His shoulders start shaking. The flowers on the table droop as if on cue, yellow petals falling one by one to the wooden surface.

Jared feels frozen. He has no idea what to say. She thought *what?* Was she *insane?*

"I didn't." Jensen sounds broken and so tired. "I swear. I didn't do it."

"I know," Jared hurries to assure him. "God, Jen, I know."

"Is everything alright?"

Jared looks up to find Susan glaring at him, looking like she might possibly kill him if it turns out he's the reason Jensen is so upset.

"Yeah," he says, trying to convey to her silently that he's just as distressed by this as she is. Jensen's still got one hand covering his face, offering no help. "Sorry."

She ignores him, her eyes now on Jensen. "Jensen, honey?" she says. "Is he upsetting you? Carlo is in the backroom, I can call him if you want."

"Hey!" Jared protests just as Jensen shakes his head and says, "I'm okay, Susie. I just needed to vent a little. Sorry."

"It's alright. Just looking out for you, sweetie." She pats him on the knee, smiling concerned. "Don't trust strangers too much, you know."

Jensen looks up at that, putting a wet hand over Jared's, where it still lies curled into a fist against his collarbone, and squeezing it firmly. "You can trust Jared," he says serious, his voice slightly hoarse. "He's not a stranger. He's the most amazing person in the world."

Jared's face flushes hot and when he glances at Susan she's studying him with a renewed interest, smiling slightly at his embarrassment.

"Well, he sure looks the part," she says and Jared can feel himself go even redder. "If the inside's as pretty as the outside..."

"Sue," Jensen mutters awkwardly, as if his brain just caught up with his words. "Shut up."

“What? I’m just sayin’... You sure know how to pick’em.”

“Christ.” Jensen pushes himself up, wiping at his face with his fingers before giving her a pointed look. “Two more coffees. To go. The same again for you, Jared?”

Jared grabs his jacket and follows. “Yeah, sure,” he says, pretending to be very interested in a picture on the wall while a smirking Susan rounds up their bill.

He’s going to have to treat Jensen to lobster or something once he gets his wallet back from Chad. Not that he can actually afford lobster... Actually, he’s not even sure he *likes* lobster, seeing as he’s never had any. He does like shrimp though. Shrimp is nice. In a slightly creepy staring beady eyes kinda way. Which is why he prefers de-shelled shrimp.

And he’s totally rambling inside his head to keep from saying something stupid like, “What was that all about?”

Oh crap.

Jensen doesn’t say anything, just scowls slightly and takes a sip from his coffee. Jared’s getting pretty high on all the caffeine – he’s had more today than he usually drinks in a week and it’s not even noon yet! – but Jensen drinks it down like water. He’s looking tired again, the circles under his eyes darker, and every now and then he reaches up to scratch at his stitches. The cut looks more or less healed by now, something that somehow freaks Jared out in a way that all the other magic doesn’t.

“Remember the maybe gay thing?” Jensen suddenly says, jerking Jared out of his thoughts. He sounds nervous. “It’s kinda still going on.”

Jared frowns. “Yeah, I know. I wasn’t talking about that.”

“Oh.” Jensen glances at him, his cheeks flushed. “I guess she thought we were on a date or something. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He’s still puzzled though. Does that mean Jensen’s never taken Chris there if she thought Jensen was hooking up with him instead? “You’d be so lucky,” he jokes when Jensen’s tension doesn’t relent.

Jensen trips over his own feet and only just manages to catch his balance before faceplanting on the sidewalk. He stops, breathing heavily then looks down at the brown stain covering most of his t-shirt. “Ow. Crap. Oh shit!”

“Dude, you okay?”

“Burns!” Jensen drops his cup and starts tugging at his jacket, throwing it on the ground and then hastily pulling the t-shirt over his head. “Oh for fuck’s sake!” Jared hears him say when his head gets trapped inside for a moment but he’s too busy staring at Jensen’s naked chest to really listen. The skin is slightly red from the hot coffee but that’s not what catches his eyes.

Jensen has freckles. Everywhere. Like... everywhere. How could he have forgotten?  
“Wow.”

“Crap,” Jensen continues ranting, wiping at his chest with the dry parts of his ruined t-shirt. “And now I’m naked in the park. Again! That’s just... That’s just awesome.”

“Again?” A smile starts tugging at Jared’s lips and he bites at them in desperation.

“There was this crazy swan that... Never mind,” Jensen huffs and glares at his ruined clothes before looking down and realizing, “My coffee! Great. Just great!” He picks up the empty cup and stalks over to a trashcan, throwing it in with far more force than the poor thing deserves. Then he picks up his jacket and puts it on only to glare down at his bare chest. It kinda makes him look like a very pissed off hooker. “Fucking fantastic.”

“Maybe you’ll start a new trend,” Jared suggest, trying his best to look serious.

Jensen’s head snaps up, glaring, and Jared can’t help it, he starts laughing. Jensen’s eyes narrow but there are small twitches at the corner of his mouth and after a while he lets loose a small snort of laughter.

“It’s not funny,” he says, arms crossing his chest. His ruined t-shirt is clutched in his hand, a sad rag of coffee and drying sweat. “I might get pneumonia and die and then you’ll feel really bad.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Jared laughs and starts unbuttoning his shirt. “Here, take this,” he says and wriggles out of it but Jensen steps back, suddenly looking wary.

“You’ll get cold,” he says, averting his eyes.

“I still have my t-shirt. I was too warm anyway. Take it, it’s okay.”

He holds it out and Jensen takes a step forward, then stops and pulls back. “It’s pink,” he says awkwardly. “And the sleeves are too long. I’m gonna look stupid.”

Jared rolls his eyes. “You saying I looked stupid wearing it? It’s not pink, Jen, it’s just got pink... uh... tendencies.”

“By which you mean flowers. Big pink flowers.” He’s smirking but he looks uncomfortable. His eyes shift away from Jared and back, like he’s thinking of running off and really, if it’s that big of a deal, Jared isn’t going to force it on him.

“Fine.”

Jared throws him the shirt and then pulls his t-shirt over his head. “Since when do you care what other people think?” he mutters as he shakes his hair out of his eyes. He really needs to get a haircut, he’s starting to look like a hippie.

“This better?” He holds out his t-shirt and is met with Jensen’s glazed eyes.

“Jen?”

There’s no answer. Jared waves his hand in front of Jensen’s face but he doesn’t even blink. His eyes are moving though, rapid twitches like the kind people usually make under their eyelids when they’re dreaming. Damn.

Unsure what to do Jared looks around. There’s a bench nearby so he takes Jensen’s hand, leading him over. He goes willingly, like a sleepwalker, and doesn’t even stir when Jared pushes him to sit down. A couple walking by looks at them funny, making Jared realize they’re both half-naked. He takes back his shirt from Jensen’s clenched fingers and puts it on, then wrestles Jensen out of his jacket and into his t-shirt. It’s slightly wide on him but other than that it looks fine. He manages to put the jacket back on Jensen as well without ever waking him up. It’s really, really creepy.

He sits down on the bench, not sure what to do. He feels hot, a kind of warm flush spreading from the pit of his stomach and up his chest. It’s weird in a familiar sort of way but he can’t really put his finger on it. Nervousness, probably.

For a moment he contemplates calling Chris but he thinks he might possibly have made a complete fool out of himself last night and so he isn’t really looking forward to talking to Chris again. He can’t really remember anything they talked about but he has a vague recollection of tripping and ending up crushing Chris under him on the floor. Which is just... yeah. No way to treat your best friend’s boyfriend. He should probably ask Jensen to tell Chris he’s sorry. If he ever wakes up again.

He moves closer to Jensen, and puts an arm around his shoulder, pulling him in so he can rest against his side. Jensen sighs, heat radiating off his body and making Jared sweat. A girl jogs by, throwing them a smile, and he smiles back before he suddenly realizes that they probably look like a couple. Again.

Thing is... it’s Jensen. He doesn’t fall under the same rules as other people. It doesn’t really feel weird or even gay, sitting so close and holding him because Jensen defies all rules of communication and closeness, all definitions of norm. They just don’t apply because he’s... Well, he’s Jensen.

It used to puzzle Jared as a kid, why he always found himself sitting so close to Jensen or wanting to touch or hug him. He never did that with his other friends, not even with his family. Well, they hugged but it wasn’t often. But with Jensen he just felt better if he was close enough to touch.

When he found out what Jensen had been hiding, those feelings suddenly made more sense but by then it was too late. Jensen was gone and Jared had wasted every opportunity given to him to give Jensen the comfort he must have needed. When he thinks about it, that’s probably a big part of why he hugs people all the time now.

And so here he is now, holding Jensen tight for the second time today and it just feels good. And not weird at all. Except for where he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do now. He shifts on the bench, nudging Jensen a little but he doesn’t stir. How long is he supposed to let this go on before trying to pull Jensen out?

The other times Jensen zoned out it was different than this. It was more like he was so deep in thought he couldn't hear Jared talking to him and then suddenly he'd jerk awake. People do that all the time. Maybe not for as long as Jensen did but still. But this time it's more like he's sleeping and Jared is starting to worry. What if he doesn't wake up on his own? Didn't he say Chris had to force him out of his mind sometimes?

"Jensen?" Jared tries, clutching him tighter. "Hey. Jen? You should probably wake up now." There's no answer. "Jensen? I don't really know what to do. You didn't tell me what to do if this happened. And now I'm starting to get really worried. Jensen? Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

Damn.

He really, really doesn't want to pinch Jensen or hurt him in any way. He still remembers the handprint on Jensen's face the first time they met and it makes him feel just as bad now as it did then. No way he can do that. He wonders what Chris does.

Sighing he gets Jensen's phone out of his pocket, flips it open and finds Chris's number. It takes a moment but then a throaty but surprisingly gentle voice answers, "Jenny? You alright? Need me to come pick you up?"

"Hey, uh... this is Jared."

"What's wrong? What happened?" All sleepiness is gone from the voice. It's sharp and accusing and Jared finds himself wanting to snap the phone closed and throw it away.

"He spaced out," he says instead, trying to sound calm. "I mean, he's done it a couple of times before but not this long. He's been like this for maybe fifteen minutes or something and I don't know what to do."

Chris sighs on the other end. "What did you do? Did you upset him?"

"No! I mean. Uh... He spilled some coffee over himself. He was kinda pissed off about that but nothing serious. I was pulling off my t-shirt to lend it to him and..." He stops when Chris starts laughing on the other end. "What's funny? This isn't funny!"

"Son, relax. He's just... He'll come out of it soon enough." Chris laughs again and Jared can feel his face going red.

"What if he doesn't?" he says angry and the laughter dies on the other end.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I know it can be a little scary but this happens all the time. Well, not *exactly* this but yeah. As long as he doesn't look like he's in pain or it's been more than half an hour he should be fine."



“What am I supposed to do? What if I have to wake him up? I don’t know how to wake him up!”

“Jared?”

Jared jumps, turning his head to find Jensen looking up at him with sleepy eyes.

“Who’re you talking to?”

“Oh thank god! He’s okay,” he says into the phone and snaps it shut before Chris can laugh more at him. “You... you scared the crap out of me!” It comes out harsher than he intended, his anger at being laughed at making him snap.

Jensen blinks then slowly straightens up and looks around, a little disoriented. “I spaced out,” he says. “No big deal.”

“Yeah, right. What if I hadn’t been here? You were catatonic, man. Anyone could have just...” He stops, the horror of it suddenly hitting him. “Jesus! Please tell me it doesn’t happen like this all the time.”

“Jared, relax. I’m okay. I’m always okay.” Jensen shrugs and cracks the cricks out of his neck. “People never bother me when I space out.”

“But what if someone...”

“Jared, people don’t hurt me,” Jensen says, serious. “It doesn’t happen. Ever. Ok?”

How the hell can Jensen be so calm about this? “But what if you don’t snap out of it and no one’s with you?” Jared insists. “What then? You just count on Chris to find you?”

“Ok, just stop,” Jensen says calmly. “Listen to me. First off, that hardly ever happens. Second, if it did we’ve taken precautions, alright? He has ways to track me down. There’s GPS in my phone, remember? And I have one of those wristbands. See?” He shakes his hand in front of Jared’s face, a silver chain glinting in the sunlight. “It’s got Chris’s phone number as well as Steve’s and the reception at work.” He looks at it thoughtfully. “I should have yours added,” he says, “now that you’re here.”

Jared swallows. “Jensen, about that...” he starts but just then his phone rings.

He detaches his arm from Jensen’s shoulder to be able to reach into his pocket. Sandy. Great. He gives Jensen a small apologetic smile and stands up as he snaps the phone open.

“Hey, baby,” he says and something cold strokes the back of his neck. He glances over his shoulder just in time to see Jensen drop his head into his hands. Jared frowns, worried. Obviously Jensen’s not as fine as he claims to be.

“Where are you?”

“Central Park,” he says, turning away again to offer Jensen a little privacy as well as getting some of his own. “I’m with Jensen.”

The noise she makes sounds like she’s trying very hard not to snap at him. “Chad says you never came to the hotel last night. Jared, what’s going on?”

“You said you didn’t want to see me,” he reminds her, not caring that he sounds bitchy.

“Don’t turn this on me, Jay. Where were you?”

He sighs. “I crashed on Jensen’s couch, ok? I got drunk and crashed on his couch.”

“You slept at his place? Jared…”

The judgmental tone in her voice is really starting to piss him off. “Ok, what is your problem? I’ve crashed on Chad’s couch more times than I can remember.”

“That’s different. Chad isn’t…”

“If you say weird I’m gonna hang up on you, I swear,” Jared cuts in, irritated.

“I was going to say gay.”

He pulls the phone away from his ear and stares at it. He feels like he just stepped into some kind of bizarre world where no one makes any sense at all. He turns his head to make sure Jensen isn’t listening but he’s stood up by now and is leaning against a large oak tree, watching a couple of squirrels fighting over a spilled bag of roasted peanuts.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that,” he says as calmly as he can manage into the phone.

“Jared…”

“No, you listen to me. You don’t know him. You’re basing your opinion on some weird first grade freak out or something and that’s not fair. He’s a great guy, Sandy. And he’s my best friend. You have to respect that.”

“Best friend? You hardly even know him!”

“Right now I feel like I know him better than I know you,” he bites back. “Why are you being like this? I know this was supposed to be our weekend, never mind that you invited Chad and Sophia along, but I’ve been looking for Jensen for ten years, Sandy! Ten years! We can always do stuff together later but this… I need this! And if you can’t respect that then I don’t know what to say to you.”

They’re both silent a long time after that but in the end she sighs and says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t… I’m not trying to keep you from your friends, baby. It’s just that Jensen…”

He's not normal, Jared. And I'm not saying that because he's gay. I don't care about that. He's just... weird."

"I'm hanging up now," Jared says firmly. "Go do something fun with Sophia and Chad and I'll see you at the hotel tonight. At least I'll be there to check out tomorrow."

"Jared, please."

"Ten years I've been waiting for this," he says in a low voice. "You have no idea how much this means to me. How goddamn hard this is. He thinks I'm here to stay. I have to tell him I'm leaving tomorrow. And it's going to break his heart."

"He's a grown man, Jared," she says, her annoyance returning.

"He's... He's not like other people, Sandy."

Jared snaps the phone shut, eyes on Jensen. He's crouching on the grass, petting one of the squirrels, a soft smile on his face. If Jared's mom was here she would be up in arms about rabies and flees but Jared just thinks it looks incredibly cute.

"Hey," he says as he walks over. "You ditching me for your new friends?"

Jensen looks up and smiles uncertainly. "You can see them?" he asks.

Jared raises his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

Jensen laughs as he stands up and brushes grass and dry dirt off his knees. "I'm never sure," he says simply. "They looked real but..." He shrugs. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"You see much that..." He's about to say 'isn't real' but changes it to, "...others don't?" at the last minute. Just because they can't see it doesn't mean it's not there.

Jensen shrugs again, looking slightly uncomfortable. "I guess. Some shapes look solid enough that it's hard to tell the difference." He looks up into the thick foliage of the tree. "And then there are other things. I think they're real, they're just not visible to most people. Or anyone I think, except me."

"Like what?" Jared asks, straining to see something up there amongst the branches and leaves. "Fairies?" He laughs but there's no answer and when Jared looks down again he's met with an awkward Jensen, blushing slightly. "*Fairies?* Seriously?"

Jensen bites his lower lip, eyes darting to the side.

"Oh wow." Jared blinks up at the top of the tree. "Are they here now? Can you talk to them?"

Jensen steps back, "They're kinda... moody," he says in a very low voice. "I try not to bother them too much."

“Huh.” He’s trying to take this all in but it’s difficult when he can’t see anything. “You see ghosts? Monsters?” He laughs again, embarrassed. “Unicorns?”

Jensen just shrugs. “Sometimes.”

Jared’s eyes widen. “This is just... wow.” He shakes his head in amazement. “You are just... wow.”

“It’s not like I do anything,” Jensen mumbles, looking uncomfortable. “They’re just there. Or not. I don’t know.”

“I want to know everything,” Jared blurts out. “I think it’s amazing. You’re amazing. I want you to show me.”

Jensen frowns. “Unicorns?”

Jared laughs. “No, not unicorns. Well ok, if you can, that would be awesome. But just... What you can do. I want to see what you can do.”

Jensen bites his lower lip again, pulling at one corner with his teeth. “I don’t really do much. Stuff just happens.”

“Then show me what can happen,” Jared says, grinning.

Jensen looks at him uncertain but then he suddenly smiles and the whole world brightens as the clouds pull away from the sun. “Come,” he says and grabs Jared’s hand. “I’ll show you.”

He drags Jared into the middle of a huge lawn and pulls him down to lie beside him on the grass. “Look,” he says and points up to the sky. For a moment nothing happens but then Jared can see the clouds shifting and changing until they form the distinctive shape of a cat. Jensen laughs. “That’s my Minna! What do you want?” he asks and Jared blinks.

“Uh... unicorn,” he says because he still feels kinda awed about that. The clouds shift and there it is, a unicorn prancing across the sky. “Jesus!”

They shift again and this time he laughs when a familiar bearded face looks down at him. “Just as well I didn’t say fuck,” he snorts and then claps a hand over his eyes when the clouds start moving. “Jensen, there are kids!”

Jensen chuckles and when Jared opens his eyes a dog is staring down at him, tongue lolling. “He looks like Harley,” he says and laughs. “That’s my dog.”

“You got your dog?” Jensen asks. “Dude, that’s great! I was wondering why I couldn’t see him anymore.”

Jared turns his head to look at him. “You saw my dog?” he asks surprised.

“Ever since you were like six or something.” Jensen nods, smiling to himself.  
“Beautiful golden retriever.”

“Actually Harley’s a mastiff,” Jared says absentmindedly. This close Jensen’s eyelashes look freakishly long. And the sky reflecting in his eyes makes them a weird turquoise color.

“Really? I guess shapes don’t care that much about breeds,” Jensen says thoughtfully. He turns his head to look at Jared, bringing them so close together their noses almost touch. “Hey,” he says surprised. “What?”

Jared’s eyes widen at being caught staring and he can feel himself turning red. “Nothing. Just... looking,” he says awkwardly. He should look away but it’s hard when he’s got Jensen’s eyes right there in front of him, less than three inches away. They’re mesmerizing to the point that it feels like he’s being drawn into them and for a moment he wonders if Jensen is laying a spell on him, if he actually knows how to do that.

“If you’re trying to count them I can tell you right now it’s impossible,” Jensen suddenly says, all serious.

Jared jerks awake. “What?”

Jensen quirks one eyebrow at his reaction but then he grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “The freckles. You can’t count them.” He nods solemnly. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“You tried to count your own freckles?” Jared asks, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Jensen grins. “I had lots of free time,” he says and it takes Jared a moment to realize what he’s talking about. His smile drops like a stone but Jensen just shakes his head, still grinning. “Dude, lighten up.”

Jared bites his lip. “Why are you not angry?” he asks quietly.

Jensen frowns. “Angry? At whom?”

“Your parents. The doctors. I don’t know, God?”

Jensen’s eyes dim slightly. “I am sometimes. Even if I shouldn’t.” He shrugs it off, his smile returning. “But not now. Not when you’re here.” He gazes into Jared’s eyes, his pupils widening until his eyes are almost black. “You’re really here,” he says, sounding awed. “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

Jared blinks. He feels strange. So light, like he’s floating, and at the same time so heavy, like something is trying to pull him down and drown him. “I’m really here,” he confirms. There’s a lump in his throat that only grows bigger when he swallows.

“I knew you’d come,” Jensen says quietly, “but sometimes... sometimes I wasn’t sure. Sometimes I thought maybe I was wrong. I didn’t want to be wrong, Jared.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Jared tells him and Jensen breathes out. He’s so close Jared breathes in his air. It tastes of coffee and waffles.

“No, I wasn’t. I wasn’t wrong,” Jensen says slowly, as if to himself. “Not about that. That... that I got right.” He blinks and then he’s gazing at Jared again, eyes shining. “Best friends, right?”

“Yeah, Jen,” Jared says and smiles softly. “Best friends.”

Jensen nods and turns his head, gazing up at the sky with a soft smile on his lips. Jared keeps watching him, trying to gather the courage to tell him about not actually living here, about having to leave. Tomorrow. Christ, he has to leave *tomorrow*. What the fuck is he going to do?

He’s about to open his mouth when Jensen suddenly sits up and grabs his hand.

“Remember the flowers?” he asks eager. “You wanna see some?”

Jared nods and sits up. “Yeah,” he says, relieved that he can delay things for a little longer. “I’d love to.”

Jensen grins. “Feel this?” he says and presses their hands down into the ground.

Jared is about to shake his head, say that he doesn’t feel anything, when something tingles under his palm and the grass around it starts to grow, spring green and stretching toward the sky. He looks up at Jensen in alarm and he laughs happily.

“Look,” he says. “Look around you.”

Jared lets his gaze run over the lawn and the flowers and trees surrounding them. All the colors are growing brighter, making everything look fresh and new. A tree sways and as he watches all its buds open to bloom bright white flowers. It’s so beautiful it takes his breath away. One by one the flowerbeds explode in a colorful jungle of exotic plants he’s sure are not supposed to be there.

He turns to Jensen and the laughter stutters to a halt in his throat. God. How did he not figure out what Jensen was before, when they were kids? Just looking at him now it’s obvious and it makes him realize how much Jensen is hiding, all the time. Because right now? He’s not. He’s here, all here, in all his wonder. His eyes are so green they sparkle and his freckles stand out like little dots of golden light in the sun. He’s smiling, practically beaming with happiness, and his gaze is all for Jared.

“Can you see it?” he asks, voice bright and excited. “Jared, can you see it?”

“Jensen, this is...” He breathes out, so overwhelmed he feels dizzy. “It’s amazing. *You’re* amazing.”

Something shifts in Jensen's eyes and he tightens his hold on Jared's fingers. "I'm not normal," he says, the words slow and hesitant, almost like he's reciting them. "I'm weird and... and different. This is what I am."

Jared nods, the lump back in his throat. "This is what you are."

He pulls Jensen into a hug, holding him tight. He can feel Jensen shake slightly, his breath hitching and then he's wrapping his arms around Jared's waist, laughing softly. "This is what you are," Jared repeats, breathing into Jensen's neck. "Jensen..."

Jensen pulls back and smiles at him. He looks so happy and hopeful that it breaks Jared's heart.

"I have to tell you something," he says carefully.

"Ok." Jensen's smile flickers slightly, uncertain.

Jared takes a deep breath, eyes steady on Jensen. "I'm leaving tomorrow. Going back to LA."

"What?" A small frown forms between Jensen's eyebrows but he's still smiling, like he's waiting for the punch line of a joke he doesn't quite get.

"I know I should have told you earlier. I don't... I don't live here. I live in LA."

Jensen blinks then shakes his head. "No."

"Jensen..."

"No, that's not... That's not how it's supposed to happen." He sounds lost and totally shocked, and Jared wishes he could take it all back.

"I'm sorry, Jen. I wish I didn't have to..."

"No. You're supposed to... No." He pushes Jared away and stumbles to his feet. "I saw it. I saw... us. No!"

A lightning cracks above them and Jared looks up in alarm. Heavy grey clouds are moving rapidly across the sky, obscuring the sun and the blue sky, and the whole park is growing darker. "Jensen, please," he says, standing slowly up. "You need to calm down."

"No. This is not right. This is *not* right." Jensen shakes his head, blinking rapidly. "You... Why are you saying this? You can't just... You can't be here and then just go away again! You can't *do* that! How can you do that to me?"

"I'm sorry." Jared swallows, feeling like the biggest asshole on earth. "I don't want to go. Jensen, I swear. I wish I didn't have to."

“Then stay. Stay here. Don’t... don’t leave. Please don’t leave. Jared, please.” Rain starts falling, heavy drops of water that instantly soak through their clothes and flattens Jensen’s hair.

“I have a job I have to get back to. And... and a whole other life. I live in a shitty apartment with... with Sandy. I can’t just...”

Jensen stares at him, eyes dark and wide in his pale and wet face. “Please,” he whispers. “Please don’t do this. Please.”

“Jensen...” He pulls Jensen in, wrapping his arms around him. Jensen is shaking, his breath hitching in his chest, and Jared’s never felt so awful in his whole life. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“No. No. This is not happening. This is *not* happening! No!”

The phone starts ringing frantically in his pocket and from the familiar chirpy ringtone he knows it’s Chris, calling to find out what’s going on. God, he’s a dead man.

“I’ll come back,” he says. “As soon as I can, I promise. I’ll come back and I’ll stay as long as I can. Or you can come visit me. Please, Jensen.”

“I can’t... I can’t... I need to get home,” Jensen mumbles. “I need to get home and play. I need my piano.”

“Ok, Jensen, ok. I’ll take you home.” He lifts Jensen’s chin, trying to make eye contact, but Jensen’s eyes don’t follow. They’re flickering frantically, looking everywhere but at Jared, like he’s searching for something and can’t find it.

“I need my music,” he says, voice rising. “I can’t... I can’t... I need...”

“Alright. Jen, it’s okay. We’re going home. Sshh, calm down.”

“No. Nonono. I can’t...” Jensen keeps rambling as Jared ushers him through the park, looking for the closest way out. “I’m gonna lose it,” he suddenly says and when Jared looks at him he sees his eyes are wide and terrified.

“No, you’re not. Stay with me.” He hauls a taxi and pushes Jensen inside, telling the driver to hurry as he gives him the address to Jensen’s apartment. Jensen is trembling so hard his teeth are chattering, and he keeps repeating the words “No” and “I can’t” over and over again.

“Is he alright?” the driver asks wary.

Jared shakes his head. He feels sick. What the fuck has he done? He’d known it would be bad but not like this. God, nothing like this. He pulls Jensen close, holding him tight. “We’re going home to Chris, Jen. I’m taking you home to Chris.”



Fuck, Chris is going to kill him. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and hits the number he remembers from before. Chris answers on the first ring, his voice frantic.

“What did you do? If you hurt him I swear I’ll kill you, you fucking asshole!”

“I told him I was leaving,” Jared says tired. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re...? Shit. Shitshitshit. Is he... How is he?”

Jared looks over at Jensen who is tapping his fingers frantically on his knees and humming a heavy melody under his breath. His eyes are squeezed shut and he jerks and flinches with every twist and turn of the car through the heavy traffic.

“He needs his music. He says he needs his music or... or he might lose it.”

“Christ. Ok, ok.” Chris breathes out. “There should be an iPod in his inner right pocket. Playlist #3. Put it on.”

“Hold on.”

Jared pinches the phone between his ear and shoulder and pats Jensen’s jacket. He finds the player just where Chris said it would be and unwinds the earbuds. The cord is tangled and he swears under his breath, finally sorting them out just when he’s close to just ripping the fucking thing apart. He puts one in his own ear and turns the player on, after some fumbling finally finding the right playlist. Piano music starts playing in his ear, low and soothing and he hurries to wriggle the buds into Jensen’s ears.

“Here, Jen. Listen.”

Jensen doesn’t answer but his fingers slow down and after a while Jared can see he’s now tapping out the notes to the music playing in his ears.

“Did it work?” he hears Chris saying in his ear, sounding frantic.

Jared leans back on the seat and closes his eyes. “Yeah,” he says, swallowing the lump in his throat. “I think so.”

“Is he retarded or something?” the driver asks and Jared’s eyes snap open, shooting him a glare. “Sorry, Just asking. Got a cousin that’s a retard. Downs. He likes music too.”

“He is not ‘retarded’,” Jared tells him through gritted teeth. “He’s a genius.”

“Oh.”

“Who are you talking to?” Chris interrupts.

“The cab driver. He’s...”

“Never mind. Tell me what happened. Tell me *exactly* what you said and did.”

Jared swallows. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t know he would take it so badly. I feel bad enough as it is and you chewing my head off isn’t going to make me feel any worse.”

“Listen, asshole,” Chris growls, low and menacing, “I don’t care one shit about you. I’m not asking so I can ‘chew your head off’ for every stupid mistake you made. I’m asking because you’re leaving. You’re leaving and *I’m* going to have to deal with the mess you left behind and to be able to do that I need to know *exactly* what happened. Do you understand me? Do you fucking *get* that?”

Jared closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “Yeah,” he whispers, his voice breaking. “Yeah, I do.”

There’s silence on the other end for a moment and then Chris says in a tired and much calmer tone, “You didn’t know. You don’t know what he’s...” He sucks in his breath and lets it out slowly. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” he says gently and Jared can’t help it, he starts crying.

“I let him down. I don’t even know what I was supposed to do! You all kept expecting me to do something and no one told me what. And I screwed it up and now he’s... he’s...” He looks over at Jensen who’s still got his eyes closed, face completely blank, fingers tapping out the music and his lips moving silently. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“Jared, listen to me. We’ll talk when you get here, ok? I’m not gonna kill you, I promise.”

He laughs shakily at that because honestly, right now, dying is the least of his worries. “Ok. We’ll be there soon.”

“Alright.”

Chris hangs up and Jared’s left with the monotonic tone in his ear, watching Jensen staring out at nothing.



By the time they reach the apartment building the weather has relented to a light drizzle. Jared's not sure whether that's a good sign or bad. Maybe it's because Jensen is feeling better but maybe it's because he's drawn so far into himself he isn't feeling anything at all.

He feels awkward and embarrassed when he has to go through Jensen's pockets, looking for his wallet. Not helped by the driver giving him the stink-eye, probably for taking advantage of a 'retard'. Just for that Jared doesn't tip him at all, just throws him the minimum before hauling Jensen out of the cab and to the door. It buzzes open before he even touches the button.

In the elevator on the way up he keeps an arm around Jensen's shoulder, holding him as tight as he can, just in case Chris won't let him near him again once they get inside. "I'm sorry," he whispers into Jensen's hair. "God, Jen, I'm so sorry."

Jensen just hums against his collarbone, the muffled sound of piano music coming from the plugs in his ears.

Chris is standing waiting in the hallway when the elevator door slides open. He takes one look at Jensen and his shoulders slump for a moment, before squaring again as he reaches out for him.

Jared shakes his head. "I've got him," he says. Something in his voice must have given Chris a hint of what he's feeling because he nods and steps aside, giving them better room to pass.

As soon as they get into the apartment Jensen slips out from under Jared's arm without a word and goes straight to the studio. The door closing behind him is like a slap in Jared's face. A few moments later the piano starts playing, a subdued jungle of notes that make up the kind of music Jared's never heard before. It sounds hateful and accusing but above all devastated.

“Don’t take it personally,” Chris tells him, patting him lightly on the back. “That’s how he deals with things. Beer?”

“What?” Jared tears his eyes away from the closed door and gives Chris a confused look.

“You look like you need it.”

Jared blinks. “Yeah. Yeah, ok.”

He feels wooden as he follows Chris into the kitchen. The neatness of the place surprises him, all surfaces empty of appliances and any kind of knickknacks that people’s homes usually accumulate over the years.

“Everything’s so... tidy,” he says stupidly and Chris looks up at him and then around the kitchen as if he’s seeing the abnormality of its neatness for the first time.

He shrugs as he opens the cupboard under the sink to throw the caps from the bottles in the trash. The door has a kiddie lock on it, Jared notices, one of those hooks on the inside that you need to unfasten to be able to open.

“That’s one thing you learn fast when living with Jensen,” Chris says. “Spotting potential missiles.” He nods toward a series of sharp marks on the wall. “Thankfully his aim is terrible.”

He grins but Jared just nods solemnly. He’s remembering Jensen’s parents home and for the first time it occurs to him that maybe it had less to do with Jensen’s mother being a neat freak and more to do with Jensen. Her neurosis and bad temper suddenly make more sense.

Absentminded he accepts the beer from Chris’s hand as he looks around him with new eyes. The picture frames are stuck to the walls with screws on all four sides. Books are kept behind closed and locked doors. The windows are made out of chicken-wired glass. The colors of the walls change sometimes midway, green blending into blue that fades away to white. Every little detail tells a story of what it’s like living with Jensen Ackles and Jared can’t help looking at Chris, wondering how he manages.

“C’mon, kid,” Chris says, smiling tiredly as if he can see what Jared’s thinking. “Let’s sit down and talk.”

Jared follows him into the living room, sinking down on the couch and staring at the bottle of beer in his hand. He feels cold and wet and nauseous and the idea of drinking makes him feel even worse so he lifts the bottle and gulps down half of it. Self-destruction sounds great right about now.

“If you gotta puke do it in the bathroom,” Chris tells him, not unkindly.

“I’m okay,” Jared mumbles and Chris snorts.

“Yeah, you’re just peachy.”

Jared clenches his jaw but he doesn’t answer. He can feel Chris studying him but he just can’t look up and face him. Instead he closes his eyes and listens to the frantic music coming from the studio. It’s too muffled to give him clear images but he feels it tug at his stomach, like a vortex trying to pull him down.

“The thing you have to understand about Jensen is that he *is* his emotions,” Chris says after a while, his voice quiet. “Which sounds like some emo teenage girl bullshit but that’s the best way I can describe it.”

Jared opens his eyes. “What do you mean?” he asks with a frown.

Chris sighs. “I’m no shrink, man. I don’t know any fancy words for what goes on in that boy’s head. Honestly I don’t think there *are* words for it because how you gonna analyze someone like him?” He rubs one hand over his face, thoughtful. “You knew his mom, right?”

Jared nods, grimacing slightly.

Chris raises one eyebrow. “Exactly. Well, she had this idea that emotions were bad for him because they made him do stuff he shouldn’t. And since he couldn’t control what they made him do he should just stop feeling altogether. That was her solution. No emotions. At all.” He snorts. “It’s crap of course. You can’t shut down your emotions and still be human. It’s insane. That didn’t stop Jensen from trying though, for her.” He scowls, his mouth twisting angrily. “Imagine a kid growing up like that, told he can’t feel anything. Not be happy or sad or angry. I mean for fucks sake picture what his teenage years must have been like.”

Jared bites his lip, hands curling into fists in his lap. He remembers clearly what it was like being a teenager, all those hormones and emotions, twisting his inside and snapping his temper like a rubber band. How anyone is supposed to be able to lock that all down is more than he *can* imagine.

“And then he was committed to that place,” Chris continues, his voice rising in anger. “Pumped full of drugs that were supposed to make him ‘normal’, to stop him ‘imagining’ things that no one else could see. Instead they turned him into an empty shell. Killed everything he had in *here* and *here*.” Chris bangs his fist angrily into his temple and chest for emphasize.

“I saw him drugged once when I was a kid,” Jared says in a low voice. “It was... scary.”

“Right. Imagine that for two years. No true feelings. No colors. No... no music.” Chris breathes out. “I don’t mean just that he wasn’t able to play but he couldn’t hear it in his head anymore. The only thing he had to deal with all those feelings he wasn’t supposed to have, and they took it away from him.

Chris leans back, sipping from his beer. “I don’t know what he was like before he went inside but when I found him he was a mess, man. Full on FUBAR. The drugs

were slowly wearing off and you know what was the first thing sobriety brought back? Emotions. A shitload of emotions, crashing into him full force. Scared the shit out of me. I'm just glad he didn't get his mojo back until a few weeks later or we'd probably be standing in a crater right now."

"Jesus."

"Yeah." Chris takes a drink from his bottle, face grim. "Anyway, I think the whole experience did something to him. Strong emotions fuck his shit up. He's lost the ability to fully control them and instead they start controlling him. For any other guy that would be tough enough but with Jensen..." Chris nods toward the window where the rain has again turned into a full-blown storm. "Well, you see what can happen. His magic thing goes haywire. And instead of dealing with it he goes inside his head and stays there until he thinks it's safe to come out again. Or I pull him out by force."

Jared nods, wiping his nose with his damp sleeve. "You said... you said you found him. How did you find him?"

"He called me from a payphone a few blocks from here. Said he was looking for you."

Jared flinches and Chris gives him a sympathetic look. "I told him I had no idea who you were and he just lost it. Broke down completely. Took me half an hour driving around before I found him curled up on the floor of that goddamn phone booth. Pale as a ghost and trembling like a druggie. Not a pretty sight."

"And still you took him home?" Jared asks, staring at him. "Why?"

Chris shrugs. "I was gonna take him to a hospital but he totally freaked out. Just kept repeating 'No more pills, no more pills' and I finally gave up and just took him back to my place."

"But you didn't know him," Jared says confused. "He was a complete stranger. I mean, why did you go look for him in the first place? You could have just hung up."

Chris gives him a look like he's the crazy one. "On Jensen? Are you kidding me? It's... It's Jensen, man. You can't *not* help Jensen."

"Yeah, but you didn't know that. Not then. So why?"

Chris shrugs, blushing slightly. "I don't know. I just... had to, I guess. Not because he did something," he adds, looking sharply at Jared. "That boy wouldn't have been able to levitate a fly in the condition he was in. Hell, he couldn't even see colors."

He laughs quietly to himself. "The first color he got back was when he woke up that night, right there on that couch," he says, pointing his bottle at where Jared is sitting. "I thought he was simple or something because he just kept staring at me saying 'Blue, blue, your eyes are blue' over and over again. So weird." He snorts and Jared smiles a little.

“Then as the rest of his senses started to come back he...” Chris hesitates. “It was tough,” he finally says. “I mean, he wanted them back, he just wasn’t in any shape to deal with them. So that took a while, for him to adjust to that. But the emotion thing? He’s never been able to fully adjust to that.”

He pauses, looking thoughtful. “Still, most of the time he’s fine. You wouldn’t know there was anything wrong. He goes inside his head sometimes when he’s trying to deal with his feelings, but it’s nothing major and he snaps out of it soon enough. Doesn’t really happen that often anymore. And how often does a person really get upset enough to blow up a hurricane?”

“He became totally unresponsive twice, just today,” Jared says, frowning. “Plus he got lost in his thoughts a couple of times, like totally spaced out for some minutes. You don’t call that often?”

“Yeah? That’s more than he’s done in the last month. Try to figure out why that is,” Chris says pointedly. “For fuck’s sake, Jared. You suddenly turning up pretty much dumped him into an emotional ocean. He’s fucking drowning in his feelings and he can only swim so far.”

Jared breathes in harshly, his eyes suddenly stinging. “I... I’m so sorry.” He covers his face with his hands, feeling like the worst person in the whole world.

“Yeah, well. A good fat of nothing that’ll do,” Chris says tiredly. “Fucking hell, kid, did you have to get his hopes up? Why didn’t you just tell him right away? Or me? At least then I’d know what to expect.”

“I didn’t know how to,” Jared admits, feeling guilty as hell. “I’m no good at confrontations.” He looks up, wiping at his eyes with his fingers. “Why me? Why is he so hung up on me? I don’t get it. I’m... nobody. I’m just a kid he knew ten years ago.”

Chris stares at him. “You... Christ! You haven’t figured that out yet?” he says incredulous.

“Figured *what* out? It’s been ten years, man. I mean... I never forgot *him* because... Well, you don’t forget someone like that. You don’t forget *Jensen*. But me? Why do I mean so much to him? I know... I *know* I was his first friend but he has you now. And Steve and Tom and lots of people. Why do *I* matter?”

“Because you’re the one he’s in love with, you moron,” Chris blurts out then freezes. “Oh fuck,” he groans.

Jared stares at him, feeling like a truck slammed into his chest. “*What?*”

“Shit, he’s going to kill me for this,” Chris sighs, briefly closing his eyes before fixing them on Jared, dead serious. “He loves you, Jared. He’s been in love with you for ten years. You’re the only person he’s ever loved and he’s been waiting for you all this time. And then you finally show up only to tell him you’ve got a girlfriend and you’re leaving again. You get it now?”

“But... I was just thirteen,” Jared says confused.

“He’s not a pedophile, man,” Chris says irritated. “It wasn’t like that.”

“I know that! Christ. I’m just... Dude, I was an ugly kid. I was short and fat and... I was a *nobody*. What on earth made him think he’d want *me*?”

Chris shrugs. “Apparently he had some kind of vision of how you two would get together. You’d be all... Well, like that,” Chris says, waving his hand to indicate Jared in his present state. “Tall and strong and apparently the most amazing magnificent person in the whole world.”

Jared thinks if there ever was a good moment to drop down dead, it would be now.

“That’s what he’s been holding on to for all those years,” Chris continues and sighs. “I tried... I *tried* to tell him it might not work out that way but he’s stubborn, man. He’s been convinced you were gonna come sweep him off his feet and then you two would live happily ever after in some frigging fairytale. Literally. And then you finally show up and now look where we are. You’re going back to LA with your girlfriend and he’s in there, dying inside.”

Jared tightens the hold on his bottle. He lifts it to his lips then slams it down on the table, stumbles up from the couch and runs to the bathroom.

When he gets back again Chris doesn’t say anything but there’s a glass of water on the table waiting for him and he grabs and downs it as soon as he sits down.

“Look, I don’t blame you,” Chris says gently. “You obviously had no idea. I mean, it’s insane, picking your soul mate when he’s just thirteen years old. No one expects you to have a sudden gay epiphany and just drop to your knees and propose to him, ok? You have a girlfriend and I bet you love her. This wasn’t what you were expecting.”

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Jared says hoarsely. His head is starting to pound and he can’t help wondering if Jensen gave him his hangover back. With a vengeance. He’s pretty ok with that punishment. “To tell the truth I don’t think I really expected to ever see him again.”

He looks up at Chris, pleading with him to understand. “I looked for him, I did. But... there was nothing. I couldn’t find anything. And when we moved up state two years later I gave up. I was a kid, for Christ’s sake. He was my best friend but I was just a kid. There was only so much I could do.”

“I know, man. Jensen knows that too. He’s never blamed you for not finding him.”

Jared shakes his head, not really listening. “And I... I love Sandy,” he continues. “I do. It’s not perfect but nothing is. We’ve known each other since we were kids, you know. She’s the only girl I’ve ever really loved.”



“Jared, it’s okay,” Chris cuts in. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me or... or *apologize*. For anything. Seriously, I’m not...”

“But it’s *Jensen*, man!” Jared says. “It’s Jensen. *Of course* I love him! It’s killing me, knowing I’m breaking his heart. God! I just... I never even thought of loving him like that.”

“Dude, I get it...”

“And what about you?” Jared asks, shaking his head. “What about you, man?”

Chris frowns. “Me? What about me?”

“You’re his boyfriend and he’s in love with someone else! Don’t you even care?”

Chris stares at him and then bursts out laughing. “Boyfriend? Me and Jensen? You’re kidding, right? Didn’t you hear a word I said?” He shakes his head, exasperated. “There has never been anyone for him but you. Believe me, I’ve tried to set him up on a million dates and he just won’t do it. For Christ’s sake, the kid’s practically a virgin.” He stops, his face flushing red. “Great, now he’s *really* going to kill me.”

“So you’re not...?” Jared blinks. “Wait, he hasn’t dated *anyone*? At all?”

Chris shakes his head. “No girls, no guys. No one. And believe me, he’s had plenty of offers. Especially when he’s drunk. Pour a beer down his throat and they’re on him like flies on crap. I think it’s some pheromone thing or something. I don’t know. It’s embarrassing.”

“I...” Jared pauses then shakes his head. “I have no idea what to say to that.”

“Yeah, that’s good,” Chris says relieved. “Let’s keep it that way, especially when he’s around, ok? I’d rather keep my balls, thank you very much.”

Jared nods absentmindedly. “So you’ve lived here, with him, for eight years. You take care of him in all ways possible except... not that way.”

“Definitely not that way,” Chris snorts. “I mean, he’s probably the prettiest boy on the planet but I like my dates with boobs and no dick, thank you very much.”

Jared manages a small smile. “Yeah, I can see how that would cause a problem.”

“But you... you’ve never... No guys? Not even looked that way?” Chris sighs at Jared’s obvious discomfort. “I’m not trying to be a jerk, ok? I just... I have to know if there’s a chance here, Jared. Because if there ain’t even the tiniest chance then Jensen has to know that. *I* have to know that so I can deal with it.”

Jared can feel his face growing hot. “I’ve never... No. But I’ve... It’s crossed my mind. Mainly because I knew Jensen was... It made me a little curious, you know. Wondering why he... I mean... God!” He groans into his hands. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m being like this.”

“I guess you never really expect the Gay Inquisition,” Chris snorts, lifting his hands in apology when Jared glares at him. “I’m kidding. But ok, at least you’re not a homophobic asshole. That’s something.”

“We’re figuring out where I am on the Kinsey scale now?” Jared laughs shakily.

Chris shrugs, smiling slightly, but his eyes are solemn. “You and Sandy though... You’re really serious?”

Jared stiffens. The whole conversation is making him feel really uncomfortable and rather defensive. “Dude...” he warns.

Chris rolls his eyes. “I’m not gonna tell you to dump your girlfriend so you can try being gay for a while, ok? I’m just asking.”

Jared relaxes a little even if he feels awkward as hell. “Me and Sandy...” he starts then sighs, rubbing one hand over his face. “It’s been three years, man. But... I don’t know. I love her. But sometimes... I’m not sure we’re looking for the same things in life, you know. My mom keeps asking me when we’re gonna make it official, wants me to buy Sandy a ring but... I’m only twenty-three! I don’t feel ready for any of that.”

“Ok.” Chris nods, reaching over to pat his knee soothingly. “Ok. Yeah.” He hesitates. “Just... think about it. Alright? Because I gotta tell you, I doubt he’s ever gonna look at anyone else. And to be honest, that’s a waste of a pretty fine ass.”

Jared can’t help laughing. It’s a broken laughter and he thinks he’s actually closer to crying but it still makes him feel better.

“I don’t know if I could do what you do,” he admits quietly. “I mean, being there for him all the time and handling everything he throws at you. I’m not really strong like that.”

Chris looks at him annoyed. “You make it sound like he’s a burden, man. It’s not like that. He’s not disabled, you know, he’s just... different.” He shrugs, looking a little uncomfortable. “I’m not saying living with Jenny didn’t take some time adjusting to but ain’t it that way with everyone?”

“Yeah, but...”

“The payoff more than makes up for it,” Chris says, his gaze steady. “It’s never a chore, being his friend. It’s a privilege.”

Jared nods slowly. He gets that. Like being handed a precious stone, the only one of its kind in the whole world. Except instead of being cold and hard it’s warm and soft and makes the sun shine when it smiles.

“So what should I do now?” he asks after a while. “I have no idea what to do.”

“I can’t tell you that, man,” Chris says tiredly. “It’s your life.”

“I know. I just...” He swallows. “Right now, what should I do right now? He’s in there and... I don’t know what to do.”

Chris tilts his head, thoughtful. “You want my advice? You might not like it.”

Jared bites his lip but nods. “It’s gotta be better than the big blank of nothing I’ve got.”

“Ok.” Chris breathes out then looks him straight in the eye. “I think you should go in there and tell him goodbye. Then leave and don’t come back tomorrow. Go back to LA.”

“What?” Jared stares at him, shocked. “You want me to just leave him? Just walk out of his life again like I don’t even care?”

“Fuck no.” The menace in Chris voice is frightening. “You do that and I’ll come after you, boy. I’ll come after you and I’ll fucking chop your balls off, I swear. Because if you leave him like that, if you walk out on him the way his bitch of a mother did, it will kill him. And I’m not talking metaphorically here.”

Jared blinks. “Then what are you saying? I don’t get it.”

“That’s because you didn’t let me finish. I want you to go home to LA, Jared, and *think*. Think about your life without Jensen in it. Think about what that means. I can tell you right now, man, it’s hell. If you’re given the chance of having someone like him in your life... Walking away from that is like walking away from sunshine and sex and beer, everything that makes life worth it. Trust me. But think about that and if you find out you agree with me, *then* think of ways that you can *be* in his life. Figure it out.”

Jared licks his lips and nods. “Ok,” he says, feeling overwhelmed and incompetent. “Yeah.”

“I don’t expect you to turn gay, drop your girlfriend and move in here,” Chris tells him serious. “No one expects that, not even Jensen despite his little fantasy. He was all ready to accept Sandy, to accept he would never have you like that. He just wants to have you in some form. He believes you’re his soul mate but I think he’ll be okay with you being a platonic one. What he *can’t* accept is you not being *here*. He thought you had come to him, that you were here to stay, man. You telling him you’re leaving again, it’s something he wasn’t ready for.”

He gives Jared a tired smile. “I gotta tell you, kid, LA is fucking far away. I don’t know how we’re gonna make that work. Because I got to be honest with you, Jensen isn’t someone you can have a long distance friendship with. Half your soul’s always gonna be where he is. Believe me. The one year he was living at the dorm at Juilliard? Worst fucking year of my life.”

“I... I have to think about this,” Jared says rubbing his temples with his thumbs.

Chris nods sympathetically. “You do that. I know it’s a lot to take in, Jared. I’m not making light of the situation you’re in. Hell, I wouldn’t want to be you right now. You’re barely out of college, right?”

Jared shrugs, for some reason not wanting to admit he dropped out.

“You’re not supposed to be committing to anything permanent, not now. Now’s the time to travel and have stupid sex and imagine you’re gonna be a rockstar. Believe me, been there, done that. Wouldn’t have missed it for the world even if I regret most of it.” He grins but it soon turns serious again. “No one’s telling you to just drop all your plans for him. What I *am* asking, is for you to try to think of a way to include him in them. Because let me tell you this, whatever sacrifice you think you have to make to make this work, I promise you it will be worth it. He’s worth it. All the way.”

Jared nods and stands up slowly. His palms are sweaty and he rubs them on his jeans, licking his lips nervously. “Yeah,” he says and nods again. “I’ll go... go talk to him then.”

“Ok. Jared? Make sure to tell him you’re coming back. If you have any idea *when* that would be the best but at least tell him you *will* be coming back, and soon. Because you are.” It’s not a question.

“I am,” Jared confirms. He has no idea how he’ll manage it, this trip alone cost him more than he could afford and getting time off work won’t be easy either. Plus him and Sandy are saving up for a better apartment and she won’t be happy if he spends money on regular trips between LA and New York.

Christ, what the hell has he gotten himself into?

The piano is still playing frantically on the other side of the door but when Jared knocks it cuts off immediately and with it some of the weight that’s been pressing down on his chest lets go. He breathes deeply, trying to compose himself, before opening the door hesitantly. It’s a repeat from yesterday morning, with Jensen sitting still at the piano, his back turned and tension riding his shoulders. The difference lies in the room itself. The walls are so black they seem to swallow all the light in the room. Jared hears a rumble above and looks up to find dark clouds obscuring the ceiling. He swallows and steps in, half expecting the floor to suck him down or the air to ignite and blow him out the door.

“Jensen,” he says in a low voice, walking cautiously up to him.

Jensen doesn’t answer but tension runs like a snake under the oversized t-shirt. Jared had forgotten how wet they’d gotten from the rain, his own discomfort unimportant in light of everything that’s been happening, and it chills him, seeing Jensen sitting there, wet clothes clinging to his lean frame. His neck is flushed pink though and the windows are steamed up. When Jared lays a palm on his shoulder it’s hot and he can see rivulets of sweat running down from his temple. Considering the violent music they’d been hearing it doesn’t really surprise him.

“Hey,” he says, kneading the tense muscles under his palm. “You should change before you catch a cold.”

Jensen sits still, blinking, but then he looks down like he’s noticing for the first time how drenched he is. “Your t-shirt,” he says in a hoarse and vacant voice. “You want it back.”

Jared shakes his head. “You can keep it, Jen. Keep it for me until I get back.”

Jensen’s shoulders slump and he closes his eyes. “You’re really going,” he whispers. “You’re going away.”

Jared swallows. “Yeah, I’m... I need to go. But I’m coming back. As soon as I can. I promise.”

Jensen nods but he doesn’t open his eyes and Jared sighs.

“Jensen, listen to me. I *am* coming back. I’m not going to let you slip out of my life again, not when I’ve finally found you. I promise.”

“Yeah, ok.” The voice is blank, holding no conviction.

“Will you please look at me?” he begs. “Jensen, please.”

Jensen breathes out and Jared can see his eyes moving under the thin eyelids but he still keeps them shut. “M sorry,” he mumbles. “I just... I can’t.”

“Ok.” Jared swallows. “Ok, Jen.”

Jensen shakes his head. “No. Before it was okay because... because I knew you’d come,” he says hoarsely. “This time... I’m not sure I will be okay. I think... I think I might not be okay.”

“Jen...”

“But it’s not your fault,” Jensen continues, seeming not to hear him. “It’s my fault. I... I was stupid. I was so fucking stupid. And now I have to... I have to figure out what to do.”

Jared closes his eyes briefly. The air is so heavy he can hardly breathe and he wishes he had some idea what to say or do. “You weren’t stupid, Jensen,” he tells him quietly. “I was. I should have realized...” He stops, breathing in deep before continuing. “I need some time, ok? Don’t give up on me. Please.”

For a moment he thinks Jensen isn’t going to answer but then he suddenly stands up, so abruptly the bench almost tips over, and turns around to face him, eyes open. They’re like a green ocean fighting the tide, overflowing and endlessly deep. The whole room turns green, like being inside a water tank, casting ripples of light that play upon their skin. Any other time it would be beautiful, right now it just makes Jared feel like he’s drowning.

He pulls Jensen close, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face in the damp hair. "I'm not gonna let you go, Jen," he tells him as firmly as he can. "I'm coming back. I promise."

Jensen doesn't answer. His breath is hot against Jared's throat, his arms hanging limply by his sides. They stand like that for a long time, Jared pressing his face into Jensen's hair, Jensen just breathing into Jared's skin. He's completely still, like a pillar of tranquility, except for the fast pace of his heartbeat pounding under his skin.

In the end it's Jensen that gently pushes Jared away, his eyes downcast and shoulders slumped. "I have to play now," he says to the floor. "You should go."

Jared nods, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. "Ok," he says shakily. "Ok, Jen."

Jensen nods, still not looking at him. He starts humming under his breath, something slow and sorrowful that has Jared's breath hitching.

He turns away and walks to the door, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. "Please don't give up on me," he says again, trying to keep his voice steady. "Please."

Jensen doesn't answer and as Jared is closing the door behind him he sees him sitting down again in front of the piano, a figure of loneliness. As soon as the door closes with a click the first notes start playing.

### ***Schindler's list theme / John Williams (2:59)***

It's the same melody Jensen had been humming, such sadness in every tone that it's ripping Jared's heart out. He leans his forehead against the door, eyes closed, and drinks in all that sadness and despair until he feels a hand on his shoulder and a low voice says, "You should go now."

He nods, and turns away. The walk to the front door is long and his feet feel heavy. As he gets there he stops, hesitating but Chris tells him again, "Go." And there's nothing else he can do,

"You have my number," he says. "Call me if..." He stops, swallowing. "He needs to put on warm clothes," he says instead. "He's still wet from the rain."

"I'll take care of it," Chris says patiently. "Go."

He stands still a moment longer, swallowing and biting his lip until he can taste copper on his tongue. Then he opens the door and walks out.

The music follows him all the way down in the elevator, out into the street and into the cab he catches there. The slow sadness of the piano fades away and is replaced by an orchestra of strings; violins and cellos swelling with grief so deep he feels like his heart is going to burst right open. He leans his head against the window, watching the rain stream in rivers down the glass as the cab pulls away from the curb.



“C’mon, Jenny. That’s enough.”

The voice doesn’t really register but the arms that are trying to pull him through the musical barrier and back into the real word do. He tries to fight it but they’re stronger than him and he gives up.

“There you go,” Chris says. He knew that, that it was Chris and not... not someone else. He’s being nudged along and when he opens his eyes he’s in his bedroom.

“I didn’t cry,” he says to no one in particular. He thinks he should feel proud but he can’t risk even that.

“You did good,” Chris says gently and tugs the t-shirt over Jensen’s head. He wants to tell Chris no, that he wants to keep it on, but as soon as the air hits his skin he realizes how cold and clammy he is.

“I held it together,” he says as he sits down on the bed. “I didn’t cry.” It’s important Chris knows that. How strong he’s been until now.

“You can if you want to,” Chris says. He sounds sad. “Might do you some good.” He’s kneeling at Jensen’s feet, pulling off his socks, and Jensen can’t see his eyes.

“I need to go away,” he says, gazing at the rain outside the window instead. “I can’t be here now.”

“Jensen...” Chris starts then sighs and when he looks up he’s smiling a little. It’s a very sad smile. “Ok. I guess I can take a few days off work. Where do you want to go?”

Jensen shakes his head. “No. Not you. Me. Just me.”

Chris stands up abruptly. He smells like gravel. “What?” he says, his voice rough. “Hell no, Jen. I’m coming with you.”

Jensen closes his eyes, breathing in deeply. The pressure is building up inside him, the borders stretching like a rubber band. Any minute now he’s going to snap. Snap and break and spill it all, like Pandora’s box thrown open.

“You know you can’t,” he says and looks up, his regret genuine. “Not where I’m going. I’m sorry, Chris. But I have to go.”

“What are you talking about...” Chris stops, his eyes widening in alarm. “No. Jensen, no! You can’t do that. You promised me you would *never* do that again!”

“It’s alright. It’s just for a while.” He breathes out and smiles, feeling peaceful already now the decision has been made. “I’ll come back, I promise, when I’m safe.”

“Jensen, no! What if you *don’t* come back? What if I can’t get you out? Jensen!”

“It’s okay, Chris. I’m okay.” He closes his eyes again and allows the music to drown out the noise of Chris shouting. Everything’s going to be alright.



Everything’s a fucking disaster.

Jared escorts that night’s fifth asshole out, using possibly a little more force than the guy’s five foot eight frame calls for.

“I was only testing the merchandise,” the fucker says drunkenly and the leer on his face is almost enough to make Jared’s fist accidentally hit it.

“They’re not merchandise,” he says instead through gritted teeth. “They’re human beings. Get out of here or I’ll call the cops.”

“Dude!”

“Or better yet, your wife.”

“I’m going, I’m going. Jeez. Fucking asshole.”

Jared raises his hand, flexing his fingers and the guy scrambles to his feet and hurries away. Sometimes it pays to be tall like a tree with hands like branches. The thought makes Jared’s shoulders slump.



This has been the longest week of his life. A week used to be just that, seven days that rotate and offer little variation. Working five nights a week at The Slippery Slope (the name alone makes him cringe, actually *working* there is depressing) and grabbing whatever shifts he can get at the coffeehouse in between. Then Sundays with Sandy, doing whatever they wanted, most of it usually in bed after he's walked Harley and gotten them coffee and bagels. Then Monday it all starts over again.

This week is different. This week he wakes up every morning with this huge ball of guilt in his stomach. This feeling of everything being wrong and knowing that it's his fault.

The small apartment doesn't feel his anymore. It feels like a stranger's, cold and empty of all familiarity, filled with the uneasiness of intrusion. He wakes up and thinks 'I don't belong here.' He gets up and he can't find any clothes that fit because the only t-shirt he wants is in an apartment in New York. He makes coffee but it doesn't taste the way it should, of a morning-after hangover and embarrassment. He walks out and the sun feels different, the air smells stale and the city is a stranger.

He hugs Sandy and she's short and soft and has no freckles.

"What is wrong with you?"

There's hurt in her eyes and he looks away because he can't answer her. How do you explain that you think your best friend put a hex on you?

"Dude, you need to get your ass in gear," Chad sighs. "You're losing it, man. You're losing it big time."

Jared ignores him.

The first thing he did when he got home was call his mom and tell her about Jensen. Not everything, just that he'd found him and that he was doing alright.

"Is he still...?" she'd asked and he'd said curtly, "Yes," and left it at that. Even now he can't forgive her for losing faith, for letting him struggle alone with believing in what he saw, what they *both* saw.

Then he asked her to go through the stuff from his old room that he hadn't bothered taking with him to LA. Two days later a brown box arrived in the mail. He cut it open just to make sure everything was as it should be and then he closed it again and sent it forward.

He hasn't called Jensen because he doesn't know what to say, and no one has called him, not Jensen and not Chris. He's not sure what to think about that. For one thing he doesn't trust Chris to let him know if something is wrong.

On the eighth day he gives in.

It's Sunday morning and Sandy is out, brunch with her girlfriends she'd said and seemed relieved to get away from him. He can't say he blames her, he feels quite relieved himself. The silence when she's gone soothes his aching head.

He sits on the windowsill in the bedroom, watching kids play in the street below. Harley is snoozing on the bed, one eye sliding open every now and then to look over at the lone figure by the window, hoping for a scratch or maybe just company, Jared doesn't know. Before he can think too much of what he's doing he's got his phone in his hand, flipping it open. He lingers over Jensen's name but something keeps him from hitting it and he scrolls up instead, finding Chris's number.

The voice that answers is gruff with exhaustion and something else that Jared can't put his finger on but it's enough to make his stomach twist into a knot.

"Jensen can't come to the phone right now," is what Chris says. No 'hello' or 'hey' or 'what's up'. "I'll tell him you called," he adds, sounding dismissive, like he's about to hang up.

"Wait! How... how is he?"

There's silence for a while and then Chris asks, "You been following the weather reports?"

Jared leaps off the windowsill, startling Harley from his slumber. He wants to smack his own head. "No," he says. "Dammit, I didn't think..."

"There's nothing," Chris cuts in. "Nothing going on at all."

Shouldn't that be good news? Except judging from the tone in Chris's voice it obviously isn't. "What... what does that mean?"

"It means he ain't here, son." Chris laughs tiredly. It sounds horrible. "Jensen has left the building and I have no idea when he's coming back."

"What are you talking about? What the fuck is going on?"

Chris sighs. "Listen, kiddo. It's like... He's sleeping, okay? I just don't know when he'll wake up."

"But why is that..." Something clicks in his head and he slides down the wall until he's sitting on the floor, phone clutched in his hand. "Chris, how long has he been sleeping?"

There's silence for a long time and then Chris clears his throat and says, "Since you left."

Jared drops the phone on the floor and his head to his hands. He feels sick, sick to his stomach and sick to his heart. He can hear Chris calling his name on the other side of the line but he can't... He just *can't*. Harley's cold nose nudges his temple but after a while the dog gives up and lies down by his side.

He has no idea how long he sits like that but when he finally picks up the phone again Chris is still there, talking to someone else in the room. For a moment he thinks Chris is talking to a comatose Jensen but then he hears the name 'Steve'.

"Hello?" he says loudly into the phone and Chris is instantly there.

"Hey," he says, "you alright?"

"No. Not really." He rubs the heel of one hand into his eye socket, trying to ease the pressure in his head. "Why didn't you call me?" he asks, wanting to sound pissy but it just comes out pathetically hurt.

"Nothing you could have done anyway." Being so far away, is what he means and Jared's ball of guilt bounces in his gut.

"I could have come back, talked to him. Fuck, man, he's doing it because of me! If I'm there..."

"Jared, he's too deep inside his head. He can't hear you, man. Even if you scream into his ear he can't hear you." Chris sighs. "And he's not doing it just because of you. He's doing it for everyone. I guess he thought he was going to lose it."

"Lose it?" Jared asks angry. "What the fuck do you call *this* if not losing it?"

"I call it damage control," Chris says calmly.

"Damage control? What the fuck do you mean 'damage control'?"

There's a pause and then Chris says quietly, "Jared, the sun comes out when he smiles."

"So?" Jared grits out between his teeth. "What's your point?"

"Point? My point is if he's got the frigging sun eating out of his hand he's got as much power as God. You ever read the Bible, Jared? You remember what God did when *he* got pissed off?"

Jared sucks in his breath.

"Yeah. The difference is Jensen doesn't want to kill millions of people." Chris's tone is sarcastic but Jared can hear the severity seep through.

"You really think he's capable of something like that?" Jared asks, feeling sick to his stomach.

"His parents thought so but I don't," Chris says firmly. "I think he'd rather kill himself than risk hurting anyone. But that doesn't change the fact that he's got a lot of power, our boy, and he doesn't really know how to control it."

“So he just...” Jared pinches the bridge of his nose. This is so beyond everything he’s ever imagined. “He shut himself down?”

“He shut himself down,” Chris concurs. “Cut the power before it cut him and everyone else in the process.”

“He’s done this before?”

“Once. Couple of weeks after he got out.” Chris sighs. “Got a hell of a shock when he found out how long he’d been in there. He got... angry.”

“How angry?”

“Blew out all the windows in the apartment, the power in the neighborhood and a satellite twenty two thousand miles above Earth.”

“Holy shit!” Jared gapes.

“Yeah. Of course we didn’t know that until later but still, he could feel it. He knew he was doing something bad so he closed his eyes and shut himself down. I’m guessing it’s something he learned to do inside. Anyway, took me two days to wake him up.”

“Two days?” Jared says with a frown. “But it’s been a whole week now!”

“It’s a lot harder to get over grief than anger,” Chris bites back.

Jared closes his eyes. How can he feel so horribly guilty over something that isn’t really his fault? “I want to come see him,” he says. “I want to be there.”

“Sure, you do that, Jared,” Chris says sarcastically. “And then what? When he wakes up and you leave again we’re right back where we started.”

“You were the one who said you’d kill me if I walked out on him!” Jared bristles. “I’m trying here, man. I’m trying to be there for him!”

There’s silence for a moment and then Chris sighs. “Jared, listen to me. Yes, I said that and I still believe it. But right now he’s in no condition to handle some yo-yo relationship with you, man. He needs to come to terms with what’s happened first and then... Then we’ll see.”

Jared bites his lip, swallowing the lump in his throat. “But what if he doesn’t wake up at all?” he asks in a low voice.

“That’s not an option.”

“But if...”

“*It’s not an option!*”

Chris voice sounds strained, edging on the brink of breaking and it finally hits Jared that Chris is afraid. The realization chills him to the bone and he closes his eyes, trying to breathe himself calm. God, he can't do this. He can't do this!

"Chris," he says shakily, slowly getting to his feet, "I need to go. Let me know if anything happens, ok?"

"Yeah, sure." It sounds tired and hopeless and Jared wishes he was there to offer something, anything, if only a shoulder to lean on and a couple of beers.

"I'll be in touch," he says instead. "And Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. I... I wish I could do something. I feel so fucking useless."

Chris sighs. "Don't beat yourself up about it, man. It's not really your fault." He laughs, a little of the old brass back in his voice. "I keep forgetting how young you are. Hell when I was your age I spent my days stoned on a couch, playing guitar and thinking I was the shit. Go out, have some fun, kid. Have a beer on me. You sound like you need it."

Jared bites his lip. "Yeah," he says. "Thank you."

He hangs up and looks around. A stranger in a stranger's place. He doesn't feel like himself anymore, the old Jared who lives here and might not know what he wants but he's alright with taking his time figuring it out. He kinda misses that Jared but the thing is...

The thing is he misses Jensen more.



"You ever do anything like that again I'll dump your ass in the middle of the park and let your precious fairies take care of you. I mean it, Jensen. Don't you *ever* do that to me again!"

Jensen blinks, his eyelids heavy. Chris is glaring down at him, all black clouds and smelling like rain. He tries to answer but his throat is so dry all he manages is a cough.

"Here."

He drinks the water offered to him, spilling half of it down his chin. "How... how long?" he chokes out.

"Ten fucking days, you goddamn asshole," Chris says coldly as he puts the glass back on the bedside table. "I hate you so much right now."

“M sorry.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Chris shakes his head, lips thin. “I know you think you’re saving the goddamn world or something but you almost killed *me*, man.” When Jensen tries to reach out for him he stands up abruptly and turns away. “I’ll let Steve know you’re not dead.”

“Chris...”

Chris throws up his hand, cutting him off. “Don’t. Don’t fucking talk to me.”

He leaves, slamming the door behind him, and Jensen closes his eyes, breathing out. Fuck. Chris has been mad at him before but never like this. Not even close to this.

The door opens and Jensen tenses before he can smell the ocean waves and California sunshine. “You come to yell at me too?” he asks dejected.

“I should.” The bed dips when Steve sits down at the edge and then a calloused hand cups his face for a moment before pulling away. Jensen cracks one eye open and is met with tired eyes and a forced smile. “That was a fucking shitty thing to do, man.”

Jensen swallows. “I was losing it,” he says shakily. “I had no choice.”

“You could have asked us to help you,” Steve sighs. “We’ve dealt with this kind of shit before.”

Jensen shakes his head. “No. Not like this. This was... There was no time, Steve. It would have been bad.” He closes his eyes again, remembering the pressure that had been steadfastly building inside him, like water in a balloon. One more drop and... “It would have been really, really bad.”

Steve’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder, gripping it tight and Jensen grabs him by the wrist, clinging to it, his breath hitching. “Steve...” It comes out desperate, almost wailing and Steve hauls him up, pulling him in tight.

“Hey, it’s ok. Nothing happened.”

“I could have...”

“You didn’t. Ok, Jen? You didn’t.”

“I was so close. I saw... I saw the world drowning.” He struggles to compose himself. “God, what am I that I almost did that because... because of a fucking heartbreak? What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Jensen, you didn’t! Dude, you think I’ve never imagined horrible things happening when I’m sad or pissed off? That doesn’t make me evil, it just makes me human. You’re just human, Jen.”

He shakes his head furiously. “You’re *allowed*. *Humans* are allowed. I’m *not*. I’m not allowed to think like that, to feel like that. I could have... God!” He starts shaking, the self-disgust and fear suddenly overwhelming him. “My mom was right. I’m not human. Oh God, I don’t think I’m human, Steve.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” an angry voice says from the door, snapping him out of the panic he was steadfastly heading into. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that.”

He breathes in deep a few times before he dares lifting his head from Steve’s shoulder and pull away. “I thought you weren’t talking to me,” he says in a low voice.

“I’m not,” Chris huffs. “I’m talking *at* you.” He sighs and walks in, sitting down on the other side of the bed. “Fuck, Jen, why you gotta be such a pathetic bastard? You’re ruining my fit of righteous anger, making me feel sorry for you.”

“Love you too, you goddamn asshole,” Jensen snuffles and Chris laughs tiredly.

“Yeah. You better.” He reaches over and ruffles Jensen’s hair then pulls back his hand and looks at it in dismay. “Christ, you need a bath.”

“What, no sponge baths?” Jensen huffs, wiping his face with the corner of the bedcovers.

“Only in the most necessary situations,” Steve says cheerfully and grins.

Jensen freezes, then lets himself fall back on the pillows with a groan, covering his face. “Aw, no.”

“What did you expect?” Chris says. “Ten days, you moron!”

“Fuck.”

Chris snorts and lays down beside him, closing his eyes. “Yeah, no. Not until you’ve been soaked in bleach. Seriously, man, you stink.”

“I’ll run a bath,” Steve says with a grin, patting Jensen’s chest before standing up. “You two kiss and make up.”

“Like hell we will,” Chris says with disgust. “He hasn’t brushed his teeth in ten days!”

“So I’ll taste just like you then,” Jensen bites back. He turns his head and smiles tiredly at Chris who is watching him, looking like he’s afraid Jensen might disappear again any second. “Hey,” he says and rolls over, snuggling close the way they used to do. “I’m sorry.”

“Hmph,” Chris mutters but he puts an arm around him, pulling him tighter. “Still hate you.”

“I know.” He lies silent, listening to Chris’s steady heartbeat. His breathing is slowing down and small twitches jerk him every now and then as he’s obviously succumbing to sleep.

“I was stupid,” Jensen whispers and Chris stirs beside him. “I should have listened to you.”

“Jenny...” Chris says weary.

“No. You were right. It was all just a fucking hallucination. Fuck, most of what I see probably is.” He sucks in his breath, eyes stinging. “Just my goddamn brain making shit up,” he says bitterly.

Chris sighs. “Oh c’mon. You’re being overly dramatic.”

“Am I?” He rolls over on his back, staring up at the ceiling. “What if none of it’s real? What if I really am crazy? I mean, fairies? Fucking unicorns? It’s insane.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Chris groans. “I’m trying to sleep here and that’s the time you choose to have a mental freakout?” He sighs and rubs his eyes. “You’re not crazy, Jensen. Just because other people can’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not there.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what it means,” Jensen mutters. “I don’t get you, man. I don’t get how you can just believe everything I tell you.”

“I didn’t believe you about the purple kangaroo,” Chris reminds him, yawning.

“That’s because I’m a horrible liar. And you weren’t drunk enough.”

“Well, there’s that. Try again later after a few more beers. I’ll believe you then.”

Jensen laughs quietly, feeling a little bit better. He doesn’t really believe he’s crazy, even if sometimes he does wonder. It’s hard not to have doubts when he spent two years being told he was just that.

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one’s around to hear, does it make a sound?” he says after a while and Chris groans.

“It’s too early for Zen,” he complains, turning over on his side and burying his face in Jensen’s pillow. “Shut up.”

“I was just wondering. If no one can see them but me, what happens to them when I’m dead?”

“They can finally jerk off without anyone perving over them,” Chris mumbles. “Because of you they haven’t been able to have freaky outdoor fairy sex in years.”

“I don’t know why I even talk to you,” Jensen says and pokes him hard in the stomach with his elbow. “Jerk.”



“Hey!” Chris yelps and kicks him in the shin. “Ow. And you talk to me because I’m the only one who can stand you for more than a few hours.”

“Yeah,” Jensen says, his smile fading. “You and Steve.”

Chris lifts his head, looking at him. “Jensen...”

He averts his eyes. “And we’re back to me being stupid.”

Chris sighs. “He’s coming back, you know.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Dude, he is or I’m gonna kick his ass.”

Jensen quirks one eyebrow at him. “He’s like ten feet taller than you.”

“Hey, I know a move or two,” Chris protests.

“Yeah.” Jensen sighs. “Doesn’t matter. He has a girlfriend, a job, a whole other life. Not to mention I probably freaked him the hell out. He’s probably trying his best to forget he ever met me.”

Chris lifts himself up on his elbow and starts rummaging through the bedclothes. “Ok, would a guy like that send you this?” He pulls out a blue soft toy, frowning at it. “Seriously, what is this? A dog or something?” he asks before throwing it at Jensen.

The worn old face smiles down at him as he holds the bear above him, staring at it in shock. “He sent me Bluebear?” he chokes out.

“And it has a name. Of course.” Chris rolls his eyes but he’s smiling now. “Yeah, that little guy turned up on our doorstep about a week ago. There was a note.” He reaches over to the bedside table, picking up a yellow Post-It. “‘Until we find Slipper’ it says. Who’s Slipper?”

“My rabbit.” Jensen pushes his face into the bear’s soft belly but it smells mostly of dust and his own sleepy sweat. Still, there’s a faint memory of Jared the boy lingering just under the surface, clutching the bear in his arms as he snores into its ear. “I can’t believe he sent me Bluebear,” Jensen says, laughing shakily. “Hey there, little guy. How you been?”

“Shit. Don’t tell me that thing can talk!” Chris glares at Bluebear who gazes innocently back. “Whatever it says about me? It’s fucking lying.”

Jensen bites his lips to keep from laughing. “Yeah? So you didn’t cuddle him when you slept in here? And... What?” He looks at the bear and frowns. “Sing? He sung for me?”

Chris stares at the bear, eyes wide. “You’re shitting me!”

“I am,” Jensen deadpans. “God, you’re so predictable. You sung for me?” He grins. “You sang me a little song? That’s so sweet.”

“Shut up.” Chris glares at him, face flushed red, and rolls over with a huff, turning his back on him. “Fucking asshole.”

“Oh you love me,” Jensen laughs and scoots over, spooning him.

“Get off me, you homo,” Chris growls but he doesn’t push him away and that’s how Steve finds them ten minutes later, both fast asleep with Chris cradling Jensen’s loose fist over his chest and Jensen with his face pushed into Chris’s neck. The blue bear is squished between them, looking quite happy with that arrangement.

For a moment Steve contemplates waking them up but this is the first decent sleep Chris has gotten in ten days and Jensen looks a lot more peaceful than he did in all that time. They can always run him another bath later. Steve yawns and crawls into the bed on Jensen’s other side. He’s probably gonna get pushed over the edge when Jensen starts his usual flailing in his sleep but until then he’s catching a little shut eye.



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Two days after he talks to Chris, Jared gets a text that simply says, “*He’s awake.*”

He’s in the middle of his shift at the coffee house and has to take a break to go out back and just breathe. He stands in the stink of trash and urine and it’s the best air he’s breathed all week. His fingers shake slightly when he texts back “*Thank you.*”

He doesn't get a reply.

When he comes back in he pulls the manager aside and asks if he can work some extra shifts after the weekend, "As many as you can give me, man. Please."

After some negotiation he gets promises of extra work for the next two weeks and advancement on his salary. Then calls Chad and after a lot of bitching and sighing and threats of bodily harm he has a truck to drive and a lot of explaining to do.

He knows it doesn't really solve anything but it still feels like a step in the right direction.

"You're going to see him. Again." Sandy is eerily reserved, like she'd rather show no emotion than her real ones. Jared thinks he'd prefer it if she just yelled at him. "We had plans," she says carefully. "Remember?"

"*You* made plans," Jared corrects her and her lips turn thin.

"If you had a problem with that you could have said. They're your friends too, you know."

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. All the stress from the last week is catching up with him and his head feels like it will split open. "It's not like that, baby," he says. "I just want to see him and I don't want to wait another week."

"Well, you could have told me sooner," she huffs, the blank façade rippling, and she stands up, gathering their plates angrily. He still has half a potato left and some greens and but he doesn't argue, just pushes away from the table and starts helping her clean up.

"I didn't know sooner, ok?" he says, fighting his own irritation. It wouldn't be fair, taking his fear and stress and plain confusion out on her just because he has no other outlet. "Chris didn't want me there while Jensen was still..." He stops and she looks up, frowning.

"While Jensen was still what?"

Jared shrugs, feeling uncomfortable. "He was like in a coma or something," he mumbles and it feels like he's lying. Like he's dodging his own guilt. He's sure it can be read all over his face in big red letters, bleeding with accusation, 'Jensen Ackles checked out of his own reality because Jared Padalecki broke his heart.'

Apparently he's a better actor than he thought because Sandy's annoyance instantly disappears. She throws the dishtowel aside and wraps her arms around him, hugging him tight. "God, honey, why didn't you tell me?" she whispers and it sounds genuine which only makes him feel worse.

He still pulls her tighter, drawing strength from her warm comfort even if she doesn't really know what she is comforting him about. "I just found out two days ago," he says tiredly, "and he only woke up today. I didn't really know enough to tell you."

"Is that why you've been so distracted?" she asks and he nods numbly. "Oh honey, I really wish you'd have told me. What happened? Was he in an accident?"

'Me,' Jared thinks. 'I happened.'

"It's complicated," is what he says out loud then awkwardly tries to put together a plausible summary of what being Jensen Ackles is like without mentioning the word 'magic'. It's anything but easy and he suddenly understands Jensen's need for a logical diagnosis, however untrue. Just to have some kind of explanation to give people so they don't look at him like he's crazy.

"It's like... like narcolepsy," Jared tells her, using Jensen's own excuse. "Except sometimes it's less like sleep and more like a coma. And this time it was a bad one."

She nods but she looks thoughtful. "Did you know about this? Before, I mean. Did he have this back home?"

"Not this bad but yeah. He zoned out a lot. Probably one of the reasons you guys thought he was so weird." He feels a strange kind of satisfaction when she flinches, blushing with guilt. Ten years and counting and he still can't really forgive her. He wonders if that says more about him or her.

"Poor guy," she mumbles and turns away, letting water run in the sink. "I get why you want to go see him. But Jared..." she turns to him again, leaning against the counter. "How you gonna get to New York? The plane tickets are at least three hundred dollars."

"Chad is lending me his car," he says, not looking at her.

"Car? It's like a forty hour drive!"

"Yeah well, it's cheaper than flying, right?" he snaps, regretting it instantly when her lips twist at the corner. "Sorry. I'm just stressed. Yes, I know it's gonna take forever but I don't mind. I have lots to think about."

She raises one eyebrow at him but doesn't comment on it. Instead she says, "I'm just worried about you driving all that way alone. You'll be exhausted. And you know I can't take time off work now."

He doesn't tell her that he doesn't really want her with him anyway. Where is she going to stay? Even if they could squeeze together on Chris's couch, given the situation he doubts she will be welcome. Fuck, he doesn't even know if *he'll* be welcome.

“I’ll be alright,” he says and kisses her. “I’ll blast the radio loud and roll the windows down and drink lots of coffee. And if I start feeling sleepy I’ll stop and take a nap. I promise.”

Later that night when she’s curled up on the couch, reading, he tells her he’s taking Harley for a walk but as soon as he’s out of the apartment he calls Chris.

“I’m coming up,” is what he says before Chris has time to say anything. “Thursday. Not sure what time since I’m driving and it takes like fourteen hours but...”

“Whoa! Hold on a minute,” Chris cuts in. “*This* Thursday?”

Jared’s stomach plummets but he’s already had this talk with Sandy and it’s easier the second time. He explains getting time off work, of securing a truck, of working extra shifts to afford it. How it’s all been arranged and that he’s not about to back down. He has to do this and he’s tired of people trying to get in his way.

“You’re going to drive eighty hours for one weekend? Damn, boy.” Chris laughs. He sounds a lot better than he did two days ago and that alone is enough to make some of Jared’s anxiety fade away. “I think we might have underestimated you.”

The relief he feels is almost physical, like a ten pound stone has been surgically removed from his stomach, and he breathes out, fingers tightening around the phone in his hand. “How is he?” he asks. “Is he alright?”

“More or less,” Chris says, “Been sleeping most of the day but he’s eating a bit now and you know how he is, he’ll be up and around like nothing happened by the time you get here.”

Jared thinks about Jensen’s cut, healing before his eyes, and wishes he could trust Jensen’s heart to heal as easily. “I mean, how *is* he?”

There’s silence for a while and then Chris says quietly, “Not good. He doesn’t think you’re ever coming back.”

It feels like a slap in the face and he stops in his tracks, causing Harley to pull on his leash and whine. “What? But I told him...”

“Yeah, he’s got a few abandonment issues, Jared,” Chris bites back irritated. “His mom left him in a fucking mental institution, man! You think he’s just gonna take your word for it?” He sighs. “I’m not even telling him you’re coming until you’re within city limits, just in case it falls through.”

He keeps forgetting that Jensen isn’t the same person he was. That his experience has changed him, made his before shy but trusting eyes guarded and doubtful. And not just what *she* did but even more what *Jared* did and *is* doing now. Chris is right, why should Jensen trust him? It hurts though, ridiculously so, knowing he’s no longer on Jensen’s most trusted list. That despite all they were to each other ten years ago,

today Jensen expects nothing of him because Jared has proved himself to be the kind of person that will let him down.

“I’m trying here,” he says in a low voice. “I’m trying the best I can.”

“I know,” Chris says, voice much gentler. “But this ain’t about you, alright? To be honest I’m worried as hell how he’s gonna take you coming up here and then leaving again. If the same thing happens again...”

“You’re not the only one that’s worried,” Jared sighs. “But I can’t... I have to see him, you know. I need to see him. It’s like...” He stops, not knowing how to explain it. “It’s all I can think about.”

“Yeah, I know,” Chris says and it feels so good, talking to someone who *does* know and *does* get it and doesn’t think it’s weird at all, driving fourteen hours just to make sure a friend is alright. Not when that friend is Jensen.

It still doesn’t keep Jared from wondering – having had too much time to think and too little logic behind his thoughts to dismiss them – and before he can talk himself out of it he asks, “Did he...? Do you think he maybe...?” He hesitates. “You know, *did* something?”

“Like put a spell on you?” Chris doesn’t laugh for which Jared is very grateful even if it makes the whole thing even more real and worrying. “I don’t know. I mean, if he did it wasn’t on purpose. Which kinda defies the meaning of spell. It’s more... It’s just Jensen, Jared. This is what he does, I told you. But he’s not... It’s not like he’s a witch or wizard or whatever. Most of the time he has no idea what he’s doing. Ok?”

Jared nods then adds, “Ok,” so Chris can hear him. “Ok, yeah. I guess. Can I... I don’t really have... This is kinda awkward,” he says, not knowing how to ask.

“I’ll ask Jensen if you can crash on our couch, once he knows you’re coming. But if he’s uncomfortable with it...” Chris sighs. “I’ll ask Steve too, see if you can sleep over at his place. I should warn you though, he’ll get you high and make you do stupid stuff, then put it on YouTube.”

Jared laughs. “I can live with that,” he says.



Jensen decides to go back to work two days after he wakes up, despite Chris’s objections.

“I’m fine,” he says, “See?” and walks in a straight line along the hall. It’s not strictly true. He still feels tired, the kind of exhaustion that makes his limbs feel heavy and the air thick in his lungs, but he’s had enough of staying at home with Chris fussing over him all the time.

“Go do something and leave me alone. Play your goddamn guitar. Don’t you have a gig this weekend?” he asks Wednesday night and Chris averts his eyes, looking uncomfortable. “What?”

He shrugs. “Nothing. Just not sure I should...”

“For fuck’s sake, man, stop treating me like an invalid. I’m fine!”

Chris just looks at him and he wants to scream. Seriously, he’s fine. If everyone would just stop staring at him like they’re waiting for him to break down and cry or something he would be just peachy, goddamn it!

Chris insists on driving him to work in the morning and he doesn’t argue even if he hates the early morning New York traffic. The ride is silent and tense, with Jensen clutching his messenger bag in his lap and humming under his breath, eyes closed so he doesn’t have to see the cars coming at him from all directions.

“We’re there,” Chris finally says after an eternity of blown horns and screeching tires and Jensen fumbles for the door, at the last minute remembering to open his eyes before he steps out. Chris is watching him, a glint in his eye Jensen can’t quite interpret but it looks like worry and that’s enough to get him annoyed all over again.

“I’ll be fine!” he hisses and Chris flinches. “I’m sorry, I just... I need to get back to normal, ok?”

Chris nods even if they both know there is no such thing as normal for him and even if there were, things are too different now for anything to be the same. Not now when there is no Jared on the horizon. When Jensen doesn’t really know where he’s going anymore.

As soon as he walks in the door Lizzie is up and hurrying towards him and she pulls him in for a hug before he has time to ask her what’s wrong.

“Oh honey, I’ve been so worried about you,” she says, squeezing him tight and he realizes with a bang that he never asked Chris what explanation he’d given them for his absence.

“I’m okay,” he says awkwardly, patting her a little on the back. He always feels strange when people hug him, other than Chris and Steve and... Other than Chris and Steve. “I’m okay now.”

She pulls away and nods, eyes shimmering. “You look tired,” she says. “Are you sure you should be here already?”

“I’m okay,” he repeats and tries a smile. “Really.”

She smiles back but it’s small and worried. “Alright, dear. Just let me know if I can do anything for you.” She pats his arm and he nods and smiles again, like a bobble head, waiting for her to go back behind her desk and leave him to his thoughts.

“And oh my gosh, Jared! That must be so wonderful for you! I swear, my jaw dropped to the floor when he walked in here. And just like you said he would be. Very tall. And so handsome.” She grins.

Jensen stands frozen. He’d forgotten Jared had come here, that he’d penetrated this part of his world too. With the coffeehouse and the subway and the park it leaves no place he hasn’t been, where Jensen can pretend Jared finding him still hasn’t happened. He feels dizzy, like Jared has stolen all the air from the world.

“Yes,” he says blankly. “So wonderful.” He turns and walks to the elevator, holding himself in check until the doors slide closed and he can finally breathe out. The elevator stutters from the sudden extra gravity of his feelings being dumped to the floor but then they seep through the crack of the door and it continues upward.

People greet him left and right when he walks to his studio but he doesn’t answer, keeping his eyes on the floor, his concentration on moving one foot in front of the other and his thoughts contained within the melody he’s humming. Once he’s able to close and lock the door behind him he stumbles to the couch, burying his face in the cushions. The piano starts playing behind him, something slow and sorrowful, and he squeezes his eyes shut, telling it to stop. After a few stuttering notes it does but it doesn’t help, not at all. If anything the silence is even harder to listen to.



When he was Inside he’d made the mistake of telling one of the doctors about Jared. How this small boy would grow up to become his everything. How he knew because he’d seen it and it was going to be wonderful. The woman gazed at him with thoughtful eyes and then wrote something in her notebook, shaking her head slowly. She didn’t believe him, but even worse, she didn’t believe in Jared. It was the beginning of what was to become a trend with the few people he confided in.

No one has really believed in Jared, in his existence or his part in Jensen’s future, no one except Jensen himself. He understands Jared’s tale, of being alone among disbelievers. The difference is Jared believed in the truth whereas Jensen apparently



put all his belief in an illusion. Jared had his faith confirmed while Jensen suddenly finds himself the fool, faced with his childish stupidity.

Of course it wasn't true. Of course it was just a fantasy. He'd feel ashamed for being so gullible if he wasn't busy fighting not to feel anything at all.

The summer he turned seven his whole family went on a holiday to a secluded beach where he could run in the sand and talk to the ocean without worrying about embarrassing his parents. It was a freedom he very seldom had and he'd been wild with it. Until the day he swam too far, following a merchild who'd beckoned him to come play.

Sinking to the bottom of the ocean all those years ago felt a lot like he feels now. Pressure on all sides squeezing him until he thinks his head might pop and his veins push through his skin and start bleeding into the ocean of feelings surrounding him. Like then he's holding his breath so he doesn't let them inside because just as the water would have drowned him if he'd breathed it in, his feelings will fill him up until his restraint escapes him with the last bubble of oxygen from his lungs. His mind would belong to the magic just like his body would have become the property of the ocean. And unlike that day his dad is not here to save him. Jared is not here to save him.

He stares up through the deep green water, desperately watching the sunlight dwindle as he sinks further and further down...

Jensen jerks awake to someone knocking on the door. His hair is damp and when he licks his lips they taste of salt. The knock comes again and he rolls over, almost falling off the couch in his haste to get up. Everything smells of seaweed and his skin feels taut with dried salt.

"Wait," he calls out and stumbles to a window, cracking it open. "Come on, come on. Help me out here." A swift breeze sweeps through the room, bringing with it the distinct smell of New York traffic and spring. It softens the smell of tang and he breathes in deeply before closing the window and moving to open the door.

"You're back," Tom says, his face strained with worry. "You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks." He turns away, using the short walk across the room to the piano to compose himself.

"Seriously, you sure you should be here? Considering." There's a click when Tom shuts the door behind him and Jensen closes his eyes, breathing in. Christ, another one that wants to talk about how he's feeling. Great.

"I'm fine. I'm good."

"What happened? You looked fine when I saw you. Well, not fine but not... you know." He hesitates, and Jensen can feel him coming closer. "Chris said you had a relapse."

“Yeah, something like that.” He takes a few deep breaths then turns around, smiling apologetically as he sits down on the piano bench. “Must have hit my head harder than I thought.”

Tom is watching him and judging by the look on his face he’s not buying it. “Must have,” he says slowly.

He leans against the grand piano, watching silently as Jensen strokes the tangents and hits a couple of notes, just to make sure it’s still as it should be. Two weeks is a long time to be away but it sounds fine, if a little sad.

“So Jared, huh?” Tom finally says and Jensen falters, banging the knuckle of his index finger hard down, making the piano protest loudly.

“Yeah,” he says and clears his throat, rubbing his finger awkwardly.

“Is he gone?”

Jensen nods, his fingers moving faster on his knuckle, rubbing it harder and harder.

“I’m sorry,” Tom says quietly. “I know how much he means to you.”

Jensen jerks his head, eyes blinking furiously. He needs to play but he can’t. Not with Tom here. But he needs... he *needs* to play. He hits one key desperately then stops. Fuck. “Tom, can we talk later? Please.”

“He doesn’t know, does he? That you’re in love with him.”

Jensen sucks in his breath. ‘Stop,’ he begs silently. ‘I can’t... I can’t deal with this now.’

“He must have been very young when you two met,” Tom continues carefully and Jensen freezes. “Thirteen, fourteen, something like that?”

“Tom...”

“And you were his teacher. Jensen, I have to say...”

“Tom! Don’t. It wasn’t... No.” He breathes in and out, fighting to stay focused. If he zones out now... “I promise you, it wasn’t like that at all.”

“I’m not saying you did anything. Christ, Jen. I just... It makes me uncomfortable thinking of you having feelings like that for a thirteen year old boy when you were so much older. It’s...”

Jensen stands up abruptly and fixes Tom with his gaze. “Tom, listen to me. It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t... I wasn’t in love with a thirteen year old kid, ok?” He takes a deep breath, pinching the skin on his arm to keep himself focused. “I was... I was in love with this Jared. The one you met. Not a kid.”

Tom frowns. “Jensen, you know that’s just...”

Jensen grabs his hand and pulls it to his chest. “Close your eyes, ok? Just close your eyes and... feel.”

“What are you...?” Tom looks startled, instinctively tugging at his hand but Jensen holds it still, pressing the palm against his heart.

“Please. Trust me.”

They hold each other’s gaze for a moment but then Tom reluctantly closes his eyes. Jensen holds Tom’s hand with both of his over his heart and closes his eyes as well, thinking of Jared, way back then when he was small and pudgy and insecure. The piano starts playing softly and he hears Tom sucking in his breath but he doesn’t stop, just pulls up the image of the other Jared, the one who was always there as well. Tall and broad and so beautiful he takes Jensen’s breath away, now like always. He can feel Tom’s hand trembling beneath his own and eases the pressure, allowing him the chance to pull away if he wants to. He doesn’t. With a relieved sigh Jensen shows him the rest. Him teaching Jared to play, Jared helping him apply for Juilliard. The vision of them together that he had in Jared’s basement. Then he moves on to the bad part. His mother’s anger and his father’s sorrow. His own feelings of desperation and Jared’s confusion. And finally the day he was taken away.

Throughout the whole story the piano plays in the background and when it starts playing the melody he wrote for Jared, Tom hitches his breath, his fingers curling slightly against Jensen’s chest. Jensen himself is shaking with the effort of staying focused when his mind wants nothing else but to slink away and hide.

He opens his eyes and faces Tom staring at him in shock, his cheeks flushed and his breath coming in rapid hitches.

“What... what was that?” he asks, sounding frightened, and Jensen lets go of his hand. The loss of contact makes him stumble, everything blurring around him as he can feel himself start to slip away.

“I need...” he mumbles and turns to the couch, falling to his knees before he manages a single step. Tom is instantly beside him, hauling him to his feet and helping him over. He sinks down on the cushions, closing his eyes and breathing as slowly and carefully as he can. He’s slipping, slipping... Fuck. “Pinch me,” he mumbles. “Please, Tom...”

He jerks awake when his arm is pinched hard, blinking furiously as he tries to remember where he is. After a moment Tom comes into focus, standing about three feet away from the couch and staring at him with fear and confusion.

“What is wrong with you?” he asks, voice shrill. “What the hell was that?”

“Tom...” He coughs and struggles to sit up. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well, you did! You freaked me the fuck out! *What the hell was that, Jensen?*”

“That... that was me.” He rubs his temple and his eyes, trying to clear the cobweb of his emotional wall from his head. “I wanted you to see... I *needed* for you to understand.” He looks up. “Did you see it?”

“I don’t know *what* I saw! How could I see that? How did you *do* that? What the fuck is going on?”

“Tom, calm down. Please.”

“How can you tell me to calm down?” Tom yells.

Jensen sighs. “Because if you don’t I might disappear into my head and last time it took ten days to get me back.”

Tom’s mouth snaps shut and he takes another step back. “You don’t have narcolepsy,” he says and Jensen can’t help it, he starts laughing.

“No,” he says, shaking his head and chuckling. “I don’t have narcolepsy. And I’m not insane or on drugs. I’m just weird, Tom.”

“Weird my ass! Mike’s weird and he doesn’t do... that! What was that?”

Jensen shrugs. “I guess you could call it magic,” he says and holds his breath.

Tom blinks. He opens his mouth then closes it again. Frowns and shakes his head and then tries again, “What?”

“Magic. I’m... I make things happen.”

Tom blinks again then asks, “Have you been drinking?”

Jensen snorts. “No. Have you? Unless you think I infected you with my drunken hallucinations.” He tilts his head. “You did see it, didn’t you? Jared, the way he was then?”

“I saw...” Tom swallows. “Magic? But... No. It can’t be.”

“Tom,” Jensen says calmly. “Did you see it or not?”

“Yes!” he says exasperated. “Yes, I saw it. I saw it, ok? But it’s just not possible.”

Jensen quirks his eyebrow. “How about this?” he asks. “Is this possible?” The piano bench moves across the room until it’s right behind a startled Tom. “Have a seat and just... Don’t freak, ok?”

“What are you...?”

“Nothing dangerous.” The bench nudges Tom behind his knees and he plops down, hitching his breath in surprise. “Relax.”

Jensen closes his eyes and the piano starts playing, a simple Beethoven classic. Easy and sweet and beautiful. When he opens his eyes again the walls are green and everything smells of summer. There are butterflies fluttering across the room and green grass grazes his ankles. There’s a blue sky above with a few fluffy clouds and in the midst of it all Tom sits dazed, staring at him.

“See?” Jensen says awkwardly. “Magic.” The music stops and the images start fading away but Tom sits frozen as if in a trance.

“You...” he says finally then stops before trying again. “You’re a... a wizard? A real honest-to-God Harry Potter?”

Jensen shrugs. “I don’t have a broom. Or a wand. But yeah, I guess. Something like that.”

“So that is all real? Wizards and witches and fucking magic? Christ. Did... did you go to some weird magic school?”

Jensen shakes his head. “No. There’s just me, Tom. I’m the only one as far as I know. And no, I didn’t go to magic school. I was locked up in my parents house until they’d had enough and put me in the mad house so they could ‘fix’ me.” He breathes deeply before adding, “As you can see it didn’t work.”

“Damn.” Tom rubs a hand over his face, eyes never leaving Jensen. “So when you... zone out? That’s...”

“Me trying not to let stupid things like this happen.” He bites his lip, wondering how much to tell. “Strong emotions fuck me up. I can’t handle them so I have to go away. In here.” He taps his temple. “That’s what happened with... with Jared. I went away and almost didn’t come back.”

Tom nods, still looking dazed so Jensen’s not sure how much he’s actually taking in.

“Tom, listen. This... People can’t know this, ok? You can’t tell anyone.”

“Who would believe me?” Tom shakes his head, eyes slowly focusing. “I mean...Hell, I saw it and I hardly believe it.” He frowns. “I assume Chris knows.”

“Chris and Steve and Jared. And now you.” Jensen looks down, rubbing his hands nervously together. “Reason I’m telling you... I’m not some pedophile, ok? I didn’t... I fell in love with the grown up I saw he would become. I mean, I loved the kid but I was *in* love with *this* Jared.”

Tom is silent for a long time. Finally he says quietly. “I’m sorry. About Jared. And for thinking you had... you know. That was... I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He smiles to let Tom know he means it. “I know how it looks. The Jared thing. But I swear...”

“I believe you. Christ, I saw it. How did you do that?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t even know if it would work.” He shrugs. “Most of the time I have no idea what I’m doing. It’s not like it came with a manual.”

“Wow. I have no idea what to say.” Tom laughs shakily. “No wonder your students are so enthralled.”

Jensen reels back. “Dude, I don’t... I would *never* use it like that.”

“I didn’t mean... It’s just you, you know. It makes sense now. You make sense.”

“Well, that’s a first!” He laughs tiredly. “Me making sense.”

Tom smiles, looking unsure. “So tell me, what more can you do?”



Jared drives. He drives and he thinks, the wheels on the truck turning as fast as the thoughts in his head. He’s two hours out of LA before he remembers he forgot to call Sandy to say goodbye. Dammit. He’d hardly taken the time to rip off his name tag when his shift was over before jumping into the truck and driving off. It was all he could think of.

He spends the night in a dodgy motel by the highway, checking the sheets for dubious spots before deciding he doesn’t really care and he falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. By six he’s back on the road again, singing along with the radio to keep himself from zoning out and falling asleep.

By the seventh hour he’s starting to lose focus so he stops by a diner, stretching his legs and filling the tank before eating his weight in burgers and fries. When that’s done he goes out and sits on one of the benches out front, breathing in the fresh air.

The sun is shining, the soft spring breeze slowly bringing summer nearer and he wonders what the weather is like in New York, now Jensen is awake. Is it raining again? Snowing? He looks over at the variety of flowers growing by the side of the road and thinks of the jungle of exotic plants Jensen made grow in the park. Are they dead now?

A butterfly flutters past him and his throat tightens.

He takes a fifteen minute nap in the truck then goes back inside and buys a huge travel mug and gets it filled with coffee. Adds chocolate bars and some chips to the bill and he’s good to go until midnight.

Another motel and it looks just the same as the last. Ugly and smelling of cigarette smoke despite the 'No smoking!' sign on the wall. He doesn't even bother taking the covers off the bed just faceplants on top of them and passes out. Six hours later he's up again, starving, tired, and eager to get going. There's a mantra of 'JensenJensenJensen' in his head that gets louder the closer he gets and if he breaks a few speed limits along the way he just can't find it in him to care.

By the time he finally reaches the city border he's so tired he thinks he might pass out. He pulls over at the next rest stop and digs out his phone, gazing at Jensen's name a long time before sighing and scrolling up to choose Chris instead. God, he hopes he can fix things enough that he dares talking straight to Jensen. Not only because Chris kinda scares him but because he keeps finding himself wanting to call Jensen and tell him stupid things. Like, "I saw a cat in a window and thought of you" or "Did you know there are twenty five different flavors of coffee syrup? Who needs twenty five flavors of coffee syrup?"

Ten years without Jensen and now he can't stand to be away from him for even a few days.

"Hey, it's me," he says when Chris answers. "I'm here."

He can hear Chris breathe out. "You really are." He laughs shakily and Jared finds himself smiling despite his exhaustion and worry.

"Yeah. Well, somewhere here. I have no idea how to get to your place. Have you... Does he know I'm coming?"

"Let me get back to you on that," Chris says and hangs up without another word. Jared sighs. The guy really could take a few courtesy lessons. Yawning Jared leans back in the seat, closing his eyes for just a second.

He jerks awake when his phone rings. To his surprise the timer on the small display shows him he's been out twenty minutes. He rubs a hand over his face before flipping the phone open. "Hey."

"I told him you were coming to visit."

"And?"

"And he went into his studio to play and won't let me in."

Jared swallows. "That's not good, is it?" he says and Chris sighs.

"I told you, it's how he deals with things." There's a pause and then he adds quietly, "I think he's scared."

"Of me?" Jared asks surprised.

“No, not you. Himself. I think it really scared him how he reacted when you were here last time. He’s been shutting down more and more since.”

Jared’s heart starts beating faster in his chest. “Like zoning out?”

“No, just suppressing everything, mommy style,” Chris says, his voice sarcastic. “No fucking feelings, remember? I think that’s what he’s doing. Who knows how his mind works. Just... don’t be surprised if he seems detached when you get here.”

Jared nods to himself, nibbling at his upper lip. “But it’s still alright if I stay with you?”

“He didn’t object to you sleeping on the couch but to be honest I don’t think he believes you’re coming.”

Jared closes his eyes, breathing deeply. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He listens to Chris’s directions, hoping he remembers any of it for longer than five minutes, especially considering how tired he is. Would be great to have Jensen’s fancy phone now, telling him where to go.

It’s closing in on ten o’clock, which thankfully means less traffic. After taking a few wrong turns he finally finds himself in the right street and gets a parking spot only a little further down the road from Jensen’s apartment building. He’s bound to get a ticket tomorrow morning but he can’t bring himself to care. He just wants to see Jensen to make sure he’s alright and then sleep for at least eight hours.

He feels nervous on the way up, tapping his fingers on his thigh and humming along with some song he doesn’t recognize. When the doors slide open Chris is waiting in the hallway, smiling at him tiredly. “Hey,” he says and slaps Jared awkwardly on the arm. “Good to see you, man.”

“Thanks.” He tries to smile but it is strained and Chris gives him a sympathetic look.

“You look beat,” he tells him. “Get in.”

“Thanks. I haven’t been sleeping too we...” Jared starts but is cut off by the sight of Jensen standing frozen in the doorway to the apartment, staring at him. “Jen.”

“You’re here.”

Jared nods, watching him carefully. “Yes. I came to see you.”

Jensen blinks. “Oh.”

He turns around and walks back in. For a moment Jared thinks he’s going back to his studio but he disappears into the kitchen instead. By the time Jared has kicked off his shoes and hung up his jacket Jensen’s standing in the living room, clutching two beers between rigid fingers. He hands Jared one, their fingers slightly touching when he accepts it. It feels like sparks in Jared’s fingertips and Jensen flinches but doesn’t say anything, just turns away to go sit down on the couch.



Jared doesn't know what to say. He doesn't even know where he should sit. He wants to sit next to Jensen but isn't sure that's what Jensen wants. Thankfully Chris frees him from making the decision by sitting down in the chair opposite and since the other chair holds a mountain of laundry Jared moves over to the couch and sits down on the other end, trying to keep some distance between them just in case. Jensen doesn't say anything but he doesn't look at him either and it's starting to freak Jared out, even if Chris had warned him.

"Look," he says when they've sat in silence for a while, sipping their beers. "I know I let you down. I should have told you right away how things were but I didn't because... Well, I didn't know how."

He feels awkward with Chris sitting opposite, watching them, but considering his fuck up last time he can't really blame him for it. "For what it's worth I didn't want to leave. I wish I *did* live here because... because being away from you is fucking awful."

"It's okay," Jensen says blankly. "I'm sorry I overreacted. I was stupid."

"No, Jen..."

"You didn't have to come. I'm alright."

Jared glances helplessly at Chris who shrugs but he looks pained and worried. "I wanted to come," he says carefully. "I missed you."

Jensen shivers slightly, blinking his eyes. "I'm alright," he repeats. "I'm fine."

"I'm not." Jared puts his beer down on the table and shifts closer, laying one hand on Jensen's arm. "Jen..."

The beer bottle slides across the table but Chris catches it before it goes over the edge. He puts it on the floor then stands up. "I'll be in my room," he says. "I'll keep the door cracked. Just call out if you need me."

Jared nods without looking up, he's too busy watching Jensen carefully. He looks frozen but the ice is obviously very thin with water rushing underneath.

"Can we start over?" Jared says finally. "Can we just start again from where we were two weeks ago? Except this time I won't be an asshole?" There's no answer and Jared sighs. "Jensen, can you please look at me?"

Jensen blinks then slowly turns his head. "You're here," he says, as if the past twenty minutes never happened.

Jared nods. "I'm here."

"For... for how long?"

He swallows. "I have to leave Sunday."

Jensen nods. “Ok.” He breathes in and out a few times, each breath carefully constructed. “Ok.” His eyes slowly focus and then he’s finally looking straight at Jared, blinking a couple of times before smiling. It’s a very careful smile but it seems genuine. “Hi,” he says and puts out his hand. “I’m Jensen, nice to meet you.”

Jared grins. “Hi, Jensen,” he says and takes his hand, squeezing it tight. “I’m Jared. You know, you remind me of a friend I once had. My very best friend.”

“Yeah?” Jensen laughs shakily. “Did he have a nice butt?”

“He did! Great butt. Nicest lump to sit on you’d ever seen. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, I think... I think I do,” Jensen bites his lips, swallowing. “I think I knew him a long time ago.”

“Awesome!” Jared shifts his hold until their hands are clasped and he squeezes Jensen’s fingers tight. “So, dude, wanna hang out? Get to know each other better?”

Jensen nods. “That... that sounds good,” he says.

Jared shakes his head and looks at him pointedly. “Awesome.”

Jensen looks up at him and then his face splits into a grin. “That sounds *awesome*,” he corrects himself. “Dude.”

“There you go,” Jared says and grins back.

“Oh fuck you.”

Jared laughs.



They talk until Jared falls asleep with one hand still enveloping Jensen’s. Jensen sits still, watching Jared’s chest rise and fall with his even breathing, memorizing every strand of his hair, the shape of his nose and the feel of his body so close. He’s exhausted himself but he doesn’t want to let go. His room is too far away and what if Jared leaves while he’s sleeping?

“I don’t want to let you go,” he says quietly and Jared sighs in his sleep. His eyes start moving under the eyelids and Jensen leans forward, laying his palm on Jared’s temple. For a moment he doesn’t feel anything but then something tickles his palm and when he closes his eyes he sees the two of them, lying side by side in a field of high grass, gazing up at the clear blue sky.

*“I don’t want to leave,” Jared says and turns his head. He’s so close Jensen can feel his breath on his face. His eyes are glittering and his nose is slightly red. “I can’t stop thinking about you. Did you do that? Did you put a spell on me?”*

*“No,” Jensen whispers but the Jensen in Jared’s dream says, “Yes. I put a spell on you. Because you’re mine.”*

*“Isn’t that from a song?” Jensen thinks, frowning slightly but then it hits him what he’s hearing. Christ, does Jared really think Jensen hexed him?*

*“Because I’m yours,” Jared repeats slowly. “Am I? Am I yours?”*

*“Do you want to be?” the other Jensen says and then they both hold their breath, waiting for Jared’s answer.*

*Jared blinks, licking his lips, and then he opens his mouth and...*

“Jensen, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He jerks back, snatching his hand away in panic. “I wasn’t...”

“Like hell you weren’t!” Chris hisses. “You can *not* mindfuck people like that! What the hell is wrong with you?”

Jensen feels a short burst of anger but he pushes it down. “I have no idea what he’s thinking, ok? I don’t know if... if he’s going to just leave and never come back. I can’t... It’s killing me.”

Chris face softens slightly but he doesn’t back down. “I get that but you can’t... they’re *his* thoughts, man. Whatever he’s thinking it’s his to tell you whenever he’s ready.”

“What’s going on?”

They both turn their heads abruptly, staring at Jared who’s blinking at them sleepily, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“M sorry. Did I fall asleep?”

Jensen can feel his face flushing red and he glances at Chris in panic. ‘Please. Please don’t tell him. Please,’ he begs and Chris sighs.

“We were just talking,” he says. “Sorry we woke you up.”

“That’s alright.” Jared sits up straighter and yawns again, stretching one arm above his head and scratching sleepily at his stomach. “Fuck, I’m beat.” He blinks slowly. “But if you want to stay up and talk...”

“I think it’s bedtime for all of us,” Chris says before Jensen can say anything. “So, want to sleep here or in the studio? The couch in there is bigger but the piano sometimes plays at night. Your choice.”

“The piano plays...?” Jared chuckles. “Of course it does. I don’t think anything can surprise me anymore.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Chris says casually and Jensen glares at him.

“This is good,” Jared says oblivious. “If that’s alright by you.”

“It’s fine. I’ll get you a blanket. Jensen, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Jensen sighs and stands up, following Chris into the kitchen. “What?” he says irritated when they’ve stood glaring at each other for a while.

“You ever done that to me?” Chris asks in a cold voice. “Read my mind?”

Jensen stares at him. “What? No! Chris…”

“I’m not fucking joking here, ok?” Chris hisses. “You ever do that to me and I’ll never forgive you. Ever.”

“Dude, what the hell?” he bites back, annoyed. “I said I haven’t. I’ve never tried it on anyone else but him, ok? I don’t want to see what’s going on inside your fucking head!”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way,” Chris huffs, shoulders relaxing. “You okay?”

Jensen glares at him for a moment longer but then he sighs. “Not really but I can handle it.”

Chris holds his gaze, like he’s searching for signs that Jensen’s falling apart but he must feel satisfied with what he sees because after a while he nods. “Go sleep, alright? You look exhausted.”

Jensen nods sullenly, still feeling miffed, and leaves him, knowing without a doubt that Chris will be checking in on him at least twice during the night. Jared is already asleep again on the couch and Jensen hesitates only a second before walking past. He pees and brushes his teeth and closes his door firmly before going to bed. Just in case.

As soon as he closes his eyes he’s back in that field, gazing into Jared’s eyes.

‘Do you want to be?’ Jensen repeats silently, ‘Do you? Jared?’

But for all he can do he can’t turn back time and delay Chris’s interruption for five seconds, just to hear Jared’s answer.



The next few days are the best Jared’s had, and the worst. Every minute with Jensen is like living a fairytale but the whole time he can hear the clock ticking, bringing them closer and closer to Sunday.

Jensen only has one lesson to teach on Friday, which Jared sits in on, amused by the way Jensen handles his student. “You know, I had no idea how unorthodox your

methods were until my sister went to have piano lessons and came home, practicing annoying scales all day long,” he says when the dazed student has closed the door behind him after the lesson.

Jensen laughs. “Yeah. I didn’t really have any idea what I was doing,” he says as he sits down on the vacated seat in front of the piano. “Still don’t.”

“Looks to me like you’re doing fine.”

Jensen blushes. “I guess.” He scoots over on the bench. “C’mon, lets play together. I’ve missed that.”

Now it’s Jared’s turn to be embarrassed. “I’m not...” he says taking a step back. “I haven’t played since you left.”

“What?” Jensen stares at him. “But... Why?”

“It wasn’t fun anymore,” Jared says, not mentioning how he broke down and cried the first time he went down into the basement after Jensen disappeared. How he kept dreaming of the piano sinking to the bottom of the ocean, dragging Jensen with it. How when he finally tried to play all he could manage was noise and he’d refused to touch it since. By the sad look Jensen is giving him Jared thinks he might be guessing some of it anyway.

“Come here,” he says gently, patting the space beside him. “Let’s see what you remember.”

“Jensen, I really don’t...”

“Don’t be such a pussy, Jare,” Jensen says and smirks. “Sit your ass down and play.”

He sighs and walks over, sitting down beside Jensen. They’re both bigger now and it feels a little awkward at first, sitting pressed together on the small bench. Maybe because he knows now how Jensen feels about him and the fact that Jensen *doesn’t* know *he* knows makes it even more awkward. But just like being close to Jensen always made him feel better back then it does the same thing now and within moments he can feel himself relaxing.

Jensen shifts on the bench, trying to give him more space and then he looks up and grins. “Dude, your shoulders are huge. We’re gonna have to get an extra bench at home.”

His smile suddenly falters and Jared swallows. It’s happened a couple of times before today, Jensen saying something offhand that makes Jared realize he’s forgotten Jared is going away again, but this is the first time Jensen’s caught himself at it.

“I mean, for when you come and visit,” he mumbles.

Jared nods, hoping that means Jensen’s finally starting to believe that Jared’s not going to disappear on him completely, even if he lives so far away. He looks down at

the keys lined up in front of him and tries to remember where his fingers are supposed to go.

“So, maestro, how do we do this?” he asks lightly.

Jensen sits still for a moment but then he reaches up and runs his hand over Jared’s face, closing his eyelids. “Like this,” he says softly then takes Jared’s hands, positioning them over the keys. “Just listen and join in when you’re ready.”

Jared nods, keeping his eyes closed. He can feel the heat of Jensen’s thigh against his and the muscles in his arm and shoulder moving against his own. He can’t help wondering if this is how it was all those years ago, if Jensen could feel him as well as see him, big as he is now. The thought makes him flush hot. If Jensen really was in love with him way back then, that must have been so weird for him. Feeling attracted to a person that didn’t exist yet.

When he first started to feel attracted to Sandy it had felt so awkward to him because they were best friends and she was so much older and already had a boyfriend. He’d been almost twenty before he’d finally dared to ask her out and it was hard to see who was more embarrassed. She’d broken up with her then boyfriend a month earlier and for a while Jared worried that he might just be her rebound guy but turned out she’d been having some less than platonic thoughts about him too. “I mean, look at you,” she’d said grinning, after they had sex for the first time. “How could I not?”

He’d blushed, feeling in many ways still like the short and chubby boy he’d been even if his body had changed so much. “You’re not so bad yourself,” he’d said and she’d laughed and just like that they were their old selves again, just more. Compared to the other relationships he’d had, most of them short and more trouble than they were worth, being with Sandy was easy because he knew her so well. And at the same time incredibly hard because there was so much more at stake, so much more to lose if it didn’t work.

He’s pulled out of his musings when Jensen starts playing. It sounds familiar but not enough that he knows what he’s supposed to do. But it feels different already, sitting here with Jensen, than it did whenever he tried to play alone after Jensen was gone. He can feel his confidence returning, can feel the old itching in his fingers, the music pounding in his veins, and before he can contemplate what he’s doing he’s got the cool ivory touching his fingertips and they’re playing.

“How about this one?”

Jensen looks over. “No.”

“It’s supposed to be good.”

Jensen shakes his head. “Too cold. I’m not in the mood for it.”

Jared frowns and turns it over, reading the back cover. Winter in Vancouver? “Oh.” He sighs and puts it back on the shelf and continues looking through the titles. “This one takes place in Africa. Wildlife reserve. That hot enough for you?”

Jensen glances at it. “Yeah, no. Don’t really keen on being eaten. Lions?” he adds with a quirk of his eyebrow when Jared just looks at him confused.

Jared shakes his head exasperated. “Seriously, I don’t get why you bother reading at all. It seems more hassle than it’s worth.”

Now it’s Jensen’s turn to look baffled. “I like reading. Everyone should read books. It’s important.”

“Yes, but everyone doesn’t get eaten by lions or freeze to death whenever they open one,” Jared says absentmindedly, flipping through one book after another. “Oh, this one. You should read this one,” he says and smirks.

Jensen takes one look at the cover and snorts. “Dude!”

“What?”

“Fanny Hill? It’s about prostitution!”

“I know! That could be fun.” He wiggles his eyebrow and Jensen chuckles.

“Ok, first? Not really that interested in naked women. Second, what if *I’m* the whore? I’d rather keep my sexual experiences consensual, thank you very much.”

Jared turns bright red, absolutely horrified. “Shit, I didn’t think...”

“Dude, relax. I’m kidding.” He wriggles his nose. “Seriously though, all that frilly underwear? So not my style.”

Jared laughs but his smile falls as soon as Jensen turns his back. He’s a big reader himself, enthusiastically consuming everything from the bloodiest crime novels to the most horrifying war stories, gleefully enjoying every gory detail. When Jensen told him about his own reading experiences, about safe and dangerous books, he’d thought it weird and a bit funny but now...

Thinking of Jensen trapped in one of those books makes him feel sick to his stomach. Just this week he was reading a prison novel and even if some of the scenes made him uncomfortable then, thinking of *Jensen* in that situation...

“Just gonna go to the bathroom,” he says as lightly as he can and doesn’t wait for Jensen to answer.

Once the door is locked behind him he stands over the sink, just breathing. He feels nauseous and his heart is hammering in his chest. It’s not just this, it’s everything. He’s slowly starting to realize what it actually means, being Jensen. Having to watch

his every step, his every thought and feeling, because he never knows what might trigger something to happen.

He'd asked Jensen last night, "Are you never scared?" and Jensen had quickly looked away, his face unreadable.

"I've been terrified as long as I can remember," he'd finally said, his voice so quiet. "There has never been a moment in my life that I haven't been afraid of what I might do."

Jared had felt sad for him but he hadn't really understood what Jensen actually meant. But now... now he's starting to. And he kinda wishes he didn't.

When he returns Jensen is waiting by the register, bag in hand. "Here," he says and digs into the bag for a book, handing it over. "Highly recommended."

Jared looks at the cover. 'The Tin Star' the title reads. "What is this?" he asks curious.

"Gay porn," Jensen answers with a grin and walks out, leaving Jared redfaced and fumbling with the book in his hand, almost dropping it as he hurries after him.



Saturday morning Chris leaves for a gig in Boston. He's edgy and bad tempered and wants to drive back during the night but Jensen tells him to not be a moron and get a room.

"Jared is here," he says. "I'll be fine."

He's aware that Jared is listening, that he's pretty much admitting to not being able to be by himself for even one night. Well, he *is* but considering how he's been lately it's probably not a good idea. That doesn't make it any less embarrassing. 'Hi, my name is Jensen and I'm a co-dependent loser. Nice to meet you.'

"You sure?"

"Yes. Stop being such a mother hen."

"Fuck you," Chris grumbles.

"Not now, man. Did you miss the part about Jared being here?" He stops, suddenly remembering Jared isn't used to their kind of bantering. "I'm joking," he says awkwardly as he turns around. "We... It's how we roll."

Jared looks more amused than awkward. "Sure it is," he says and smirks.

Chris laughs.

"Oh fuck you both," Jensen mutters, flipping them off.





They have an easy day, Saturday, doing very little. After lunch they go back to the coffeehouse Jensen had taken Jared to two weeks ago and Susan comes out in front of the counter and hugs him. “I was worried about you,” she says. “Tom told me you’d been sick.”

“Yeah,” Jensen says and pats her back awkwardly. “I’m better now.”

“I can see that,” she says and winks as she looks at Jared. “Welcome back, tall dark and handsome.”

“Thank you, short, blond and sweet,” Jared says with a grin.

She laughs. “Did I tell you I liked him?” she asks Jensen. “Because I do.”

“Susie, back off,” Jensen mutters but he’s smiling and when she turns to go back behind the counter he takes hold of her arm and pulls her back, kissing her on the cheek. “Missed you too,” he says softly and grins when she blushes.

“Never knew you were a flirter,” Jared says with a wink when they sit down.

Jensen shrugs, grinning. “I’m just a natural charmer.”

“So I’ve heard. Chris says you ooze pheromones when you’re drunk.”

“He says what?” Jensen stares at him, flushed. “That’s... Oh, he’s a dead man.”

“Oops, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that,” Jared says innocently. “My bad.”

“What else did he say about me?” Jensen grumbles. “Because it’s lies, all of it. He’s a fucking asshole. I’m gonna kill him when he gets back.”

“He called you the prettiest boy on the planet,” Jared tells him with a grin, laughing when Jensen turns tomato red. “But I already knew that.”

“If I remember correctly your exact words were ‘not exactly ugly,’” Jensen mutters.

“And yours were ‘amazing’ and ‘magnificent,’” Jared reminds him. “Maybe we should just stop with the compliments before we hurt ourselves.”

Jensen laughs, still flushed red, but when he looks up his eyes are serious. “You are though. Exactly like I pictured you.”

Jared looks away, feeling awkward. “Dude, I’m not amazing. I’m so far from amazing it’s not even funny. I dropped out of college. I work as a bouncer at a strip joint. I didn’t even keep up my piano skills. I’m a complete fucking loser.”

“Jared.” Jensen sighs and reaches over the table, grabbing his hand. “Jared, come on. You’re twenty-three. You’ve got plenty of time.”

“To do what?” Jared asks frustrated. “I don’t know what I want to do. Or be. I’m a fucking flake.”

“Stop that.” Jensen’s eyes turn hard, fixed determined on Jared. “We’ll figure it out together. Start by telling me why you dropped out of college.”

So Jared tells him about all the stuff he never wanted Jensen to know. Nights spent drinking, days spent hung over. Classes he kept missing and friends he wasn’t sure he liked.

“I think I got lost,” he says quietly. “After you left, I... I felt lost. And when my parents divorced I thought it was my fault because I kept hearing them talking about me, that they didn’t know what to do with me. I felt like a complete failure and college was the perfect place to hide from all that.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Jensen says gently. “Your mom had been unhappy for a long time.”

Jared looks up, blinking. “What?” he says confused. “Why do you say that?”

“She had the same colored cloud around her as other people I’ve seen heading for divorce.” He shrugs. “I think she was only waiting for you and your sister to be old enough so she could leave.”

“So you knew?” Jared says, feeling ridiculously hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jensen looks down, obviously uncomfortable. “I didn’t know, I just suspected. And how could I have told you, Jared? How was I supposed to explain that?”

“I don’t know,” Jared mumbles. “You could have found a way.”

Jensen sits silent for a moment before saying quietly, “I’m sorry. I let you down.”

Jared swallows. “Doesn’t matter.” He thinks of how it would have been, knowing for years maybe that his parents were unhappy. Maybe it was better he didn’t.

They fall into silence again, sipping their coffee and not looking at each other. Jared stares out the window at a happy and laughing couple walking by, thinking about his parents and how they must have been like that once and he can’t understand what happened. Thinking about it he realizes hardly any of his friend’s parents are still together. It’s depressing. Is that what awaits him and Sandy? Considering how much they fight already...

A soft noise from across the table disturbs him out of his thoughts and he looks up. “Jen?”

Jensen doesn't answer. He's busy pinching his forearm, adding to a row of bruises blossoming there. His eyes are flickering, going blank and then jumping back into focus every time his fingers tweak the skin.

"Jensen, hey." Jared leans over, grabbing his shoulder. "Jen, stay with me."

"I am... I'm trying." Jensen shakes his head, squeezing his eyes closed then opening them up wide, staring at Jared. "Fuck."

"Dude, it's alright, just keep talking to me until you're good again."

"I'm sorry. For not telling you. I should have... Fuck! I should have told you. I... Dammit!" He grits his teeth, obviously furious with himself.

"Jen, it's alright. I'm not mad, I promise," Jared says, shaking him. "It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

Jensen breathes heavily, sucking in air and blowing it out through his nose. "Fuck," he mumbles. "Can we go?"

"Yeah, sure." He grabs Jensen by the arm and pulls him out of the booth, giving a worried looking Susan a reassuring smile. "Thanks, for the coffee."

"Come back soon," she calls out as they're walking out the door and he waves in acknowledgement.

They walk to the park, Jared's arm around Jensen's shoulder. Jensen's shaking, his breath coming in sharp hitches and he keeps cursing in an almost frightened voice.

"This is my fault," Jared says guilty. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm not mad at you, I promise."

"Not your fault. My fucking fault," Jensen mutters annoyed. "I'm a fucking adult, I shouldn't be like this."

"You've been good, Jen. This is the first time since Thursday. That's damn impressive, ok? Seriously."

"I'm not like this, ok?" Jensen breathes. "I'm not this... this fucking mess all the time."

"I know. Chris told me." He steers them to a bench and sits Jensen down. "I know it's because of me, ok. I fuck your shit up."

"Don't... Never your fault." He drops his head to his hands, elbows on his knees. "Christ."

Jared rubs his back, feeling completely out of his depth. "If I'm making you worse maybe I shouldn't..."

“Don’t!” Jensen takes a few more deep breaths then straightens up and looks straight at him. “You know why it’s been happening more and more often since you came back? Because you make me feel, Jared. Real feelings. Not just those everyday emotions that don’t really matter, but honest true *deep* feelings.”

Jared swallows, blinking his eyes. He thinks he knows what Jensen is talking about but he’s not supposed to know so he has no idea what to say.

“You have any idea what it’s like, *not* having feelings like that?” Jensen asks him. “It’s like... It’s like never putting sugar in your coffee, never using salt on your food. Like napping instead of sleeping, like only taking lukewarm showers. Like... like breathing through a filter. It’s never living life to the fullest, Jared, only halfway. That’s what I’ve been doing these last ten years, not living.” He breathes in deep and lets it out slow, then gives Jared a tired smile. “It takes some getting used to, being alive again.”

Jared tries to smile back but it doesn’t quite take. “I’m worried about you. About what will happen when... when I leave again. I’ll come back,” he hurries to say when Jensen starts blinking rapidly. “I’m going to come visit as often as I can but... it might be a while.”

Jensen nods slowly, biting his lip. “How long is a while?”

“Two weeks at least. Probably more.”

He nods again. “I have two weeks left of teaching. I could... I could maybe come visit you. After that.”

“I’d love that,” Jared says and smiles, even if he has no idea what Sandy will say about two guys crashing in their small apartment. Not like Jensen can travel on his own, right? Who knows where he’d end up?

“I’ve never been on a plane,” Jensen says, lifting his eyes to the sky. “Is it fun?”

Jared wrinkles his nose. “Hmm. The tiny bottles are fun. Trying to figure out what kind of food you’re eating is... interesting. Being terrified the plane might crash... not so much fun.”

Jensen looks over at him surprised. “You’re afraid of flying? I wouldn’t think you were afraid of anything.”

“Plane crashes kill tall people too, you know.” Jared grimaces. “I’m also afraid of spiders. And bees.”

“I’m afraid of hospitals and drugs,” Jensen says slowly. “And being alone.”

He stops and blinks, as if he hadn’t realized he was talking out loud. “Christ.” He laughs, obviously uncomfortable. “Talk about pathetic. I’ve never lived alone, you know. I’m twenty-eight and I’ve always had other people to take care of me. It’s sad, man.”

Jared shrugs. “Independence is overrated. I mean, c’mon, we only celebrate it once a year,” he says lightly and Jensen smiles a little. “Plus, I think everyone’s afraid of being alone,” he adds. “It’s human nature. People need people. We’re not made out to be alone.”

Jensen doesn’t say anything but after a while he nods, shoulders slumping as he relaxes. He’s breathing slowly, his ribcage expanding and deflating under Jared’s palm. He should pull back, now that Jensen is obviously feeling better, but somehow it feels so natural, sitting like this, that he doesn’t bother. Just lets his fingers crawl up so his hand is resting more comfortably on Jensen’s shoulder and then they sit in silence, watching life go on all around them.



Jensen is aware of Jared’s closeness like he’d be aware of a fire, burning brightly beside him, warm and tantalizing and dangerous. Jared’s hand feels heavy on his shoulder, keeping him in place when he knows he should run. Run far, far away or he’ll burn up from the inside out.

Being in love with Jared when he was still just a part of the future was a whole different thing from being in love with this Jared, here in the present. This Jared that doesn’t love him back and isn’t even going to stay. This Jared who touches him and looks at him like... like there’s something there when Jensen knows there isn’t. He knows, his head know, but his heart... his heart is foolish.

His heart wants to read more into Jared’s words and glances and behavior. It sees what it wants to see and ignores the familiarity of it. Ignores what Jensen’s *head* knows, that it’s nothing more than he’s seen before. All of this, the need to be close and the urge to touch, the fondness in Jared’s eyes every time Jensen catches him looking... it’s like Chris all over again. And Steve and even Tom, if to a slightly lesser degree.

Because it’s not about him, it’s just his ‘thing’, his magic. It’s just something it makes people feel. Something they try to hold back because it oversteps their inbred feeling of what’s appropriate. Keeping it to seemingly random touches and awkward glances, all the while looking confused and struggling. Just like Jared had been back then. And when they find out *why*, they behave just like this. Letting go of their restraints, giving in to what they’ve wanted all along. To be enchanted.

It’s not something he’s ever minded because until now it hasn’t mattered why people like him. It hasn’t mattered what their intentions are because he’s never been looking for anything more than friendship, never wanted anything else. Until now. Now he wants. Jesus, he wants it so much his heart is bleeding through his chest.

And it’s all because of that stupid vision. Some stupid teenage hormonal hallucination he had because he was so fucking lonely and just hungry for someone to love him the way he was. That’s what led him to the situation he is in now. This desperate hopeless situation. Without that vision he’d never held on to the ridiculous idea that Jared

would be his. That Jared was the answer to all his misery, that he would be what would finally make this awful life worth something.

He feels stupid and broken and so lost.

“Jensen?” Jared says quietly beside him, fingers rubbing at his neck. “Maybe we should get back.”

He nods and stands up, a shiver rippling down his spine in the path of Jared’s fingers, sliding along his back. It isn’t until he raises his head and looks around that he sees that all the flowers in the beds around them are drooping. Damn.

“I’m alright,” he says, not needing to turn around to know that Jared is shooting him worried glances. “Just thinking.”

“A penny?” Jared offers as he stands up.

Jensen looks up, startled. “What?”

“For your thoughts. You know, ‘a penny for your thoughts’. Except it should be a cent, shouldn’t it?” Jared says thoughtful. “A cent for your thoughts. Or even a dollar. Depends on how interesting they are, I guess. I bet I don’t even have enough money on me for your thoughts. I only have like...” he frowns and pulls a handful of coins from his pocket, “...two and a half dollars. Unless you take cards.”

Jensen stares at him but then a smile starts tugging at his lips, despite everything. “You still ramble. I always liked that.”

Jared grins, a blush crawling up his neck and to his dimples. “That’s good because I ramble a lot. Seriously though,” he says, gazing at Jensen with concern, “if you want to talk, I’m here.”

Jensen nods, his smile fading. ‘For now,’ he thinks. ‘For *now* you’re here. But soon you won’t be.’

Out loud he says, “I know. Thank you. Maybe... maybe later.”

He looks at the damage around them then briefly closes his eyes and when he opens them again the flowers are straightening up. ‘I’m sorry,’ he tells them silently and they nod in acknowledgement. When he turns back to Jared there’s that look again, the one that he loves and hates. The one that fools his heart to think that maybe, maybe. Stupid idiotic heart.

They start walking, Jared keeping close enough that their hands keep bumping into each other and Jensen has to fight the urge to grab it and entwine their fingers. He doesn’t know how he’s going to do this, to *not* be in love with Jared. He’s not even sure it’s possible. And to have Jared right by his side and know that that’s as close as he’ll ever get... It’s enough to make the grass wilt in their path.

As soon as they get home Jensen excuses himself to go into the studio. The piano is waiting for him, vibrating soothingly, and he smiles, stroking its tangents with loving fingers. “Yes, yes, I know,” he says and laughs softly when it plays a happy melody. “Cheeky.”

“It’s talking?” Jared asks from the door and Jensen jumps slightly.

“Not really,” he says awkwardly. “Just... expressing emotions.” He looks fondly down at the keys waiting for him. “It thinks I’m moody.”

“We could play something?” Jared suggests.

Jensen looks at him and Jared averts his eyes, blushing slightly. “I regret quitting,” he says awkwardly. “Being here... You make me want to start playing again.”

“Yeah? That’s great!” He smiles, gripping Jared’s arm in excitement. “Man, that’s wonderful.” He beckons Jared over. “Sit down. I’ll go fetch an extra chair.”

“Can we...?” Jared cuts in then stops, seeming embarrassed. “I mean, I play better when we’re closer.”

Jensen closes his eyes briefly, keeping his face turned away as he nods. When he looks up the smile is back in place, just as bright as before. “Whatever helps.”

Jared gives him a grateful nod, his cheeks still flushed as he awkwardly perches on the edge of the bench. It’s shorter than the one at school and when Jensen sits down beside him they both wobble on opposite edges of the bench, scooting closer until they’re pressed together like two pieces of a puzzle.

“What are you in the mood for?” Jensen asks, tip-tapping his fingers playfully over the tangents. It’s too light to make a sound but it distracts him from Jared’s heat, burning beside him.

“Something cheerful.” Jared turns his head and smiles at him, so close Jensen can feel his breath on his face. “Maybe it works on the pianist as much as the piano.”

Jensen nods. “Maybe,” he says thoughtful. He breathes in before casting Jared a small smile. “Cheerful means faster. You think you’re up for that?”

“You just lead and I’ll follow,” Jared says with a grin, cracking his knuckles.

‘Oh, really?’ Jensen thinks and smirks to himself. ‘Let’s see if you can follow this.’

***Finger Buster / Dick Hyman, John Sheridan (2:55)***



“Ok, that was just evil!”

“What?” Jensen says and looks so innocent that for a moment Jared wonders if he’s mistaken, if Jensen really doesn’t realize what a complete musical *madness* he put him through.

“That piece of insanity got a name or did you just make it up on the spot?” he asks, blowing on his aching fingers.

“It’s called Finger Buster,” Jensen says and his innocent façade cracks as his face splits into the biggest grin. “Why? Was it hard?”

“Evil!” Jared turns up his palms, looking mournfully at his red fingertips. “You poor things. I’m gonna have to put you guys on ice.”

“Think holding a beer might help?” Jensen suggests, laughing when Jared instantly brightens.

If anything the playing gets even wilder with every sip they take. The subtle but unmistakable reservation Jared’s been sensing from Jensen all day slowly but surely slips away and soon he’s laughing openly, creating colorful butterflies and rays of sunshine that dance playfully around the room. They jostle each other on the narrow bench, Jared’s extra height and weight putting him at an advantage that has Jensen wobbling and nearly tumbling off a few times if it wasn’t for Jared catching him at the last second. Each time Jared lets his arm linger a little longer, fingers curled around Jensen’s waist to pull him close before reluctantly letting go. He’s starting to feel slightly dizzy, as if he’d drunken a bottle of champagne instead of the couple of beers.

“Do you feel weird?” he asks when Jensen stops for a breather after a very expressive melody of dolphins and mermaids and other sea creatures that Jared thought only existed in fairytales. The walls are still reflecting the clear blue Aegean sea, which probably isn’t helping with the whole dizziness thing, and Jared’s sure he can feel sand between his toes.

“Weird?”

Jensen looks at him in question, his green eyes as clear as the ocean was moments before. They shimmer, glints of green and gold and cerulean dancing within his irises, and Jared can’t for the life of him look away. It’s like... like gazing into the core of the magic Jared can feel all around them. Like seeing Jensen, the real Jensen, the one he never allows to truly surface. It’s... oh wow, it’s breathtaking.

“Like... warm?” Jared whispers. “I feel warm.” He blinks, pulling in shallow breaths through his open mouth. “And... dizzy.”

Jensen blinks and it’s like a door being closed. The light is gone from his eyes and whatever was charging the air dies. He stands up so abruptly Jared almost falls from the bench, and backs away toward the door.

“Fuck,” he says and Jared sucks in his breath because hell yeah! What? No! What is he...?



“I’m sorry,” Jensen blurts out, sounding guilty but above all stricken. “It’s me. Fuck, I’m so sorry.” He stumbles and Jared is up in a blink of an eye, steadying him. “I forgot,” Jensen says, looking away. He’s flushed and feels hot under Jared’s hands.

“Forgot what?” Jared asks confused but then he suddenly remembers himself, what Chris had said, what Jensen himself had told him. “Oh,” he says and Jensen instantly stiffens and pulls away.

“Yeah, oh,” he repeats. His eyes shift to the door like he’s thinking of running away.

“Hey, it’s cool,” Jared hastens to assure him. “I mean, alcohol totally gets me worked up too.” He grins, hoping to lighten the mood. “In fact I think most people lose their virginity under the influence of some kind of drink or smoke or... something.”

“Drugs,” Jensen says and his eyes widen, like a deer in headlight.

“Yeah...” Jared starts to laugh but then the word connects with Jensen’s reaction and he stops. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jensen says quickly. “I didn’t... I mean, right? That’s what... happens.” He shrugs awkwardly.

“You lost your virginity while drugged?” Jared asks carefully and takes a step closer but Jensen backs away, looking everywhere but straight at Jared.

“I... No! I mean... Why would you...?” He swallows, biting his lip nervously. “Yeah. Maybe. I... Yes.”

“Jesus, Jen. That’s... God.” Jared runs one hand through his hair, feeling at a loss for words. “When? When you were inside? Someone... Did someone...?”

“No! Why does everyone think that?” Jensen asks, clearly annoyed. “No one hurts me, ok? It doesn’t happen. It wasn’t... No.” He sighs, shaking his head. “Can we not talk about this? I mean... C’mon, man.” He looks extremely uncomfortable, squirming under Jared’s concerned gaze.

“Yeah... sure. Ok.”

Jared gives him a small smile even if his insides are still churning. He just can’t get the image out of his head of a drugged Jensen laying flat on a bed while he’s being... Christ. Because it’s different when you’re gay, right? Losing your virginity with a girl is mostly awkward and terrifying but it’s not... intrusive. The guy undeniably gets the better end of that. But if it’s *with* a guy chances are you’re the one that’s getting... taken. And it shouldn’t happen like that. Not drugged. Not the way Jensen is when he’s drugged. And even if he denies it, how much does he know of what happened, of what was done to him in there? It’s enough to make Jared sick to his stomach.

“Jared, no one hurts me,” Jensen says gently and when Jared raises his eyes he’s met with Jensen’s calm gaze. “Not when I zone out, not when I fall asleep, not even when I’m drugged. They can’t. I can’t be hurt, ok?”

“How do you know that?” Jared asks quietly. “How can you be so sure? Jensen, you... You can’t *know* that!”

“Of course I can. How many times do you think I’ve zoned out on the subway? Or fallen asleep in the park? No one hurts me, Jared.” He shrugs. “I guess I’m protected.”

“Oh.” It makes sense in a way. Nature’s forces taking care of one of its own. “I mean... good. That’s good.”

“C’mon, lets eat something.” Jensen says lightly and grins, the matter obviously dismissed. “The beer is getting to your head.”

“Not just my head,” Jared mumbles to himself as they head out into the kitchen but thankfully Jensen doesn’t seem to hear him. He stops short in the kitchen and looks around, obviously unsure.

“I think...” he starts then stops, frowning. “There’s probably bread somewhere. Or cereal.” He opens the fridge and stands gazing into it, still frowning. “Chris usually leaves me something but he was running late.” He suddenly starts laughing and pulls out a yellow post-it that reads, ‘Just order pizza, dumbass’ with a phone number underneath. “I guess we’re having pizza.”

Jared smiles even if it’s unnerving, once again seeing how dependent Jensen is on other people. He’s been living here for eight years and he doesn’t know where they keep the bread and can’t remember the number to the pizza place?

It clashes with what little he knew of Jensen before he disappeared. Jensen at eighteen was a boy who got easily distracted and was strange but still in many ways a genius. Someone who could play any melody after only hearing fractions of it. Who could easily recite pages of poems and explain the difference between Renaissance and Baroque to a very confused Jared. Whose greatest wish had been to break free from his parents’ rigid hold and become his own man.

What the hell had they done to him in there?

“What do you like?” Jensen is saying and Jared snaps out of his thoughts to find Jensen eyeing his phone worriedly, as if faced with an enormous task. He looks at the numbers on the note before slowly punching them in, hesitating for a moment before hitting the right button to make the call.

Yet another thing that is just so... odd, how much technology seems to puzzle Jensen. Makes Jared wonder if maybe magic, like most other types of creativity, resides on the right side of the Jensen’s brain and with his musical skills as well it has rendered the left and more logical side less active. The idea gives him an image of Jensen’s head tilting to the right, overcome by the extra weight and he can’t help smiling.

“Whatever is fine with me,” he says easily. “What do you like?”

Jensen frowns. "I don't know." He licks his lips, shaking his head in thought. "I should know. I just... I don't know." He says it as if it bothers him, like he's just now realizing.

"Hey, whatever we were gonna have last time is fine. Since, you know, we never got around to eat..." Jared stops, his brain suddenly making the connection between what happened that day with what he knows about Jensen now. Damn.

Jensen looks up slowly, his eyes flickering a couple of times but then he shakes his head and his voice is carefully blank when he admits, "I don't remember what we had."

"Me neither," Jared hastens to say, "Really, whatever is fine with me. As long as there are no anchovies."

Jensen nods, the vacant eyes snapping into focus when the music stops on the other end of the phone and an annoyingly cheerful voice ask Jensen for his order.

"Uh... pizza," he says. The voice starts rattling off something that sounds like special offers and Jensen frowns. "No, I just... What? I don't know." He looks up at Jared, exasperated.

"Pepperoni and extra cheese good with you?" Jared asks him loudly and Jensen breathes out, nodding in relief. "You want me to tell them?" He nods again and quickly hands the phone over.

Jared cuts the cheerful voice off and quickly finishes the order, keeping his eyes on Jensen who is drumming his fingers on the kitchen counter in correlation with whatever melody he's humming under his breath.

"They said it would take about twenty minutes," Jared says as he snaps the phone shut. Jensen nods but he doesn't look up. "Jensen, you alright?"

"I should know. Why don't I know these things?" Jensen mutters. "Christ. What the hell's the matter with me? So fucking incompetent."

Jared smiles at him, nudging his shoulder with his own. "Jen, c'mon. It's not a big deal."

Jensen just shakes his head, obviously angry with himself. His drumming is getting more manic and Jared jumps when the doors to the kitchen cabinets start shaking with the sound of glasses and china clinking inside.

"Ok, Jensen? Could you maybe not do that?" The faucet turns on, spewing hot water into the sink and the kitchen starts to fill up with steam. "Dude, it's just pizza. It doesn't matter." He sighs when Jensen still won't look at him and can't help thinking 'What would Chris do?' He feels totally out of his element. "Hey, you wanna go play until the food gets here?" he finally says, as cheerfully as he can.

Jensen nods again, turning away and walking out of the kitchen without looking at him. Jared waits until he can hear the door to the studio closing before slumping against the kitchen counter, its sharp edge digging into his spine. Everything goes quiet, the cabinets stop rattling and the water turns off, leaving his face moist with warm steam that's slowly cooling down and dissolving.

He closes his eyes when the piano starts playing. Even if the isolated walls and door keep most of the magic out, the music itself speaks loudly enough for Jared to understand.

***Prokofiev : War Sonata No. 7, Op. 83: III. Precipitato / Boris Berman (3:46)***

There's confusion and sadness and anger, a turmoil of feelings that Jensen is trying to express or maybe even figure out for himself. What Jensen was talking about, not being used to having true deep feelings and therefore not knowing what to do with them. Maybe that's what's happening, him waking up from the emotional slumber he's been in for the last few years and it's making him realize just how much he's lost. How far from normal he's come, in terms of being a functional individual. It can't be easy, realizing you're pretty much dependant on others for survival.

Jared jumps when the doorbell buzzes but the music doesn't even pause, not surprisingly considering how well isolated the room is and how loud Jensen is playing. As Jared waits at the elevator for the delivery to arrive he checks his wallet. Pizza, he should manage that. Won't leave him with much left but as long as he can pay for gas to get back to LA he should be alright. The elevator opens with a ping and a young girl steps out, her smile faltering slightly when she sees him.

"Oh hey," she says and glances down at the order sheet. "Jared?"

He nods. "Yeah, that's me."

"Hi, I'm Katie," the girl says and smiles, more genuine this time. "Sorry about earlier. That was Jamie, he's new. Boss forgot to fill him in."

"Okay," Jared says slowly, not quite sure what she's apologizing for.

"I know you said pepperoni and cheese but I thought I'd bring you one with mushrooms too, just in case." She pulls out two boxes, balancing them skillfully on her hand. "Don't worry, it's on the house. Just tell Jensen we're sorry."

"I don't understand," Jared says as he hands her the money. "Sorry about what?"

"Confusing him." She looks at him, frowning. "You do know Jensen, right? I mean, I assumed..."

"Yeah," Jared hastens to assure her. "Old friend. Visiting. You know him?"

"I've been delivering pizzas to this neighborhood for five years," she says like he's being stupid. She smiles as she hands him his receipt. "Tell him hi from me, will ya?"

“Yeah, sure.” Jared stands watching her as she steps back into the elevator, lifting his hand awkwardly when she gives him a little wave just as the doors slide shut.

It shouldn't surprise him, really. Chris most likely has Jensen's preferences programmed into fast food places all over town for those days he's not there to make the call himself. Preferences Jensen doesn't even remember he has.

All those funny cartoons and movies about scatterbrained professors suddenly don't seem so funny anymore.

Jared takes the pizza boxes into the living room along with a couple of beers before going to knock on Jensen's door. The music doesn't stop, not even after he knocks a second and a third time, hard enough to shake the door. For a moment he doesn't know what to do. He got the feeling from Chris that he shouldn't open the door when Jensen is playing but what if Jensen just won't stop? What if he's gotten lost in the music and needs help getting out?

Christ, he feels so incompetent. Chris makes it look easy but he's got practice and he knows what to expect every time. Jared just feels lost.

He hesitantly opens the door, only a crack, and the force of the music is almost enough to knock him off his feet. The wall around the doorframe starts changing its color, adding grey to the rainbow mix that already surrounds it. Jared hastily slips inside and closes the door behind him before more of the magic gets out, then looks up and instantly freezes.

He's in the middle of a war zone. There are bombers roaring above his head and explosions all around him. A soldier lies dying at his feet and he can hear a child wailing somewhere in the ruins of a building to his left. Someone is shouting in a language he can't understand and when gunshots cut the air, he throws himself down on the ground in panic. 'It's not real,' he tells himself. 'It's just an illusion.' But the air smells of gunpowder and blood and the soldier's broken eyes stare at him blankly and he is so scared he wants to cry.

He runs in direction of the loud piano music, crouching to make himself as small as possible because what if it *is* real? The piano stands in the middle of ruins, Jensen hunched over it, lost in the music.

“Jensen! Jensen, c'mon. You gotta stop.”

There's no answer. Jensen's eyes are closed, his whole body moving with the music, muscles rippling like waves over water. His fingers dance furiously over the tangents, occasionally crashing down hard to create explosions all around them. The insanity of the high notes is the whistling of falling bombs, the madness of the low ones the rumbling sound of army trucks approaching.

“Jensen! Stop!” Jared grabs him by the shoulders, shaking him. “Jensen, please!”

Jensen's eyes snap open. They're greengreengreen, emerald sparks dancing in a sea of chlorophyll, pupils pinheads of blackness. “There's a war,” he says, voice flat, his

hands still moving madly across the tangents. “People are dying. You shouldn’t be here. No one should be here.”

Jared laughs hysterically. “You’re right about that. Jensen, please. Stop playing.”

Jensen blinks. The music slows down and the noise fades around them. “Jared?”

“Yes, it’s me. Can you see me?”

“Jared.” The pupils widen, Jensen’s eyes warming until they’re the color of spring grass, and he smiles. “Jared.” He stills his hands, fingers going slack.

“Yeah.” The air in the room warms and soon the stink of war is gone. There’s a wooden floor under their feet and four solid walls around them. Jared breathes out in relief and smiles back. “Hey.”

“You’re still here.” Jensen sounds amazed, smiling happily, and Jared squeezes his shoulders, tears still caught in his throat from being so frightened.

“I am. You thought I’d gone?”

Jensen blinks, his smile fading slightly. “I don’t know. What day is it?”

“Saturday. I’m not leaving until tomorrow, remember?”

Jensen nods slowly. “Tomorrow. Ok.” He nods again then stands up slowly, hands gripping the edge of the piano. “That’s good.”

“You look exhausted,” Jared says worried. “The pizza is here. How about we eat and then get to bed?”

“Pizza?”

“Yeah. Katie says hi by the way.”

Jensen smiles softly. “Katie. She’s nice.” He breathes in and straightens up. “I’m good. Let’s have pizza.” He laughs, like he’s already forgotten all the horror from earlier. “Remember when I stayed over at your place? Best pizza I’ve ever had.”

“Yeah?” Jared follows him out of the room, trying to adjust to Jensen’s sudden light mood. “Pepperoni and mushrooms, was it?” he asks, something suddenly clicking in his brain.

“You know, I think it was. My favorite.” Jensen hums under his breath as he walks into the living room and Jared recognizes it as the music from the movie they watched that day. He should know, he owns the soundtrack and listens to it all the time.

“Jensen,” he asks, tapping his shoulder. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Jensen says absentmindedly but then he stops, a frown on his face. “No, wait. I’m... Oh.” For a moment he looks stricken but then he shakes his head and smiles. “Twenty-eight. I’m twenty-eight. Sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s ok.” They sit down and Jared hands him a beer, even if he isn’t sure if Jensen should actually be drinking more, considering. “You often think of that time? When we were kids?”

“*You* were a kid,” Jensen corrects him. “I was almost an adult.”

“Ok, when *I* was a kid,” Jared indulges him. “So do you?”

Jensen nods. He flips open the pizza boxes, frowning at the one with pepperoni and extra cheese before choosing a slice from the other box. “I guess,” he says. “It was a very important time.” He bites down, nodding to himself.

“Yeah, it was,” Jared says quietly but Jensen doesn’t seem to hear him.

“I mean, I met you,” he continues, chewing thoughtfully. “Nothing else has happened since that tops that.”

Jared bites his lip. He just can’t get used being Jensen’s... everything. “Not even getting into Juilliard?”

“Well, that was pretty awesome,” Jensen admits, “but no, not even that. It would never have happened anyway if it wasn’t for you.” He shrugs. “I’d probably still be locked up in my parents’ house instead.”

“Everything that happened, you think it happened because of me?”

“In a way, yeah. Without you I don’t think I’d ever have woken up.” He looks up at Jared, smiling. “I was asleep until I met you. In here.” He taps his chest, accidentally leaving greasy fingerprints on his t-shirt. “I didn’t know it but I was.”

Jared swallows, trying to get his head around that. “So without me you never... you never would have rebelled and they never would have put you in a mental institution. And your dad wouldn’t have died and...”

“Jared, stop it,” Jensen says sharply. “Not your fault. None of it. You woke me up. The rest... the rest was my own doing.” He shrugs. “I just didn’t know how to be awake, I guess.”

He gives Jared a smile and continues eating. Grease runs down his fingers and he licks them before wiping them meticulously on a paper napkin. As he looks down he spots the grease stains on his t-shirt and for a moment his eyes widen but then he shakes his head and shrugs, as if he’s forcing himself not to worry about it. His eyes flicker to them every now and then though, and it’s obvious it bothers him. When he drinks he holds the bottle at the top of the neck, his hand still shaking from the exertion of playing earlier. He reaches out to wipe the sweat stain the bottle has left on the table, glancing over to see if Jared’s part of the table needs cleaning before

doing that as well. It reminds Jared of the time they spilled popcorn on the floor and Jensen got frantic with the cleaning. Obviously that's something that hasn't changed. In fact some things haven't changed at all while others have, a lot.

He's starting to see the pattern in Jensen's erratic behavior. He kinda wishes Chris were here so he could ask him, just to be sure, but from everything he's seen he thinks he must be right.

There's the Jensen he knew, the shy, soft-spoken polite boy who looks at him in wonder and is almost childish in his obvious love for him. Who needs everything to be precise and in its place and is still yearning for other's approval.

And then there's the grownup Jensen, the one that swears and snarks and is easily annoyed by his own shortcomings. Who has accepted what he is and what he can do as something that doesn't have to be bad or evil unless he makes it so and instead tries his best to live with his gift.

But there's also just Jensen, dealing with what he is and what happened to him and what is happening right now, with Jared inadvertently ruining the one thing Jensen's been holding on to for the last ten years. His belief that Jared would find him and they would be together.

No wonder Jensen is so brittle and having trouble controlling himself. Emotions, Jensen's Achilles heel, totally screwing him over. It must feel a little like being schizophrenic, the voices of his past and present and what he thought would be his future, shouting at him in his head. Jared has a feeling there's a lot more struggling going on in there than Jensen allows anyone to see.

"You wanna watch something?" Jensen suddenly asks, nudging Jared out of his thoughts. "We've got movies." He wipes his hands on the napkin and stands up to crouch in front of the TV cabinet, pulling out drawers with rows upon rows of DVDs.

"Alright," Jared stands up and walks over, flopping down on the floor by Jensen's side. "What ya got?"

"All kinds. Chris likes watching stuff at nights when..." Jensen starts then stops, looking uncomfortable. "I keep him up a lot," he says awkwardly.

Jared nods. To be honest he's kinda worried about tonight. He remembers how tired Chris looked when he was here last time, like he hadn't slept at all. The first night after Jared returned to New York he'd been so tired he'd slept like the dead the whole night through but last night he'd woken up to Chris talking to someone down the hall, assumingly Jensen. Again he'd fallen asleep without paying it much attention but now he can't help wondering, is that what Chris does, check on Jensen every night? So what now then, when he's not here? Then it has to be Jared's job, right?

He pushes those thoughts aside from now. He can call Chris later, when Jensen has gone to bed, just to check.



They choose some Bruce Willis movie, “For old time’s sake,” Jensen says and grins, and before long they’re lounging on the couch, beers in hand and stomachs stuffed with pizza.

Jared watches Jensen more than what’s going on onscreen. He’s seen the movie before, several times in fact, and he’s too wrapped up in his thoughts to really pay attention anyway. The slight beer buzz from earlier had all but disappeared but it only takes a few sips to rekindle it and he hasn’t even finished the one he has when Jensen quickly stands up and fetches them a couple of new ones, not giving Jared any chance to refuse.

“It’s Saturday night, dude,” he says and quirks his eyebrow when Jared puts up feeble protests. “You going somewhere?”

His gaze is challenging but there’s a slight twist at his mouth, like he’s suddenly remembering that Jared actually *is* going somewhere in less than twelve hours. Jared takes the beer without another word. Jensen grins and they clink their bottles together before sipping in unison, like comrades.

They’re halfway through the movie when Jensen suddenly says, “I’m glad you came, Jay. It means a lot.” He’s still gazing at the TV but his hands are twitching in his lap, making the beer splash around at the bottom of his bottle. “After what happened, I wouldn’t have blamed you if you never... if you hadn’t.”

“You’re my best friend,” Jared says easily. “Whatever happens.” He tilts his head, giving Jensen a little smile. “You need to do more than blow up a little hurricane to get rid off me.”

Jensen flinches. “I didn’t mean... I meant the rest. Being... weird.” He laughs shakily. “Really, *really* weird. I must have come off like a total nutcase.”

“You got upset,” Jared says and shrugs. “It happens.”

Jensen shakes his head. “Don’t do that. Don’t act like it’s nothing. I know I have... emotional issues. With you. And they make me act... not normal.”

It’s the closest Jensen has gotten to admitting how he feels and Jared doesn’t really know what to say. Especially since he’s not supposed to know about it. “Jensen, it’s alright,” he says gently. “You don’t have to explain.”

Jensen closes his eyes, sucking in his breath before letting it out slowly. “I’m not normal, Jared. That’s what you have to understand. That I will never be normal. So... so if you think it’s too much, this... all of this, then... it’s okay. You can walk away. I won’t blame you. And... I’ll be alright. I will.”

“Jen...”

“No. I don’t want you to stay in touch because you feel you have to. I don’t want you to think I can’t... *exist* without you. That’s not... That’s not how it should be. I don’t

want that.” He shakes his head, jaw tight. “That would be worse than having you. Here. Than having you here.”

“Jensen, listen to me.” Jared reaches over, putting his hand on Jensen’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to. Ok? You’re my best friend and I love you. I want to be here. If I could I would stay and never go back. In fact, it’s killing me, having to leave you tomorrow.”

Jensen opens his mouth but snaps it shut again. He looks away, shaking his head slightly before looking up again. “I’m sorry. I’m being stupid. Right?” he says and laughs shakily. There’s something there, hidden behind his pained smile but Jared can’t read it.

“No more than usual,” Jared says lightly and laughs when Jensen flips him the finger. He squeezes Jensen’s shoulder, turning serious again. “I meant what I said. I want to be here. This isn’t easy for me either, you know, living so far away.”

“I know,” Jensen says quickly. “Sorry. I... No, of course it isn’t.”

“But we’ll make it work. We can talk on the phone,” Jared says. “All the time. And chat. Do you have a computer?”

Jensen shakes his head. “No. Chris has a laptop but he uses it for his work so...” His eyes suddenly brighten. “But I can get a laptop at school. They’ve been bugging me about it since I started teaching there.”

“Great!” Jared pauses. “Do you know how to use one?”

Jensen shrugs. “I tried that Internet thing a few times when... Well, I was looking for you. Chris helped me. Other than that...I just haven’t had any use for a computer. But hey, how hard can it be?”

“Probably a little more complicated than figuring out your phone,” Jared says and laughs when Jensen kicks at his shin. “Don’t worry, I’ll give you my email and messenger name and Facebook account and ooh, Skype! Chris can help you figure out the rest.”

“Wait, Face...what? Sky?” Jensen asks confused, frowning when Jared just grins. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Probably, yes.” Jared laughs, already making a list in his head of all the stupid stuff he’s going to spam Jensen with. It sure is time Jensen joined the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With horrible American Idol YouTube videos and lolcatz.

“Is there music?” Jensen asks, looking curious.

“Dude, lots of music. There are even sites where you can download classical music for free. And get sheet music and get to know other pianists.”

“I’m not a pianist,” Jensen protests but Jared just gives him a look.

“Jensen, you are. You even have your college degree now, if that had actually been a requirement. Liar.”

But Jensen keeps shaking his head. “I’m a piano teacher not a pianist. I don’t play for people.”

“You play for me.”

Jensen looks conflicted for a while but then he smiles softly. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“See? I told you,” Jared says smugly.

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Know-it-all,” he mutters and Jared laughs.

Half an hour later Jensen is starting to nod off on the couch, dark circles smudging the skin under his eyes.

“We should probably get some sleep,” Jared says and yawns, even if he doesn’t feel tired at all.

“Yeah.” Jensen nods and stands up, picking up the beer bottles while Jared takes care of the leftover pizza. He helps Jensen straighten the pillows on the couch and wipe the table, making sure there are no crumbs or drops of spilled beer anywhere.

“You know, you should sleep in Chris’s bed,” Jensen says when they’re done. “I bet the couch is killing your back.”

“Dude, no. I can’t do that,” Jared protests, shaking his head. “It’s his bed. I doubt he’d appreciate strangers sleeping in his bed.”

“You’re not a stranger,” Jensen tells him patiently, “but whatever. I’ll sleep in there and you can sleep in my room. You need a good night’s sleep before you...” He stops then adds in a blank voice, “It’s a long drive.”

“I’m fine here,” Jared protests. “Honestly.”

“Jay, stop being stupid. I’ve slept in Chris’s bed a million times. He doesn’t mind.”

Jared follows him down the hall, not sure what to say. He still doesn’t get it completely, what kind of relationship they have, Jensen and Chris. Chris said there was nothing like that between them but they seem closer than any married couple Jared’s ever known.

“You’ve slept in his bed a million times?” he asks, unable to keep his curiosity in check. “Something you wanna tell me?”

Jensen looks at him sharply. “What? No.” He rolls his eyes when Jared just looks at him. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Jare. I don’t... He’s not gay.”

“But if he were, would you?” Jared asks curious.

“What is this? Why are you so interested?” Jensen retorts, sounding suspicious and Jared instantly backs off.

“Nothing. Just wondering. I mean, I like Chad well enough but I wouldn’t sleep in his bed even if he paid me,” he jokes.

“You’re about to sleep in mine,” Jensen points out and to his horror Jared can feel his face heating.

“Yeah, but not *with* you. I mean... We’re not gonna....”

He stops, not finding any words that wouldn’t sound horribly homophobic and he really doesn’t want Jensen to think he has anything against him sleeping with guys because he doesn’t. And it’s not like he’d actually feel disgusted, sleeping in Jensen’s bed even if he were there too. In fact it would probably be fine. Like, nice. And warm. And...

Jensen suddenly bursts out laughing. “You should see your face, dude. Absolutely priceless.” He shakes his head and throws open the door to his room. “I sometimes have trouble sleeping alone, that’s all. Speaking of which, you should keep the door closed,” Jensen says awkwardly and his face turns red. “Just in case.”

“In case...?” Jared starts but then he suddenly connects. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I’m not gonna... you know,” Jensen says, making a vague obscene gesture and blushing even further. “But sometimes I dream... stuff.”

“Right.” It’s hard to see which one is more uncomfortable. Especially when Jared suddenly remembers that time Jensen slept over at his house and his face goes even redder. He gets it now, why Jensen slept on top of the covers, rather having a restless night than risk making Jared feel something inappropriate.

“Right,” Jensen repeats, looking everywhere but at him. “So... yeah. If you wake up to... something, just ignore it, ok? And if you never mention it to me ever, that would be great.”

“Yeah. Sure.” He laughs a little and looks around the room, for the first time really taking it in. It’s so different from Jensen’s room in his parents’ house. Sure, all surfaces are empty of the usual kind of stuff people gather around them but there are framed pictures and posters screwed to the wall and books behind locked shelves and everything’s in bright colors. A familiar blue face peeks out at him from below the covers on the bed.

“Oh, I see you got Bluebear,” he says and grins. “I know he’s not as good as Slipper but...” He shrugs.

“He’s great. He helps me sleep,” Jensen says, not seeming embarrassed at all. “He misses you though.”

Jared stares at the bear. “What? He’s not... He talks?” He already has a dozen excuses for all the secrets the damn bear might have spilled when Jensen shakes his head, grinning like he knows exactly what Jared is thinking.

“Nah. Just a feeling.” Jensen smiles fondly at the bear. “You should let him sleep with you tonight. I think he would like that.”

“You think so? Maybe.” He reaches out and touches Bluebear’s scruffy ear. “I kinda miss him too.”

“So... what time are you leaving tomorrow?” Jensen’s voice is casual but his eyes are fixed on the floor, jaw tight and hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans.

“Early.” Jared swallows. “It’s a very long drive so... I should get going around eight. Chris said he’d be home by then”

Jensen nods, licking his lips. “Right. Ok.”

“You want me to wake you up or...?”

Jensen stands silent, shoulders hunched up, his hands clearly fisted in his pockets. “I... No. I think... No.”

“Okay.” Jared takes a step closer and when Jensen doesn’t move, he pulls him into a tight hug, closing his eyes as he tries to find the right words to say. Jensen stands stiff at first but then he pulls his hands out of his pockets and wraps his arms around Jared’s waist, just holding on.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Jared whispers but Jensen doesn’t answer. Jared’s about to ask him if he’s going to be alright when he abruptly lets go and steps back, still not looking up.

“Have a good night, Jared,” he says. Then he turns around and walks out, leaving Jared gazing after him with a lump in his throat.

Jared waits until he hears Jensen close the door to Chris’s room behind him before fishing his phone out of his pocket and quickly texting Chris, *‘Any sleeping issues I should be aware of? Nightmares?’* He kinda hates going behind Jensen’s back but it’s better than being blindsided by something he won’t know how to handle. Of course Chris is most likely busy playing at his gig and won’t see the message for a while but it’s the best he can do.

After a quick bathroom trip he returns to Jensen’s room and closes the door behind him. It feels weird, crawling into Jensen’s bed, under Jensen’s covers and laying down on Jensen’s pillow that smells exactly like him. Like grass and sunshine and some spice that is probably from his shampoo. It’s a big comfortable bed, king sized, which seems weird until Jared realizes Chris probably sleeps as much in here as Jensen sleeps in his room.

He lies on his back, staring up at the ceiling, Bluebear beside him on the pillow. It feels stupid, worrying so much about a grown man sleeping alone but he can't help it. He wonders what it is that disturbs Jensen's sleep so much, other than apparently erotic dreams. Nightmares probably. He remembers Jensen saying something about his mother locking his room at nights, which suggest that even then he'd had bad nights. And their solution had been to lock him up in his room? Yeah, that sounds like great parenting.

He jumps when the phone vibrates on the bedside table, half expecting it to be Sandy – who he really should call by the way – but sighing in relief when Chris's name flashes across the screen. "Hey," he says after flipping it open. "How's your gig?"

"Good," Chris says impatient. "How is he? Is he alright?"

"He's fine, he's gone to bed. Your bed. I'm sleeping in his." Jared hesitates. "I was just thinking... I got the feeling he has bad nights, like nightmares or something. Right? I just wanted to know what to expect. And some ideas of what to do, I guess, if anything happens."

"Right." There's a pause. "Yeah, it can be... uh... freaky. Right." Chris coughs. "So... uh. Bet he told you to keep your door closed? Don't. I know it can be awkward if he gets a wet dream or whatever but just ignore it or think of your girlfriend or something."

"Dude! I'm not gonna..."

"Whatever, I don't care. How's he been today? Rollercoaster, right? He looked pretty shaky this morning and considering you're leaving tomorrow I'd say to expect anything. And if things get bad you need to be able to hear him so you can wake him up. You get that?"

Jared swallows. "Yeah."

"Good. And even if you hear nothing at all it's better if you check on him a couple of times. He was trained pretty well to keep quiet, no matter what." Chris's anger is evident in his voice. God help Jensen's mom if Chris ever meets her, Jared can't help thinking.

"Ok. I will. Chris?" he asks at the last moment.

"Yeah?"

"I'm fucking him up, aren't I? Just by being here. He's doing his best to hide it but... He's so sad, man. It's killing me. He was playing something earlier that was like right out of World War Two or something. Literally. Scared the crap out of me."

"Fuck." Chris sighs. "I've told him to stay away from that shit. Happy music, I keep telling him, but no. Fucking emo Beethoven and Shostakovich or whatever all the time. Christ." There's silence for a long time and when Chris speaks again he sounds tired and almost hopeless. "I don't know, kid. Yes, and no. Before you came he was

doing alright but he wasn't... he wasn't really *living*, you know. He was just there, waiting. Now he's actually *alive*."

"Having real feelings," Jared says quietly.

"Right. Which at the moment aren't all that great. So yes, in some ways you're making him worse but at least it's something... something real." There's a pause and then Chris asks, "Have you thought about what I said?"

Jared sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. "Chris... I can't just... It's not that simple."

"I'm just asking if you've thought about it. What the fuck is complicated about thinking?" Chris growls and that's it, Jared's had enough of his goddamn aggressiveness.

"Everything! And yes, I have. Of course I fucking have. It's all I think about, ok? So just... back off and let me deal with it at my own pace, alright?"

"I'm just..." Chris starts but a sudden loud noise breaks out behind him and Jared can hear someone shouting for Chris to get back on stage. "Fuck. I gotta go. We'll talk later."

The call is cut off before Jared can even answer. He rolls his eyes and snaps his phone shut, putting it back on the table before turning his head to look at Bluebear. "What an asshole," he mutters. Bluebear just stares at him.

After a moment Jared gets out of bed and opens the door. Everything is silent. Chances are he's worrying about nothing. Jensen looked so tired he probably fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. Too tired for nightmares for sure. Or whatever it is he does. Right? Right.

He gets back into bed, leaving the door open, and sets the alarm on his phone to ring in about two hours. Better safe than sorry. He's sure he'll have trouble sleeping even if it's actually kinda nice, having Bluebear again and lying in a decent bed for the first time in two nights and being surrounded by the ridiculously good smell of Jensen.

He's not sure what wakes him up. Not the alarm, it hasn't gone off yet, and when he strains his ears he can't hear anything unusual. The piano is playing, a soft and soothing melody that almost lulls him back to sleep while his eyes are still struggling to blink awake. Yawning he checks the time on his phone and since it's set to go off in less than ten minutes he figures he can just as well get up now.

He slides out of bed, not bothering putting anything on more than the boxers he's been sleeping in, and then walks as quietly as he can down the hall to Chris's room. The door is closed, of course, but even so he can see the light inside the room, leaking along the sides. It's glowing, pulsating, and when he lays his palm on the wooden surface it vibrates against his skin. For a moment he hesitates, not sure what to do, but Chris had said to check on Jensen and it's not like he can do that from the wrong side of a door.

The door swings slowly open as soon as he touches the handle and he stands in the doorway, holding his breath at the sight that greets him.

Jared's never been in Chris's room but he's sure it doesn't normally look like this. Unless Chris lives in the middle of an enchanted forest. He steps inside and the green moss is soft underneath his bare feet, with bluebells and dandelions tickling his ankles. A squirrel runs across the room and up a trunk of a tree, disappearing in its thick foliage.

Something flutters to his right and he looks over, expecting to see a butterfly but is instead staring straight into the sparkling eyes of what has to be a fairy. Barely four inches tall it hovers in the air, a breath away from his face, wings fluttering so fast they're like a shimmer of light in the air. Jared blinks and the fairy – he can't even tell if it's a boy or a girl – blinks as well. He smiles cautiously and it scrunches up its nose and then it's gone, just like that, leaving him staring at the space it occupied moments before.

He hears a soft noise and turns to find a child staring up at him, pointy ears and eyes impossibly big and deep ocean green. Before he can ask its name it laughs, a sound like pearls falling on glass, and then it turns and skips away, disappearing between the trees. He has this strange desire to follow it, but that's not what he came here for so he shakes it off, concentrating on finding Jensen. He takes a few more steps forward, not really knowing if he's heading in the right direction. There are no walls, the forest might as well be endless and when he looks over his shoulder the open door stands like a foreign object in the middle of the clearing, the soft light of the hallway seeming almost dark in the bright sunlight that shines through the branches above.

He turns his head forward again and jumps back when he's suddenly looking straight at Jensen, standing right in front of him. “Jen! Jeez, you scared me.”

“You shouldn't be here,” Jensen says, his voice eerily calm. “This is my world.”

“I know, I just... I wanted to check on you. See if you were sleeping alright.” He smiles awkwardly. “Apparently not.”

Jensen frowns. “But I am.” He looks over to his right and when Jared follows his gaze he sees another Jensen, asleep in a bed of moss and ferns, a grey cat curled up beside him.

“Oh. But...” Jared reaches out hesitantly and touches the Jensen before him. He's solid but different. His skin is warm but too smooth, too flawless somehow. The green eyes are clear like marbles and Jared thinks the freckles that dapple the skin might be made of actual gold. “Who are you?” he asks, pulling back.

“I'm me,” Jensen says, looking at Jared like he's the strange one. “I'm the one I should be.”

He mirrors Jared's movement, reaching out to him. His fingers on Jared's cheek feel like tiny sparks of electricity on his skin and he blinks, his face twitching. Jensen tilts



his head, watching him thoughtful but then he suddenly smiles and the whole forest glows like gold.

“You came to me!” he says and laughs happy. It sounds similar to the child earlier, bright and clear like raindrops. “My Jared.”

He lays his hands on either side of Jared’s face, palms warm on his cheeks, and gazes into his eyes with such love it makes Jared’s heart clench. “My Jared,” he repeats dazed like he still can’t quite believe it. And then he pulls Jared’s head down for a kiss.

His lips are soft and warm and tasting of spring. It’s like an echo of a memory Jared has forgotten, a moment in time slipped from his mind. It never even occurs to him to pull back. Instead his eyes slip closed as his lips fall open, inhaling Jensen’s breath. It goes straight to his head, a whole bottle of champagne in one mouthful of air. Every fiber of his body vibrates, the blood is rushing through his veins and he thinks he might be passing out because it feels like he’s floating on air. He grasps at Jensen’s arms, then his shoulders, then slides his hands up to the sides of Jensen’s neck, fumbling and desperate to pull him closer. It’s like he’s finally found the answer to a question he didn’t even know he was asking. Like someone just showed him the reason for everything.

‘Oh,’ he thinks. ‘Yes. Of course! This. This!’

Jensen laughs into his mouth then pulls away, leaving Jared swaying on his feet and staring dazed into Jensen’s gold green eyes. ‘I need,’ Jared wants to say. ‘I want, I have to. Please.’ But all he can do is stand there and struggle to breathe.

Jensen smiles. Then he leans in closer and whispers, “Sleep.”



Through his twenty-eight years of being a freak Jensen has woken up to possibly every weird circumstance imaginable, including up in a tree once and in the middle of a funeral of a man he’s pretty sure he didn’t know. But nothing has ever scared him as much as waking up in Chris’s bed, pressed up tight against Jared’s apparently naked body.

A wave of panic hits him as he goes through every possibly reason why this might have happened and ‘Oh God, I hexed him to have sex with me!’ keeps knocking out every one of them like a sledgehammer of guilt. Oh Christ, he couldn’t have, could he? No. Nonono. Please, God, no.

He tumbles out of bed, shuffling across the floor until he’s pressed up against the wall. He feels sick. His jeans are lying folded on the chair to his right and he fumbles in the pocket until he finds his phone, dropping it twice before managing to flip it open and hit #1 on speed dial.

“Jenny?” a gruff and sleepy voice says. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” he whispers, the words rushing out in panic. “I think I might have done something terrible. Oh God, Chris.”

“Jesus, Jensen, slow down.” All sleepiness is gone from Chris voice; it’s sharp and alarmed but above all soothing. “Tell me what happened.”

“Jared’s in my bed! *Your* bed,” he ramblingly corrects himself. “The bed I slept in.”

There’s silence for a while and then Chris asks in a very low voice, “Is he dead?”

“No! Jesus, no, he’s not *dead*! Christ! What’s *wrong* with you?”

“Well, what the fuck am I supposed to think when you call me up at four o’clock in the fucking morning!” Chris growls. “You’re the one who keeps saying you killed a guy with your dick.”

“I didn’t...! Fuck.” Jensen grinds the heel of his free hand into his eye socket. There are flecks of silver dappling his vision, like tiny frost fairies, waiting to strike. Focus. Focus, dammit! “He’s in my *bed*! Jared!”

There’s a pause on the line. “Right. And?”

“*And?*” Jensen asks incredulous. “I don’t know what happened! What if we... you know?”

There’s a low noise that sounds suspiciously like someone stifling a laugh.

“Are you laughing?” Jensen hisses, his fear starting to make way for anger. “Chris, this is not funny!”

“Dude, are you seriously asking me if you had sex last night?” Chris snorts, obviously grinning. “I know you don’t have much experience but I think if you did you would know.”

Jensen takes a moment to think about that. “Not if I did the... you know. I mean, right?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.” Chris yawns, the need for alert obviously gone as far as he’s concerned. “Ok, are there condoms or wet stains or god forbid other substances I’d rather not think about? Anything that might suggest you shoved your dick up his ass?”

“Don’t...! Don’t say that!” Images flicker in his head like an old time movie. Jared on his knees, Jared lying flat on the bed, Jared with Jensen’s cock in his mouth, always staring up at him with wet empty eyes. Oh God. He’s going to be sick. “Fuck, Chris. No, I can’t see anything but what if we didn’t use... what if I just... God.”

“Jensen, what exactly is it you’re worried about?” Chris asks, clearly exasperated. “Either you did have sex – which excuse me, I thought was what you wanted – or you didn’t. Are you worried he might regret it or... what?”

“What if I... did something? What if I made him...?” He presses his forehead against his knees, eyes squeezed shut. Breathe, breathe... “Chris, that’s rape. That’s...”

“*What!?!?*” Chris sputters on the other side of the line. “Jensen, stop it! Are you *insane?* Like hell you would ever do that!”

“You don’t know that,” he says, his voice breaking. “Chris, I can’t remember. I can’t remember anything. What if it’s like that man two years ago? I did that, I know I did that.”

“You *don’t* know if you did that. Jensen, listen to me,” Chris says firmly. “You don’t *know* that. The coroner ruled that a heart attack. And know what, even if you did? He had it fucking coming. The guy had a fucking knife in his hand, Jen. He lay two steps away from you.”

“Maybe he was just...”

“He’d already killed two other guys in that park, Jen! Will you let it go? If you actually *did* kill him you did the world a fucking favor.”

Jensen shakes his head. “My mom was right. I am dangerous. She always said I was gonna hurt him. She said...” The phone is suddenly snatched from his trembling fingers and he looks up to find Jared in only his boxers, towering over him.

“Hey,” Jared says calmly into the phone. “It’s me. Yeah. No.” He looks down at Jensen, his eyes unreadable. “I just went in to check on him and must have fallen asleep.” He laughs a little but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah. Sure. Alright, man. See you later.”

He snaps the phone shut, still watching Jensen calmly. When he suddenly moves Jensen can’t help jerking back but instead of the expected punch there’s just a hand extended to him. “C’mon, Jen. You need more sleep.”

He hesitates briefly but then he takes Jared’s hand and allows himself to be pulled to his feet. For a moment they stand close enough to breathe each other’s air but then Jared steps back, giving him more space. He’s still so close though, standing there all tall and practically naked and God, smelling so good. Jensen can’t even look at him. His cheeks are burning red and he feels hot all over, with embarrassment and shame and Jesus Christ, lust. Greedy hungry lust burning him up from the inside. He wants to touch, to taste, to just fucking take! He wants, he wants...

He lets out a shaky breath, clenching his hands into fists by his side. Fuck. The wave of lust he felt at the park when Jared took his shirt off was nothing compared to this. It had just surprised him, like being kicked in the groin but in an oh-so-good way, and so he’d slipped away before he even realized what was happening. But now, with his heart already beating way too fast in panic, all his senses are on overload. He thinks all it might take is a single touch, just to feel Jared’s skin against his own and he would...

“Are you alright?” Jared asks, sounding sincerely worried and Jensen jerks out of his trance. He takes a few deep breaths before risking a glance at Jared. He doesn’t look angry or hurt and definitely not scared. There’s something there though in his eyes that Jensen can’t read but it makes his stomach twist in worry.

“Yeah,” he says. “I just... got confused.” He wants to ask Jared if he’s alright, if he hurts anywhere, if he remembers anything that might explain why they were in bed together. Instead he latches onto what little he had grasped from the conversation between Chris and Jared and asks, “You came to check on me?”

Jared blinks. There’s a strange expression on his face, like he’s fighting with himself, but then he smiles and shrugs. “Yeah. You seemed a bit restless so I sat with you for a while. I must have just crashed on your bed without realizing. Sorry.” He pauses, studying Jensen thoughtfully. “I didn’t mean to freak you out,” he finally says and Jensen drops his eyes, cheeks burning.

“You didn’t. I mean... I just...” A hand lands on his shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly, and he sucks in a sharp breath. Jesus!

“You would never hurt me, Jen,” Jared says in a gentle voice. “Alright?”

Jensen freezes, his panic rising again. “What? I wasn’t...”

“I heard what you said to Chris on the phone. Don’t... don’t *ever* think that.”

Jensen slumps. Damn. “How much did you hear?” he asks in a low voice.

“Enough to know you think you did something to me. You didn’t. We just slept.” Jared’s eyes flicker slightly to the left with his last words and just like that Jensen knows he’s lying. Or at least not telling the whole truth. Oh God, what if Jared’s figured him out?

“Did we dream?” he asks cautiously and Jared looks back at him, his cheeks turning slightly pink.

“Nothing embarrassing, don’t worry,” he says and grins. It looks genuine enough that Jensen breathes out.

“Now, how about some sleep?” Jared says lightly and yawns. “Do you realize it’s about four o’clock in the morning?”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” He laughs nervously as he sits down on the bed, rearranging the pillows to keep his hands occupied. The spot he sits on is still warm from Jared’s body and the thought of melting down in that heat is making his skin flush hot. He’s about to slip under the covers when he realizes Jared’s still standing where he left him, looking awkward and unsure. “Jared,” he asks, “you okay?”

“What? Yes.” He smiles a little hesitantly. “I’m fine.” He nods and takes a step back toward the door. “I’ll just go...”

Jensen rolls his eyes. “Chris told you to check on me, didn’t he? That’s why you came in here.”

Jared licks his lips. “Uhm…”

“Christ.” Jensen shakes his head, not sure whether to be mad or amused. “I’m not a frigging baby, dude. You don’t have to come in every five minutes to check if I’m breathing.”

“I didn’t t…” Jared starts then stops and sighs. “He’s just worried about you, man.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Jensen shakes his head again then lies down, pulling the covers up to his chin. “So what, you’re gonna go and then come back in two hours or something?”

There’s a brief silence and then Jared says awkwardly, “Something like that, yeah.”

Jensen looks at him pointedly. “Dude, you’re going to be driving cross country for the next two days!”

Jared shrugs and gives him a little grin. “I’ll be ok,” he says but Jensen can see how tired he is, the lines of worry on his forehead deepening in sync with the color fading from his skin. An image of Jared nodding off at the wheel pops up in Jensen’s head. Hell, no.

“Come here.” Jensen pats the free side of the bed, trying not to think too hard of what he’s doing. “Just don’t hog the covers.”

“What? Oh.” Jared walks over then stops by the bedside, shifting from one foot to the other. “Are you sure?”

“Dude, stop being such a girl and hop in. At least this way we’ll both get some sleep.”

He turns on his side, his back to Jared, and closes his eyes. Then stores away all thoughts of that naked tan skin, those long arms, the drops of sweat clinging to Jared’s neck. Far away in the deepest corner of his mind. He can always bring them out later when Jared… When Jared’s no longer here.

After what seems like forever he finally feels the bed dip and then Jared is lying down beside him, obviously feeling awkward and unsure as he pulls up the covers and tries to get comfortable. They lie in tense silence for a while until finally Jensen gives up and starts humming, something low and calming and before long he can feel Jared relaxing. He lets out a low breathy laugh, the covers rustling as he shifts into a more comfortable position.

“You gonna sing me to sleep, Jensen?” he asks in a low amused voice.

Jensen just hums.

It doesn't take more than five minutes before Jared is snoring. A little less than half an hour before he's rolling over, slinging one arm over Jensen's waist and burying his nose in his hair. A little over an hour before Jensen dares to breathe out and relax against Jared's chest, soaking up his warmth until his insides feel like liquid and his skin like an extension of Jared's own.

Jensen doesn't sleep. He lies counting Jared's heartbeats, slowing his own down until they beat in rhythm, one an echo of the other. Jared's arm is heavy over his waist, the fingers lying slack against his midribs. Every breath is warm in his ear, whispers of possibilities that will never happen.

'It's alright,' he tells himself. 'It doesn't matter. This, this is what matters. Jared being... Jared just being. That is enough. That will have to be enough.'

He fails his goal of staying awake until Jared has to get up by less than twenty minutes. He doesn't stir when Jared slides out of bed and gets dressed and is totally unaware of Jared standing silent by the bed, watching him for the longest time, before leaning over and kissing him on the temple. Then turning around and walking out, his shoulders slumped and his eyes tired when he nods to Chris standing silent in the hall.

Jensen sleeps on, dreaming of a grand piano, pulling him to the bottom of the ocean.

When he wakes up he's alone in his bed with Bluebear lying on the pillow beside him and Chris sitting in the chair by the window, watching him silently.

"Is he gone?" Jensen asks, his voice hoarse with sleep, and Chris nods.

He looks on edge, like he's expecting Jensen to blow up a storm or burst out crying. He doesn't. Instead he gets out of bed and walks over to the chest of drawers. His fingers linger over Jared's t-shirt that he'd hidden before Jared got there, just in case he'd want it back, but there's no use dwelling on what should be so he picks a simple black one, putting it on before grabbing his jeans.

"Coffee?" he asks and Chris breathes out.

"Yeah. In the kitchen. Got some donuts too."

"Thank you." He puts a hand on Chris's shoulder as he walks by. "I'll be alright," he says and Chris nods.

"Yeah, I know."

They're both shitty liars.



Jared makes it an hour out of New York before he has to pull to the side and stop. For the longest time he just sits there, head tilted back and eyes closed as he tries to

breathe. It doesn't work. It starts as a small hitch in his breath and then his eyes begin to burn and before he knows it he's shaking, sucking in his breath and making the kind of noise that he'd never in a million years let anyone hear. But it's just him here, alone, and no one to listen and so he cries, like he hasn't done in years.

"What the fuck am I doing?" he asks when the sobs finally subside, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "What the hell is happening to me?"

There is no answer.

He breathes in deep and lets it out slowly, in out, in out, and by the time he reaches fifty he's reasonably calm again. It's just because he's going to miss Jensen, he tells himself. And obviously he's feeling guilty because he knows how hard it will be for Jensen, him leaving. And possibly it's some kind of aftereffect of all the magic he's been breathing in the last three days. That's all.

Seriously, he's used to the people he love being far away from him. He hasn't seen his dad in two years, his mom since Christmas. He has a sporadic relationship with his siblings at best; somehow his less than successful life clashes with all of his brother's ideals and his sister is too busy being a senior in high school to spare him much thought. Christ, he hardly saw Sandy at all those four years she was in college. So yeah, he's not clingy, not anymore. There's no use needing people around you when all they do is leave.

Then why the hell does this hurt so much?

He takes a deep breath and wipes his eyes with the heel of his hand before putting the car in gear and swinging back into traffic. It's fortunately slow since he's really too distracted to handle anything complicated. Unfortunately it also gives him plenty of leeway to think. Like about what happened last night.

A part of him wants to think it must have been a dream but he knows it wasn't. No dream is that real. Plus he'd woken up in Chris's bed. With Jensen on the floor, back pressed against the wall, looking absolutely terrified. Christ. Jared's not sure what is bothering him more, the fact that Jensen thought himself capable of hurting him like that or that he apparently didn't remember what actually *did* happen.

Ok, so what *had* actually happened?

Jensen kissed him.

Correction: A Jensen kissed him. A Jensen that was... What had he said? "I'm the one I should be." Yes. His pure form. His magic form in his magical world. If the world Jensen sees was visible to everyone else, it would possibly look like Chris's room had looked that night. With fairies and impossibly bright colors and magic in every molecule.

So the Jensen he'd seen there, that is how he would look if people had that kind of magic goggles? Probably, but is that really how Jensen sees himself when he looks in the mirror? Somehow Jared doubts it. He remembers Jensen's puzzlement at being

considered attractive, like he just couldn't see it. Maybe mirrors only show what everyone else sees. Just like photographs. What you see is what you get. Plus ten pounds, according to his mother.

Anyway, yes. A Jensen had kissed him. Which isn't really that surprising, considering Jensen is in love with him. What *is* surprising is that... he'd kissed Jensen back.

Just thinking about it has his lips tingling and his cheeks turning pink. God, he kissed Jensen back. And it was the most amazing kiss he's ever experienced. If Jensen hadn't pulled back Jared probably would have passed out soon anyway, just because of how breathtakingly amazing it was.

The fact that the most amazing kiss he's ever experienced was with a guy? Pretty damn surprising as well.

The whole thing kinda throws everything he thought he knew about himself out the window. Like being straight. And monogamous.

He's never in his life cheated on the girls he's been with. Never. Just the idea is enough to make him hate himself. And yet all it needed was one press of Jensen's lips and that's where he goes, without a second thought. Cheating on Sandy. With a guy.

Christ, no. Not a *guy*. Jensen. Calling him a guy is like calling his mom a woman or his sister a girl. Which yes, they are, but it's not *all* they are. Not to him. And Jensen is not just a guy. Jensen is... Jensen. Above everything else he is *Jensen*, this magical being that is unexplainable and mysterious and just... Jensen. Him being a guy is as insignificant as the White House being made of stone.

Which might explain why he's not having a sexual identity crisis right now on top of everything else. It doesn't feel gay, wanting to kiss Jensen, it just feels like he wants to kiss Jensen.

God, he wants to kiss Jensen! Like really, really kiss him. Not just press their lips together but *kiss* him! Taste every inch of his mouth and swallow his air and just... fucking *kiss him*.

This time when he pulls to the side of the road it's for a whole other reason altogether.

'It's not real,' he tells himself, breathing heavily. 'It can't be.' Jensen must have put some spell on him, he just must have. Not on purpose, his freak-out last night clearly showed that as something he would never ever do. But yes. The love Jensen feels for him, mixed up with the magic around them... That must be it. It must be.

He ignores the little voice in his head that tells him that if that was the case, why does it feel like he's finally found the piece of puzzle that he's been missing his whole adult life?





“A laptop? *You* want a laptop?” the IT guy – Chad his name apparently is, which Jensen finds way more confusing than it should be – asks him for what seems the fifth time.

“Yes? They said I could. Should,” he corrects himself. “They said I should. When I started working here. Right?”

“Right. Three years ago.” The guy stares at him, still looking kinda shocked. “So... a laptop?”

“Yes! ” He really can’t see what the big deal is. Isn’t this what everyone’s been telling him to do? “A laptop. A computer you use on... on your lap. I guess. Something that will get me on the Internet.”

“*You* want to get on the Internet?” There’s a grin tugging at Chad’s lips now and Jensen frowns in irritation.

“Yes. Apparently it has music,” he adds because ‘I want to be able to communicate with Jared’ doesn’t really sound like a valid reason to get a free computer.

“Really?” Chad says and then he’s laughing. Openly laughing like Jensen is the most ridiculous person on the planet and fuck it, he’s had enough of this.

“Are you gonna give me one or not? Because they said I could get one here but if you don’t want to help me, if you’re just gonna stand there and *laugh* at me, then forget it. You obviously think I’m stupid. Well, I’m not. I’m *not* stupid. I can learn how to use one but not unless you stop laughing at me and *give* me one!”

He stops, sucking in his breath, eyes fixated on the messy desk before him. *This* was probably why Chris told him to take Tom with him. Which he hadn’t because Tom was busy teaching and Jensen had been too impatient to wait.

“Hey, chill,” Chad says, taken aback. “Dude, I don’t think you’re stupid. C’mon.” He gets up from behind his desk, pushing cables and other computer parts aside to make space big enough to lean against. “You want a laptop, I’ll get you the best damn laptop I have, man. Just give me some details and I’ll have one ready for you in no time.”

“Thank you.” He nods, his fingers repeatedly cramping into fists and straightening out again. He should have gone up to his studio first, played a little to calm himself down, but he’d been desperate to get this done. To do *something* to bring Jared closer to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“Dude, it’s ok. I was being rude. I just never thought I’d see the day when *you* wanted to get a computer.”

Jensen glances up to find Chad grinning at him but it doesn’t seem malicious, just amused. “Oh. Why?”

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

Jensen shakes his head. "I hardly ever remember anyone," he says in apology in case Chad feels hurt. "Sorry."

"No biggie." Chad shrugs, looking at him almost fondly. "Christmas party two years ago. You said the Internet was like artificial sweetening, giving people a false sense of comfort. That you'd rather eat your sugary doughnut alone than surrounded by digitally applied friends. Something like that."

"I did?" He frowns. He can't remember that conversation at all. "Was I drunk?"

"A little." Chad laughs. "So I'm guessing you found a friend."

"What? No! It's... Yes." He laughs awkwardly, averting his eyes when he feels his cheeks heating in embarrassment. "I did. Old friend from many years ago. But he lives in LA."

"Bummer. Well, let's get you hooked up then. What is it you want, apart from the Internet? You have wireless at home?"

"Yeah, I think..." he pulls the piece of paper out of his pocket, looking at Chris's notes. "Yes. But I need an email and... what's this?"

Chad takes note from his hand. "Messenger. Cool. Although our mail system runs on Gmail so you can use their chat if you want. That's what I do. Do you know what your friend has?"

Jensen frowns. He pulls up his phone, taking a few minutes to find the inbox with Jared's textmessage. '*Email: [jpad@gmail.com](mailto:jpad@gmail.com), Skype: just type my name*', it says. He shows it to Chad who grins.

"Great. You know, that's a GPS phone, right?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. "Pretty fancy one too."

"Yeah. I..." Jensen stops, remembering that Chad doesn't need to know why he has one. "Yes."

"Dude, you can get online with that. I mean, a laptop is better but if you want to just check your email or whatever you can totally use your phone too. It's got a built in Wi-fi, WAN and WLAN and..." He stops. "You have no idea what I'm talking about."

Jensen stares at him, blinking slowly.

"Right," Chad says after a moment of awkward silence. "Let's just start with the laptop."

He smiles and Jensen nods, relieved. All this stuff is making his head spin. Maybe him and Jared should just stick with talking on the phone. That at least he knows how to do. Not that they have yet. Jared just sent him a text message late last night to let him know he'd arrived in LA and then another one this morning with his email and

stuff. It's not the same as hearing Jared's voice but it's something. He's not sure why Jared doesn't just call him, or why he doesn't call Jared for that matter. It just seems... too much. For now. Maybe later, once they have this settled down.

An hour later he has a 14 inch MacBook equipped with everything he needs and a lot of stuff he's pretty sure he *doesn't* need and has little to no idea what's for. Chad shows him how to get online, finds and bookmarks their email login for him as well as gives him an email username. "JACKles or JensenA?" he asks and Jensen frowns.

"Can't I just get 'Jensen'?"

Chad looks at him, then shrugs and types in Jensen, grinning in surprise when it is approved. "Guess there's only one of you."

"There's just me," Jensen says. "No one but me."

"Well, it's a pretty unusual name," Chad points out, looking at him strangely. "And there are only so many people at Juilliard."

"Right," Jensen says awkwardly, realizing they're talking about two completely different things. "Lucky me."

He gets some programs for his music as well, to write notes and record and such. He has no idea how to use them but Chris can probably figure it out for him.

"Got to have something work related there, dude," Chad says and laughs when he blushes. "Seriously though, your colleagues will be thrilled to know you've finally joined the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You know you're the last one of our staff that's needed everything printed out and handed to him. Don't get me wrong, I don't think they've minded but this makes everything a lot easier."

Jensen looks away, uncomfortable. He had no idea. Why doesn't anyone ever tell him these things? Unless they did and he just forgot.

"If you need help or anything just let me know," Chad says and gives him a pat on the shoulder. "No shame in that."

"I have friends," Jensen says absentmindedly, stroking the laptop's smooth surface before he puts it in the case. "They help me all the time."

"Well, if you need one more, just holler. Or, you know, email."

"Thank you. Chad, right?"

"Yep. I'll send you an email with some links and stuff and..." He stops, giving an increasingly confused Jensen an encouraging smile. "You just play around and it will all start to make more sense, I promise."

"Right." He really doubts it will.



02:33 PM **jensen:** *Hello?*  
02:41 PM **jensen:** *Hello?*  
02:55 PM **jensen:** *Hello?*  
04:55 PM **jensen:** *Hello?*  
04:56 PM **jpgad:** *Jensen! Hey!*  
04:56 PM **jensen:** *Hey. How are you?*  
04:56 PM **jensen:** *Jared?*  
04:56 PM **jensen:** *Hello?*  
04:57 PM **jpgad:** *Sorry. Just moving into another room. And I'm good. How r u?*  
05:00 PM **jensen:** *What?*  
05:01 PM **jpgad:** *Sorry. How are you?*  
05:01 PM **jensen:** *Ok. I got a laptop*  
05:02 PM **jpgad:** *I can see that. lol*  
05:03 PM **jensen:** *What?*  
05:03 PM **jpgad:** *LOL, it's like... Never mind. Doesn't matter.*  
05:04 PM **jensen:** *Oh.*  
05:05 PM **jpgad:** *It's nice to see you*  
05:06 PM **jensen:** *You can see me?*  
05:06 PM **jpgad:** *I mean it's nice to chat with you. Like this.*  
05:06 PM **jensen:** *Oh. Ok. You too.*  
05:07 PM **jpgad:** *I miss you.*  
05:09 PM **jpgad:** *Jensen?*  
05:12 PM **jpgad:** *Jensen? Are you there?*  
05:12 PM **jensen:** *I have to go play now.*  
*jensen has signed off*

By the third day Jared is starting to think he made a huge mistake with the whole Internet idea. So far every attempt at chatting with Jensen has ended in him suddenly signing off with the very telling explanation that he needs to play his music. He's tried to send Jensen emails, one with a link to a video on YouTube of his dog playing catch and another with just idle chat about his day. He's gotten an answer to neither. He was going to send him instructions on how to join Facebook but then he realized he had pictures there of him and Sandy together and that would probably only make things worse.

After trying to ping Jensen for two days straight and never getting any answer even if the green dot by Jensen's name shows that he's on, Jared gives in and calls him. It rings for a while until finally a grumpy voice that's definitely not Jensen answers.

"Chris? Hey, it's Jared."

"I know. Dude, what is *wrong* with you?"

"What?"

"You put some goddamn ABBA song as your ringtone? Jesus Christ."

Jared raises his eyebrows in surprise. "Uh... I don't think so."

There's silence for a while and then Chris chuckles. "Well, I'll be damned. That sneaky little fucker. He told me he had no idea how mine changed to fucking Britney."

"So Jensen is having fun with his laptop." Jared laughs. "I told him he was a genius. Well, he told me ten years ago but with how he is now I thought maybe..." He stops, awkward. "So he's okay?"

"Depends on how you look at it. Man, I hate you."

"What?"

"Minesweeper. Every time I check on him he's trying to beat his record. Seriously, like it wasn't enough with the piano. And the books! Now I have to drag him away from the fucking computer as well? Fuck you, man."

"Sorry?" Jared sits down on the bed, really not sure what to say. "Is it that bad?"

There's a moment of silence but just when Jared's starting to get really worried, Chris chuckles. "Nah, it's alright. He's down to about twenty eight seconds on the Expert board. How low can he go? But man, if he wakes me up in the night one more time to show me a fucking YouTube video of a cat doing stupid stuff I will kill him, I swear." He sighs dramatically. "I'm just happy he hasn't discovered YouPorn yet."

"What?" Jared can hear a voice saying on the other end. "Who are you talking to?"

"Jared. Here."

That's all the warning Jared gets before he suddenly has Jensen, breathing into the phone. "Jared?"

"Hey. Hey, man. How are you?"

"Ok." Silence.

"Ok. Good. I was just... Just checking up on you. You've been kinda AWOL."

"What?"

"The chat thing. You don't like it? Is it weird? It's kinda weird, right? I'm sorry. It was a dumb idea. I don't know what..."

"I took the sound off," Jensen cuts in. "There was this bell, all the time. It was... distracting."

"Uh... yeah. That was me, trying to get in contact with you." Jared laughs a little.

"Oh. Sorry."

"That's ok. We don't have to do that if you don't want to..."

“I can’t hear you,” Jensen blurts out. He sounds nervous.

Jared frowns. “What? Now?”

“No. On the... the chat. It’s like...” He stops and then the words rush out, like he’s been holding them in for too long. “They’re just words. Written words. And I can’t... I don’t know what they mean. There are no colors or sounds and I can’t... It’s like it’s not you but just someone with your name, talking to me. It freaks me out.” He stops again, breathing deep and letting it out slowly.

“Oh,” Jared says. He hadn’t thought of that. “Is this better, us talking on the phone?”

“Yeah. Now I know it’s you,” Jensen says, and Jared can tell he’s smiling. “I like your voice. It’s warm. And purple.”

“Huh.” Jared smiles, imagining his voice floating out of the telephone like a purple mist. “Ok. We could try a web camera? Then you could see me too. Would that help?”

“Maybe.” He sounds unsure.

“You’d rather not? That’s ok.”

“It’s just... I think I look weird.” He breathes air into the phone. “When I talk to you.”

“You look weird?” Jared’s not sure whether to be concerned or laugh. “Weird how?”

There’s silence for a long time but finally Jensen sighs into the phone and says, “It doesn’t matter. Sure, yeah. We can try that.”

“Jen, we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. This is fine.” He smiles. “I like your voice too.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.”

Silence.

“You like the laptop?” Jared finally asks and Jensen breathes out in obvious relief.

“Yes. I thought it would be hard but then I wrote everything down, like notes, and it’s a lot easier now.”

“Like musical notes?” Jared asks confused.

“Yes!” He listens to Jensen go on enthusiastically about how the Internet is really just a series of sounds and images and how easily that can be transferred into a kind of digital musical that, once he saw played out in his head, had made everything so much

clearer. “But no, no magic. It doesn’t like that. Everything went black and I had to start all over again.”

“You tried to use magic on the computer?” Jared asks amused.

“No, not *tried*,” Jensen says, like Jared’s the one being absurd. “I didn’t *try*, it just happened. It was pissing me off and I... I guess I yelled at it.” He laughs, obviously embarrassed.

“Oh well, I do that all the time,” Jared says and laughs as well. “Computers have a way of doing exactly what you didn’t ask them to do.”

“Exactly! Stupid thing.” He goes silent for a while then says, “I saw the video of your dog. It’s beautiful.”

Jared grins. “Yeah? I thought maybe you didn’t get it since you never answered.”

“I’m supposed to answer?” Jensen asks, sounding confused.

“You don’t have to but it’s nice to let people know you’ve seen what they’ve sent.”

“Oh. Everything?”

“Well, no. Not everything,” Jared says and laughs. “Not spam. Chris has explained to you about spam, right? No giving your bank account number to some guy in Nigeria.”

“I just get spam about my penis,” Jensen says. “Why is everyone so concerned about the size of my penis? I don’t get it.”

Jared bites his lip, a hysterical giggle threatening to erupt. “I think the idea is to make *you* concerned about the size of your... of your penis. I’m sure you have nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried, just confused. I think my penis is fine.” He stops, seeming to suddenly realize what they’re talking about. “Uhm, awkward.”

“A little.”

“Right.” He coughs. “I need to go.”

“Ok, Jen. Talk to you later.”

“Right.”

The phone clicks off without a word of goodbye and he’s left lying on his bed, listening to the silence on the other end. Through the whole conversation he’s been scooting higher up on the bed, finally lying down to stare up at the ceiling. He feels all disjointed and hot and when he closes his eyes there are stars tingling behind his eyelids. He can hear the TV in the living room; it sounds like some reality show or

possibly a sitcom. The low murmur and laughter is soothing though, something ordinary and boring in this chaos of wonderment that's going on in his head.

*He opens his eyes and he's back in Chris's room, in that forest, with Jensen smiling at him. He knows he must have fallen asleep and is dreaming, but it all seems so real, maybe because that's what he wants it to be.*

*"I've missed you," he tells Jensen who doesn't fluster and look away but smiles only brighter, taking his hand and pulling him along.*

*"C'mon," he says. "I want to show you something."*

*They run through the forest, branches and twigs moving out of their way until finally they're standing in a wide clearing, warm and bright under the blinding sun.*

*"Look," Jensen says excited. "Look over there."*

*It's a unicorn. A full sized white unicorn, its silvery horn gleaming in the sunlight. It's the most beautiful creature Jared has ever seen. He stands frozen, staring wide-eyed and a little dizzy, Jensen's hand clutched in his own, as the unicorn lifts its head and looks at them. When it starts walking towards them Jared's first instinct is to back away but Jensen tightens his hold on his hand and whispers, "It's ok. It won't hurt you."*

*They stand still as the unicorn comes closer, finally stopping right in front of them, nostrils wide and fluttering. This close Jared can see that its eyes are sparkling blue, like blocks of ice, with long eyelashes that look frosted in snow.*

*"Is it cold?" he whispers. "If I touch it, is it cold?"*

*"No," Jensen whispers back. "It's just beautiful." He raises their clasped hands and allows the unicorn to sniff their scent before laying Jared's palm flat against its neck. "Feel that? Not cold at all."*

*He's right, it's not cold. It's warm and Jared's palm tingles where it touches its silky neck. He can feel its heartbeat pounding against his skin, slow and heavy like the big drum of an orchestra.*

*"Oh wow, Jensen. This is... It's amazing! Your world is so amazing." The unicorn nudges his neck with its nose and he laughs delighted. "A unicorn. I can't believe I'm touching a unicorn!"*

*"Are you happy?"*

*Jared turns his head to find Jensen looking up at him, hopeful and a little nervous, and when the unicorn slowly backs away Jensen steps forward, bringing them closer. "Are you, Jared? Happy?" he asks, gazing up at him with green and golden eyes.*

*"Yes," Jared answers and leans down, pressing their lips together. It's just as amazing as last time except Jared doesn't waste time thinking but pulls Jensen closer,*



*hands running up his arms to meet at the back of his head, weaving through the short hair and digging his fingertips into his scalp. Jensen whimpers, hands clutching at Jared's biceps as he slips his tongue into Jared's mouth and... God, yes!*

"Yes," he gasps into Jensen's mouth. "This. Oh God, Jensen, yes."

"Jared?"

He snaps his eyes open to find Sandy sitting on the bed beside him, a strange look on her face. When he reaches out for her, more for a grasp of reality than comfort, she pulls away, eyes downcast.

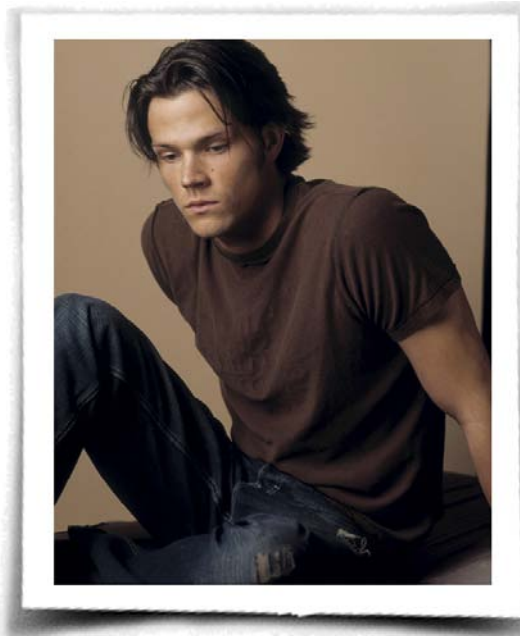
"Are you alright?" she asks warily. "You sounded..." She stops, blushing and Jared feels his face go hot.

"I'm fine," he says. "Just a dream. It was nothing."

"Right."

When she stands up to walk out he doesn't try to stop her.

Another week passes and it seems that whatever Jared tries to do it all turns in his hands and he only ends up making things worse. Jensen is subdued when he talks to him on the phone, often zoning out mid-sentence and Jared is left calling his name or listening to him breathe until Chris comes on to tell him Jensen is either asleep or has just left the room to go play the piano, not remembering to turn the phone off. The phone bill is going to be a nightmare Jared thinks but he can't bring himself to care.



He's having dreams now, almost every time he drifts off to sleep, whether that's at nights or in the daytime. Dreams so vivid and tangible that at times he isn't sure whether they actually *are* dreams or if Jensen is somehow sending images and thoughts straight into his head. All of them take place in the same place, showing him

more and more of Jensen's magical world, and all of them end in more or less the same way. Sometimes he kisses Jensen, sometimes Jensen kisses him, most times he can't tell who initiates it. It's just heat and wetness and Jensen's breath like gentle fingers on his skin. Whispers of 'Yes' and 'Please' and 'Wanted you for so long' that he doesn't know who belong to. He wakes up confused and so turned on and he just doesn't know what it is he wants anymore.

It must be Jensen, doing this. Right? Because he's not... he's not gay. And he loves Sandy.

Sandy who is so clearly unhappy he feels guilty every time he looks at her. She hasn't said anything but sometimes he looks up to find her watching him when he's talking to Jensen on the phone and more than once he's woken up from one of his dreams to catch the sight of her leaving the room, shoulders tight with tension.

He goes running in the dark, Harley panting by his side, feet hitting the pavement in sync with the pounding of his heart.

'I love her,' he tells himself. 'Why is this happening when I love her more than anything?'

'Not more than anything,' a voice whispers in his head that sounds suspiciously much like Chris's. 'Not more than Jensen. Right?'

He wants to yell, 'Why do you say that?' but instead he hears himself whisper, "No, not more than Jensen."

Harley woofs and tugs on his leash, urging him to go faster. He's more than willing to comply but however fast he runs he can't get away from his own conscience.

By Wednesday he calls Chris. He's not sure why, not like Chris would know anymore than Jensen himself if it's real or not. And it's not like Jared can tell him exactly *why* he thinks he might be hexed. It doesn't matter anyway because he doesn't get a single word in before Chris is talking.

"When are you coming up next?" he says in a hushed voice. "Are you coming this weekend? Please tell me you're coming this weekend."

"Why?" he asks, straightening up in alarm. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I think. Yes. Fuck man, I just don't know." He sounds stressed and worried and it's so unlike the Chris Jared has got to know that he can feel his stomach turning.

"Chris, you're scaring me here. What's going on?"

There's silence for a long time and then Chris suddenly says, "The piano's stopped playing. At nights. I know, I know, it's probably nothing but... It's played almost every night for eight years, man. The silence is freaking me out."

Ok, that sounds strange but Jared still doesn't quite get what the big deal is. "Have you asked him about it?"

"He just shrugs and says it's not his to control. Like hell. We both know that piano is like plugged into his brain." Chris breathes out. "I don't know, man. It's like... Last night I went to check on him and he was just sleeping."

Jared frowns. "Isn't that good?"

"Sleeping!" Chris hisses, clearly irritated. "No dreams. The room was just... it was just his room."

"Oh." Jared hesitates. "I thought he just did... you know, when he was upset or something."

"That's when the scary stuff comes out but no, it's always something. Butterflies or bunnies or some shit." Chris breathes out, his fingers tapping the phone nervously. "Maybe it was just a fluke, I don't know. Fuck, I hope so."

"Chris, what exactly is it you think is happening?" Jared asks confused. "It's not like he's losing his magic."

There's no answer and suddenly he gets it. "Chris? Are you kidding me? You think he's losing his magic?"

"Just get here, ok?" Chris says in a low voice and hangs up.

But the thing is he can't 'just get there'. There's no way. He's still working extra shifts to pay for the last trip and Sandy is already talking about what they can do when he finally gets a day off. And Chad may love him like a brother but he might possibly love his car more, judging by the protective cooing and petting it got when Jared got back last time. No way he'll be willing to lend it to him again so soon, not for such a long trip.

He's feeling torn with guilt in all directions. No matter what he does someone will get upset and disappointed with him and frankly, he's just not good at dealing with this kind of stuff, never has been.

"I don't know what to do," he tells Chad, head in his hands. "What the fuck am I supposed to do?"

"Dude, you're being a moron. What's the big deal? He's not a girl, he'll get over it." Chad sips his beer, voice casual, but the glances he keeps sending Jared are anything but. He always was a shitty liar.

“Have you been listening to anything I’ve said?” Jared says frustrated. “He’s losing his magic, man.”

“Don’t we all?” Chad says dramatically, cursing when Jared hits him. “He’s closing in on thirty, man. Maybe he’s just growing up. About time if you ask me.”

Jared throws up his hands in frustration and stands up. “You’re absolutely no help. I hate you.”

“Whatever.” Chad grabs him by the arm as he’s about to walk away. “Hey, man. You know I love Sandy but…” He stops, looking awkward.

“But what?” Jared asks, impatient.

“You guys have been looking miserable for months, man.” He shrugs. “Finding Jensen… it’s the happiest I’ve seen you in ages.”

Jared stares at him, not sure what to say. “Thanks,” he finally manages even if he has no idea what he’s thanking Chad for.

Chad nods, trying to look cool even if his face is flushed and he obviously feels uncomfortable about the whole thing. “Anytime.”

The more Jared thinks about it the more obvious it is to him that he has to do something. Maybe it’s time the mountain was moved instead of the other way around. He sends Chris a message, asking him when Jensen’s vacation starts, and gets a reply within minutes, telling him he’s got *“1 week left and he’s done. Why?”*

*“I can’t come to NY but maybe he can fly over here.”*

This time it takes about fifteen minutes before he gets a reply.

*“I’ll look into it,”* the text says and that’s all he knows for the next three days. Days spent nervous and worried that he’s just made a huge mistake. And wondering how he’s going to tell Sandy she’s about to get invaded by her least favourite person in the world and probably his guardian as well.

Monday night, just as they’re sitting down to eat dinner, Jensen calls him. It’s so unexpected that Jared just stares at his phone for a moment before flipping it open, heart hammering in his chest.

“Hey, Jen,” he says as he stands up, ignoring Sandy’s disapproving glare. ‘No calls during dinner,’ she mouths but he waves it away. She doesn’t understand how huge this is, Jensen calling him and not the other way around

“Hey,” Jensen says and he sounds so happy Jared finds himself automatically grinning in response. “Better break out the good china, dude. I’m coming to visit.”

“Really? That’s great!”

“It is, right?” Jensen asks, and now Jared can hear the nervousness underneath the excitement, like he’s terrified Jared might take his offer back.

“Hell yeah, it is.” He laughs and Jensen laughs with him. “It’s fucking awesome.”

“Awesome,” Jensen echoes happily, like he’s reminding himself of the word. “Yes.” He laughs again and Jared can hear someone talking behind him. “Yeah, yeah. Chill,” Jensen says and sighs. “Chris says you need to write this down. Saturday morning, eleven o’clock. LAX airport.”

“Hold on.” He rips a strip from today’s newspaper, cradling the phone between his shoulder and ear as he scribbles it down. “Ok, I’ve got it.”

“Good. What? No, I’m not gonna tell him that!” There’s a murmur of subdued voices and then Jensen comes back, sighing dramatically. “He says if you lose me he’ll kill you. He’s not gonna lose me, man!” he adds, clearly speaking to Chris. “I’m not a dog.” More murmur that sounds like ‘better sense of direction than you’ and Jensen growls, “But they can’t work a GPS phone, can they? I’ll be fine. And he won’t lose me!”

“You’re coming alone?” Jared asks surprised.

“Dude! Yes, I’m coming alone,” Jensen answers, his annoyance clearly escalating. “I can actually do stuff on my own, man.”

“I didn’t mean... Of course you can. I just thought...” he laughs, feeling awkward. “Never mind.”

“Christ, you two act like I’m a goddamn kid. I’m not stupid.” Something in the way he says that makes Jared’s chest tighten. Like it’s something Jensen feels he needs to repeat all the time, to himself as much as others, because somewhere along the line someone managed to convince him that maybe that is what’s wrong with him.

“I know you’re not,” he says softly. “You’re the smartest person I know.”

A loud noise startles him and he turns around to find Sandy already putting her plate away in the sink, face stoned. His dinner is left cooling on his plate, a poor collection of potatoes and meatballs, the gravy already congealing and unappetizing.

“Hey,” he says, turning his back on the angry display and concentrating on bringing the smile back in Jensen’s voice. “What do you want to do? The whole of LA is at your disposal. Oh, how long are you staying?”

“One week. Is that alright? I’m not imposing, am I? Oh damn,” he says, sounding stricken. “Sandy. She doesn’t like me. I forgot. Chris?” The phone starts vibrating in Jared’s hand.

“Hey, no, it’s okay,” Jared hurries to say. “That was years ago, man. She’s cool. She’s looking forward to meeting you again.” He doesn’t dare look at Sandy,

knowing she must be glaring at him, furious. “And a week, that’s wonderful. No problem at all. Dude, we’re gonna have so much fun.”

He’s going to have to call work to get some time off. And talk to Chad about borrowing his car. And somehow convince Sandy not to kill him. Basically he’s going to have to turn his whole life upside down for one week but damn if he even cares.

They chat for a while longer, planning places to see and things to do, and when they say goodbye Jensen is laughing happily and Jared feels elevated with anticipation. Over two weeks without Jensen and he’s not sure how long he would have held out before he’d have hijacked a car and driven up there, maxing out his credit card and probably losing both his job and Sandy in the process.

Talking about Sandy...

“Where is he going to sleep?” is the first thing she says after staring at him in disbelief for what seems forever.

Jared blinks. He hadn’t thought of that. The logical answer would be ‘the couch’ but Jensen doesn’t follow logic and turning their living room into an enchanted forest or something worse is not a good idea. Which means he has to have his own room and there is no other room.

“I don’t know,” he says, rubbing his face tiredly. “I’ll figure something out.”

She looks pained, eyes shifting to him and away. “Jared, I just don’t know if I can do this. You know how I feel about him.”

“And you know how *I* feel about him,” he bites back, starting to get frustrated. “You’re being irrational. Stop judging him on some childish phobia you had ten years ago!”

“I’m sorry! I can’t just...” She grits her teeth. “It’s just how I feel.”

“Sandy, that’s...” He stops. There’s no use getting angry, however idiotic he thinks she’s acting. “If you just took the time to get to know him again I know you’d like him,” he says patiently. “He’s impossible not to like.”

She nods but she doesn’t look convinced. “I’ll go stay with Sophia. It will give you two more time to... talk.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he sighs even if frankly it’s the only solution he can think of.

“I think I do.” She stands up, grabbing her jacket from the hook by the door. “I’m gonna go talk to her, make sure she’s okay with that.”

'Unlike you did with me' is implied but he doesn't rise to the bait, after all she's right. He should have asked first. He wonders what that means, that he didn't. 'To avoid the confrontation' seems like too simple a solution.

Saturday morning finds him waiting at the airport, nervously bouncing on the balls of his feet as he checks the board repeatedly. The plane landed twenty minutes ago and he's this close to walking up to the guard and demanding to be let in to look for Jensen. He's got his phone in hand, searching for Jensen's number when he sees him coming through the gate, backpack over his shoulder, eyes anxiously searching the crowd.

"Hey, Jen! Over here!"

All around them people look up confused when the whole terminal brightens like a playing field before a game, but Jared can't bring himself to worry about that. Not when he has Jensen, laughing and literally shining with happiness as he hurries over and throws his arms around Jared in delight.

"Jared," he laughs, completely void of all shyness as he buries his face in Jared's neck. "God, I've missed you."

Jared closes his eyes, breathing in the fresh and clean smell of Jensen, easily overpowering the stink of airplane fuel and bad food. Jensen feels warm and solid in his arms, like in every dream Jared has had for the last three weeks, and if it weren't for the deafening chatter around them he'd think he was back there, with nothing more than an illusion in his arms. Like any moment now Jensen might look up and then they'll be kissing, just like they've been doing every night.

He shivers, sucking in his breath and gripping Jensen even tighter to keep him from pulling back and seeing what must be clearly displayed on his face. "I missed you too, Jen," he whispers and Jensen laughs, squeezing him one last time before letting him go and stepping back. His face is flushed but he doesn't look embarrassed, just happy and Jared finds himself smiling back, pushing all thoughts of 'Did you do this to me?' back into the furthest corner of his mind.

"How are you?" he says instead, not mentioning that Jensen looks pale and tired, like he hasn't slept in a week. Or possibly two. Maybe it's just the sharp light of the terminal but he reminds Jared of a faded photograph, with all the colors just a little bit off.

"I'm good now," Jensen says with a smile, his inadvertent honesty making Jared's chest tighten. He smiles, pushing those thoughts of guilt aside as he puts his arm around Jensen's shoulders, pulling him tight as if that will make up for what he's put him through.

"That all you've got?" he asks. "One backpack?"

“It’s only a week,” Jensen says, shrugging. “Don’t need that much. Don’t worry,” he adds with a grin, “Chris made sure I brought clean underwear and socks so I shouldn’t smell too bad.”

Jared laughs. “So what did *you* pack?”

“Jeans, t-shirts, toothbrush and music. Oh and Minna.”

“Minna?”

“My cat.” He frowns. “I’m actually not sure I needed to do that since, you know, she’s not real, but I thought if I didn’t and she got left in New York she would be really pissed off when I got back.”

Jared shakes his head in amusement. As used to as he’d gotten to Jensen’s ways in New York, having him here in LA is kinda like meeting your teacher outside school. Strange and bewildering.

“I’ve got the car in the car park. C’mon,” he says, steering Jensen the right way. He notices people looking at them but it’s not hostile, quite the contrary. Mostly they’re glancing at Jensen, looking a little dazed and unsure, like they’re wondering if it’s someone they should know. This is LA, after all, Hollywood’s cradle. And Jensen sure looks the part.

“You have a car?” Jensen asks. He sounds a little off but when Jared looks down at him he’s met with the same bright smile.

“It’s Chad’s,” he explains. “The same one I drove to visit you.”

“Oh. Ok.” Jensen shifts the strap on his shoulder, hoisting the backpack up higher. “Right. Is it far to your place?”

“Not that far.” Jared shrugs. “Twenty, thirty minutes maybe. Depends on the traffic.”

“Right,” Jensen repeats, biting his lip. Jared can definitely feel the tension now in Jensen’s shoulders, and he pulls him in a little tighter.

“You alright?” he asks and Jensen nods.

“Yeah. Just... not too fond of driving.” He shrugs.

“Oh.” It’s not like he can leave the car and take the metro. Chad would kill him. “I’m a very safe driver, I promise.”

“Yeah, of course.” Jensen looks up at him and smiles. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

He doesn’t look too fine though, hunched in the passenger seat with his arms wrapped around his backpack like a shield and his eyes squeezed shut, jumping every time someone honks a horn or a loud engine zooms by. Jared throws him worried glances,



debating which will reassure Jensen better, keeping both hands on the wheel or offering one to Jensen for comfort.

“We’ll be there soon,” he says and risks putting his right hand on Jensen’s knee. “Ok?”

Jensen nods, keeping his eyes closed. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m completely insane.”

“Nah, no more than usual.” He squeezes Jensen’s knee to let him know he’s joking and Jensen laughs shakily.

“I had these nightmares,” he says after a while of tense silence. “Inside. Of being trapped in the middle of a highway with cars crashing into me, again and again, ripping me limb from limb. They always felt very real. Really, really painful. And terrifying.”

“Jesus!” Jared glances at him startled. Great timing with that joke, asshole.

“I know they weren’t real but my... ‘thing’ forgets and...” He breathes out slowly. “I don’t really handle being scared very well.”

“What happens?” Jared asks quietly, his eyes firmly on the road. Like hell he’s gonna risk getting Jensen in a damn accident.

“Time freeze.” Jensen’s knee shifts under his hand and Jared risks another glance over to find Jensen watching him out of the corner of one half-shut eye. “I did that with you once.”

“What?”

“You almost got hit by a car, remember? I panicked and everything froze.” Jensen smiles a little. “Which made me panic again and I almost pushed you back in front of the damn thing.”

“You saved my life?”

Jensen blushes and squeezes his eyes shut again. “You’ve saved mine many times,” he mumbles.

Jare can’t remember doing that, mostly he seems to break Jensen’s heart and bring him misery but he doesn’t say anything, just squeezes Jensen’s knee awkwardly and concentrates on driving.

The apartment seems eerily silent when he unlocks the door and he realizes Sandy must have taken Harley with her to Sophia’s. Not really what they talked about but on the other hand he hadn’t asked Jensen how he’d feel about staying in a small apartment with such a big dog. And then there’s Minna to consider. The fact that he’s worrying about an imaginary cat feels a lot less disturbing than it probably should be.

“Here we are,” he says, stepping aside to let Jensen in. “It’s not as big as your place but I hope it’s alright.”

“Of course it is,” Jensen says, glancing warily at one of Sandy’s coats, hanging by the door.

“Sandy’s not here,” Jared hurries to say. “She’s staying with a friend.” He hesitates. “But I thought maybe you two could meet, tomorrow or something. Would that be alright?”

“Sure.” Jensen gives him what looks like a genuine smile. “I’d love to meet her again.” He nods thoughtfully. “I need to let the cat out of the bag.”

Jared’s eyes widen. “What?”

“Minnie.” Jensen slides the strap off his shoulder and sits on his heels with the backpack on the floor. “C’mon, girl.” He opens the bag and murmurs something inaudible before straightening up again with a soft smile. “Poor thing. She really didn’t like the plane.”

“Oh.” Jared stares down at the floor but he can’t see anything. “Yeah, I forgot to ask, how was your flight?”

“Weird.” Jensen shakes his head, frowning. “Not as fun as I thought it would be. First it felt like my lungs were being pushed down into my stomach. Then it felt like my stomach was trying to crawl up into my lungs. Interesting but not fun. I didn’t get sick though. Or scared.”

“Just as well,” Jared can’t help blurting out. “With the time freeze and all.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Jensen shrugs, completely oblivious to Jared going deadly pale. Jesus! *No one* had thought of that!

“Gonna give me the grand tour?” Jensen asks and Jared shrugs himself out of his morbid thoughts.

“Sure. There’s not much to see though.” He goes ahead of Jensen, pointing out to him where the kitchen is, then walking through the living room and to the bedroom, finishing with a peek into the bathroom. “That’s it,” he says when Jensen looks at him expectantly.

“Oh.” Jensen blinks. He walks back into the living room, biting his lip as he takes everything in.

“You can sleep in our room and I’ll just sleep out here,” Jared hurries to say. “So you can totally close the door and it should be alright.”

“That’s not…” Jensen starts then stops. He continues gnawing at his lip, looking increasingly distressed. His fingers twitch and he curls them into fists, banging them rhythmically against his thighs, and Jared suddenly gets it.

“There’s no piano,” he says stupidly and Jensen sucks in his breath. “Oh fuck. I… My mom has it. There was no room and I wasn’t playing anyway. I didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Jensen nods to himself, teeth digging into his upper lip. “It’s no big deal. It’s only a week. I have my iPod and my… my fingers. I can just…” He drums his fists faster against his thighs. “It’s okay.”

“No. Wait.” Jared flips his phone open, finding Chad’s number. “I can fix this,” he tells Jensen but he’s not listening. He’s digging through his backpack, finally pulling out his iPod and stuffing the plugs into his ears.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, too loud over the music already playing in his ears. “Just need a little… fix.” He laughs nervously and Jared gives him a smile back, silently cursing while he waits for Chad to pick up his goddamn phone.

“Dude, I was sleeping,” Chad’s grumpy voice finally says in his ear and Jared sighs in relief.

“I need a favor. Now.”

“I’m *sleeping!*” Chad repeats annoyed but Jared can hear him getting out of bed. “What the fuck is so important?”

“You still have your keyboard somewhere?” he asks. “The electric one?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I need to borrow it. Now.”

“Why are you…? Ah,” Chad says as realization dawns. “Wonderboy is here.”

“Stop calling him that. And yes. He needs something to play on. I forgot.”

“He *needs*? Why does he need…?” Chad sighs. “Never mind, I don’t really care. I’ll get it to you.”

“Hurry, ok?”

“Fuck you,” Chad says and hangs up but fifteen minutes later he’s standing on the doorstep, looking sleepy and grumpy but carrying the electric keyboard that was going to bring him fame and fortune when he went through what had to be at least his third I-wanna-be-a-rockstar phase two years ago.

“Finally!” Jared grabs the instrument, leaving the door open as he hurries into the living room. Chad kicks off his sneakers and follows him, looking curious and a bit wary.

“So is he like flipping or something?” he starts, stopping abruptly when he spots Jensen sitting on the floor in the middle of the living room, eyes closed and fingers tapping furiously on his thighs. There are black music notes flying all over the room like manic bats. “Holy shit!”

“Help me plug it in,” Jared says, paying him no mind.

“He’s... What...what is he doing?” Chad stutters.

“Playing,” Jared answers, fighting to get the damn legs unfolded and under the keyboard. “C’mon, help me. Where does this go?”

“Are those...notes?” Chad whispers and Jared sighs. Clearly he can forget any help from that department.

“Yes,” he says impatient, frowning as he tries to sort out the different cables and plugs. “Why are you acting so surprised?”

Chad stares at him. “Dude, music notes! In your living room! How’s he doing that?”

“I told you, he’s playing,” Jared says exasperated. “That’s what music is, notes. No wonder you never made a rock star,” he adds with a snort.

“Music? Jared, there’s *no* music! He’s playing on his knees. There’s no sound!” Chad stops. “What am I saying? Jared, listen to me. There are actual black music notes flying around in your living room. *Why are you not freaking out?*”

“It’s Jensen,” Jared says, shrugging, and Chad starts laughing hysterically.

“I’m insane! I thought you were, that *you* were insane but turns out it’s me! *I’m* insane! It’s real? All the magic stuff, it’s really real?”

Jared sighs. “Chad, stop being an idiot and help me hook this up. Or I’ll ask him to turn you into a frog,” he adds, just for the fun of it.

Chad’s laughter cuts off. “He can’t... he wouldn’t... He can do that?”

Jared shrugs, biting his lip to keep from laughing. “Dude, he made snow. Like Santa, remember? So what do you think?”

“Oh shit.” Chad hurries over and they’ve got the keyboard hooked up in no time.

“Did you bring headphones? My walls are pretty thin.”

“Yeah yeah,” Chad says, pulling huge headphones out of his backpack. “This alright?”

“Should be fine.” Jared walks over to Jensen and crouches down beside him. “Hey, Jen?” he says, tapping him on the knee. “I got you something.”

Jensen looks up, blinking. “What?” he says, too loud, and Jared taps his ear, reminding him off the earbuds. “Oh, sorry.” He puts the music on pause and grins. It looks slightly manic. The black notes start fading, turning grey and wispy. “What did you say?”

“I got you something. C’mon.” He stands up, tugging Jensen to his feet and pulls him to the keyboard. “Think you can play this?”

Jensen stops and stares at the instrument, blinking slowly. He reaches out, touching the thin plastic keys with the tips of his fingers, then pushes one down. It makes a weird sound, like a cat meowing.

“Sorry, sorry,” Chad says in panic. “I’ll fix it.” He starts fiddling with the setting, his hands shaking. Maybe Jared should let him know Jensen can’t really turn him into a frog. He thinks. Probably not anyway.

All the while Jensen stands back, frowning as he watches Chad work on the different knobs and switches. His fingers have gone back to drumming against his thighs but he looks more intrigued than stressed.

“Here you go,” Chad says and smiles ridiculously wide. “Piano!”

“It’s not a piano,” Jensen says absentmindedly but he presses down a key anyway, his face brightening in surprise when it gives him a perfect A. “Oh cool.”

“It’s okay?” Jared asks. “I mean, I know it’s not as good as a real piano but I thought maybe it would help.”

Jensen plays a few more notes, the beginning of a familiar melody that Jared can’t quite pin down, and then he grins. “Dude, it’s awesome! Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me, thank Chad,” Jared says and grins. “He brought it over.”

“Chad?” Jensen looks over at a dazed Chad like he’s just now seeing him. “Oh hey. Chad. You still a jerk?”

Chad abruptly looks away from a pair of blue butterflies, fluttering around his head. “I’m not a…” he starts, glaring at Jensen insulted, but then seems to remember who he’s talking to and just smiles awkwardly. “Would a jerk have brought you a keyboard?”

“I guess not,” Jensen says and grins at him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Chad says and nods. “Anytime.” He breathes out. “I need a beer,” he blurts out and practically runs out of the living room.

“What’s up with him?” Jensen asks confused.

“I might have told him you could turn him into a frog,” Jared admits, blushing when Jensen stares at him. “Sorry, I couldn’t help it. Did you see his face?”

For a moment he thinks Jensen is going to be angry but then a smile starts tugging at his lips and he grins. “He thinks I’m gonna turn him into a frog?”

Jared nods, grinning back. “Think we can scare him into buying us pizza?”

Jensen chuckles. “Oh, you *are* evil.”

Just then Chad comes back and Jensen’s eyes snap to him, narrowing dangerously. “What is this? You didn’t bring *us* any?” he accuses, and Chad turns on his heel, running back into the kitchen.

Jared has to bite the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing, almost losing it when Chad comes running back, carrying two extra beers and apologizing in panic, and Jensen waves one hand and says, “I absolve you” in a pompous voice.

The relieved look on Chad’s face quickly turns into confusion and then resentment when Jared bursts out laughing and Jensen stands smugly sipping his beer.

“Ribbid, ribbid,” he says innocently and Jared has to sit down he laughs so hard.

“You’re the jerk, you know that? Both of you,” Chad says annoyed. “Fucking assholes.”

“Drink your beer and stop bitching,” Jared says laughing, wiping at his eyes with his fingers. “Seriously, Jen, do you think you can use it?”

Jensen nods, drinking down half his beer before putting it away. “Lets see how it sounds.”

“Don’t you mean ‘hear’...? Chad starts but stops abruptly when Jensen starts playing and colors begin spreading out from the spot he stands on, transforming the room into an entirely new world.

### ***Beethoven: Piano Sonata #14 - Adagio Sostenuto / Jenö Jandó (5:15)***

It’s the same piece as Jensen had started on earlier and Jared recognizes it now as a sonata by Beethoven, a melody he’s always thought to be rather overplayed and boring. Until now.

Jensen plays it low, so quietly in fact that Jared has to strain his ears to hear the lowest notes. Maybe it’s how the piece speaks to him, maybe it’s because he’s aware Jared’s home isn’t built for anything too loud. Whatever it is, it’s beautiful. Jared can hear children laughing in the distance and the sound of feet running over cobblestones. The air smells old, like the steps of a stone church. A dove coos somewhere above and the room is yellow with the light of flickering candles.

“Did we just take acid?” Chad whispers and Jared hushes him. Tears spring to his eyes and he quickly blinks them away, sucking in his breath as quietly as he can. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed Jensen’s music. It’s like seeing an old friend again, like breathing in the warm air of spring after a particularly hard winter.

“I think I get it now,” Chad suddenly whispers, so low he’s barely breathing the words.

“What?” Jared whispers back.

“Why he makes you act like a girl.” Chad hitches his breath and Jared glances over to see glittering eyes in a flushed face. “Jesus Christ, what the fuck are you doing still living in LA, Jared?”

Jared stares at him then turns his head and gazes at Jensen. “I don’t know,” he says quietly. “I really don’t know.”



Jensen never imagined that Jared’s home would feel like a stranger’s. Somehow he’d expected it to be like Jared’s old room, chaotic and comforting. It’s not. It’s tidy and nice and smells like flowers. Even if he blocks out the couple-y pictures of Sandy and Jared on the walls he can still see Sandy in every little detail. The pillows, the magazines, the selection of food in the cupboards. He wants to ask Jared, ‘Where is *your* stuff?’ but it seems rude. Maybe this is Jared’s stuff now. Maybe this is the person he is now. Organized. Neat. Fond of flowery things.

He feels better now. Better and a bit embarrassed. He hadn’t realized how dependant he’d become on having access to a piano whenever he needed one until suddenly he was without. Only for a few hours but they were hours dealing with emotions he usually *did* need the piano for; fear, nervousness and insecurity.

He’d kept his eyes closed most of the flight because all around him people were dealing with their own fear, excitement and sadness which didn’t help at all with *his* feelings. Alone on a plane with no one around to pull him out if he got lost in his thoughts. He read the safety brochure five times before take-off even if once was enough to memorize it. Just to be sure. A flight attendant asked him if he was alright and he couldn’t answer because the butterflies in his stomach were trying to crawl out of his mouth. Then when the plane was landing he watched the ground approaching fast as the atmosphere around him intensified and all he could think of was Jared being there somewhere below, waiting for him, and he’d had to hold on to the armrests to keep the plane from lifting with him. Jared hugging him tight sent his heart into overdrive and he was buzzing with so much energy he could feel the electricity in the building vibrating, threatening to blow out. The drive through LA’s traffic was the final straw and by the time they reached Jared’s apartment all he could think of was laying his palm on the belly of Jared’s piano and breathe in its serenity. Except it wasn’t there. Cue freak-out.

Seems every time he tries to show Jared how normal and independent he can be, he just ends up looking like a lunatic.

“I’m sorry,” he says. They’re walking, Sunset Boulevard stretching out before them like a landmark of failed fortunes. “I didn’t know I’d be like that.”

“Like what?” Jared asks, sounding genuinely bewildered, and Jensen doesn’t know whether to be sad or relieved that Jared doesn’t even notice how weird Jensen is anymore. Like this is normal now, for him and them.

“You know. Freaked without my music.”

“Oh that.” Jared shrugs. “Totally my fault. I didn’t think of it. Which is weird because I knew, you know. I just... You and the piano are like merged in my mind and I kinda forgot *I* didn’t have one.”

Jensen wants to tell him once again that his weirdness is never Jared’s fault but Jared never listens to him anyway.

“You know,” he says instead, “the whole reason I learned to play the piano was to better be able to control myself. And then I wind up like this.” He waves a hand in front of him awkwardly. “It’s like... an addiction. No,” he corrects himself, frowning, “that’s not it. It’s... It’s like air. I can’t function without it. Which makes me... handicapped.”

“Jensen...” Jared says gently but Jensen shakes his head.

“Maybe I should have tried harder, on my own,” he says. “Back then, you know. Then I wouldn’t be like this.” He curls his fingers into fists, the thought of being without his music enough to make his hands twitch in need. A fix, that’s what he’d called it back at Jared’s place. Maybe it is an addiction after all. Maybe he’s just a fucked up loser druggie.

“I don’t think it’s that,” Jared says, his fingers stroking briefly over Jensen’s lower back, seemingly by accident, before continuing. “I don’t think learning to play made you need it. But I think maybe *not* being *able* to did.” He looks at Jensen, smiling sadly. “When I knew you... it was different. *You* were different. You played to express your emotions. But now... now you play because you’re afraid of them.”

Jensen stops in his tracks, bringing them to a halt. He wants to say that’s not true. That he isn’t afraid of his emotions, he just doesn’t like losing control to them. But he suddenly realizes it *is* true. He *is* afraid of his emotions. They’re like his own personal demons: Fear, Anger, Grief. Bad things happen when they’re around. But playing makes them weaker, like the piano is a third party he can channel them through. They still do bad things, just on smaller scales. Instead of flooding the Earth it simply rains. Instead of creating wars he just pictures them.

“You were without your music for two years, Jen,” Jared says, watching him. “Just when you needed it the most. It’s like, they had this balance, your emotions and your music, and when they took away both for so long the balance was corrupted. The way



I see it you use your music to suppress your emotions because your emotions are trying to control you. It's like a circle or, you know, a triangle. You, your music, your emotions. Bumping into each other at the corners but unable to break the continuity. It's a kind of psychological dependence, but with magic added to the mix." He stops, looking awkward. "Or something like that. Sorry. I sometimes forget I'm not..." He shakes his head and laughs a little. "I have no idea what I'm talking about."

"You did psychology at college," Jensen says, understanding suddenly dawning. "That's what you wanted to learn."

Jared stares at him. "Yes. How did you know?"

"This," Jensen says, waving his hand between them, "trying to make order out of chaos." He smiles softly, small things he'd been wondering about starting to make sense. "Your head, it was messy. Complicated. Like your room, remember?"

Jared nods, frowning like he just now remembered that conversation. "Yeah. One big fucking mess."

"But it was alright, Jared," Jensen tells him. "You were going to figure it out."

Jared shakes his head. "But I didn't. It just got messier. And... I stopped finding things." He swallows. "After... after everything happened."

Jensen nods. "So you wanted to understand why. What makes people do unthinkable things. Like leave the one they're supposed to love forever." Like Jared's parents. And, although not voluntarily, Jensen himself.

"Or lock someone up they're supposed to protect," Jared adds slowly. "Yes. I did."

Jensen swallows. "So what happened? What made you give up and drop out?"

Jared looks away, flushed and uncomfortable. "I couldn't do it. The more I learned the more confused I got. I just... I guess I became depressed. Because it all seemed so pointless, you know. There *is* no order behind the chaos. There's just chaos."

Jensen looks at him, suddenly seeing it. Jared got lost, just like he does. Except where he gets lost in his head to escape what he can't deal with out here, in the real world, Jared got lost in the real world because he couldn't see inside his head. Inside anyone's head.

"It's not all chaos," he says. "Jared, it's not all chaos." He smiles. Maybe there is a way he can be of use. "Jared, I've seen inside and it's beautiful."

Jared shakes his head. "Maybe inside your head. Your head is different. You have a whole world in there."

"Everyone does. Where do you think your dreams come from? Your imagination? Music?" He taps his temple. "In here," he tells Jared then runs his fingers into Jared's hair, cupping the side of his head. "And in here."

He smiles up at Jared who just stares at him, mouth slightly open. Jensen tenses, thinking he must have said something wrong but then Jared breathes in and tilts his head, just a little. Just enough to be leaning into the touch. He licks his lips, blinking slowly and Jensen freezes. He's been here. This, this has happened before. He can feel it. Them, him and Jared, standing like this and...

He pulls away abruptly, his fingers slipping out of Jared's hair and sliding over his ear in the process. It makes Jared hitch his breath and he steps closer, just a tiny movement but it's enough to make Jensen panic.

"We should get back," he says and turns away. "I'm hungry. Are you hungry? Chris said, 'Make sure to eat.' That's what he said. He worries, all the time because I forget. Sometimes. Sometimes I forget. To eat and sleep and... everything. I forget everything."

"Jensen..."

Jensen shakes his head and starts walking back the way they came. "Not you, man. Never forgot you. Did I tell you that?" He knows he's rambling but he just can't seem to shut up. "I never forgot you. All that time. And it was a very long time, Jared. Such a fucking long time."

"Jensen," Jared says, sounding pained, and he lays a hand on Jensen's shoulder. It feels heavy. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." He smiles and shrugs, all casual and so fucking obvious. "You didn't put me there. They did. Or *I* did. I lost control so that's what had to be done."

"Not about that. I mean, I *am* sorry about that but that wasn't what I was talking about. I meant..." Jared stops, his fingers curling around Jensen's shoulder. "Wait, what? Jensen, no. Are you kidding me? Christ, you think what, that you *deserved* to be there?"

He frowns. "No, not... Not *deserved*. I wasn't being punished. It wasn't like that. There was just no other way, that's all."

"Of course there was," Jared objects angry. "You're here now, man. You're functioning fine."

"Fine? You call this fine? Where the fuck have you been these last few weeks?" Jensen laughs shakily. "Jared, I freaked out because I had no piano. I freak out in traffic. I freak out when you..." He takes a deep breath. "I'm not fine, Jared. Right now, I'm a frigging mess. And this is one of my good days. I'm actually *happy* now."

"Jensen," Jared says patiently, "most of that, hell pretty much *everything* that freaks you out has to do with what happened to you in there. It *wasn't* right. You should never have been put in there."

"Don't. Don't say that."

“Why? It’s true. You’re dependant on your music because they took it away from you. You can’t handle your emotions because they suppressed them. You are terrified of people leaving you because your family left you there. The nightmares you had there are still messing you up and... I know you don’t want to talk about it but Jesus, Jen, you lost your virginity when you were drugged up to your eyeballs and now you’re afraid of intimacy with everyone.”

He sighs, his breath warm on Jensen’s face. Jensen wishes he could breathe it in because he feels frozen. His bones are brittle with the cold, his blood thumping sluggishly through cooling veins. He can’t feel his toes or fingers. He can’t feel anything. He wishes he could breathe. He really, really needs to breathe.

“Ok, so... yes. You freak out. But you also deal with it. You don’t let it get out of hand. Jensen,” Jared says, putting his large hand on the side of Jensen’s head, mirroring his touch earlier, “you’re doing fine.”

There’s a tingling sound in Jensen’s ears when the ice breaks and he sucks in his breath. It’s dizzying, what feels like pure oxygen going to his head, and he sways on his feet, high with it.

“I...” he tries but it’s too hard to find the words so he fumbles for Jared’s hand instead, pulling it down to his chest. “This,” he breathes and closes his eyes.

He doesn’t open them, not even when Jared’s hand starts to shake, heel bumping into his chest. He just lets it flow, what he remembers from Inside. Not all of it, there’s no point in Jared seeing his nightmares or watching him being manhandled into showers and down on beds because he was too drugged to walk or see where he was going. He doesn’t show him Mason, so desperate and so broken, asking for something Jensen knew he shouldn’t give but was too empty inside to see how it would matter. He keeps away the times he cried for his mother and grieved for his father. The times he couldn’t remember if his sister was real or just another figment of his imagination. The days when the only thing he *could* remember was Jared’s name.

Instead he shows him the monotony of days spent in shades of grey and void of emotions. Staring at blank walls and breathing in stale air that tasted of nothing but sour sweat, boiled cabbage and disinfectant. Lets him feel the roughness of the clothes, the slickness of the floors. The slim shape of the pills on his tongue and the sting of the needle sliding into his arm. Hands, touching him, trying to wake him up. Voices talking somewhere outside his vision. The sudden understanding that he would never get out of there unless he became what they wanted him to be. Happy.

He opens his eyes, breathing in the fresh air of outside. Of Los Angeles in June with Jared and music and friends waiting for him back in New York. That’s where he is now, he tells his heart as he breathes out, feeling it gradually slow down to almost normal. He lifts his head and is met with Jared’s tearstained face, his nose red and shiny in the middle of sickly paleness.

“I’m sorry,” Jensen says, praying for him to understand. He feels drained, sucked dry and spit out, but he holds his head high, faking himself strong to keep Jared from more distress. “I had to... You need to see.”

“I saw,” Jared sobs. “God, Jen. How could they...?”

“No. Don’t.” Jensen shakes his head. “Not that. You need to understand. I need for you to understand. It was two years. Two fucking years, Jared. But I got out. I got out, ok? So don’t... don’t tell me I’m like this because of that place. No. I’m not there anymore. I’m not *there* anymore!”

Jared stares at him like he’s lost all meaning, like he’s speaking in riddles that can’t be solved. He’s well aware of how he sounds. How irrational and naïve and just plain crazy but he doesn’t care. It’s his right to refuse to believe that that place still controls him, eight years later. It’s his choice, however irrational and untrue it is. He took a stand, a long time ago, and he’s not backing down. ‘Please,’ he thinks, ‘please Jared. Please understand.’

Just when he thinks Jared is going to call him on it, is going to use his logic and psychology to reason with his stupid denial Jared suddenly smiles shakily and says, “Did I ever tell you about the time my mom sent *me* to a shrink?”

Jensen frowns, not sure where this is going. “No. She did?”

“Yeah. It didn’t help though. Turns out once you’ve grown this tall there’s no going back.”

Jensen stares at him. Jared is grinning hopefully, his eyes still rimmed red and wet and Jensen doesn’t think he’s ever loved him more than in this moment. A smile starts tugging at the corner of his mouth and before he knows it he’s laughing, doubling over and wheezing. Jared’s grin widens, looking stupidly pleased with himself.

“You...” Jensen gasps and then just continues laughing until he’s got tears running down his face and Jared is thumping him on the back as he heaves for breath.

“It doesn’t take a lot to amuse you, does it?” Jared says happily. “Of course I *am* awesome.”

“You are,” Jensen says, shaking his head as he tries to get his breath back. “You’re also a frigging idiot.” He grins up at Jared and Jared grins back, his relief evident.

“You hungry?” he says and Jensen nods. He actually is. Starving in fact. He still feels weak from projecting all those memories that he usually does his best to suppress, like to the furthest part of his mind where no light ever shines. The aftereffects are not as bad as when he did it with Tom though. Maybe it’s something that gets better with practice. Not that he really plans on practicing letting people peek inside his head.

Jared takes him to a little Italian place with pictures of Hollywood stars on the walls, most of them dead and more than half of them forgotten. The waiter greets Jared like an old friend and sends Jensen curious looks of mild disapproval and he realizes with a bang that this is a place Jared frequents with Sandy. It’s almost enough to make him back out, fake tiredness and loss of appetite but his stomach is growling too loud and Jared looks too psyched for that to be an option. All through the meal he keeps catching Jared watching him, looking contemplative and calculating but whatever it is

he's quick to brush over it with a smile when he realizes he's been caught staring. Jensen lets it go for now, not sure he really wants to know what Jared is thinking. Maybe it means something, Jared taking him here. Or maybe he just is that oblivious.

Jensen wants to believe Jared hasn't figured him out yet but there are signs constantly popping up that makes it hard to deny that it is a definite possibility. The cautious way he always mentions Sandy's name is one. The 'moment' they had earlier is another. And the fact that he didn't seem surprised at all that Jensen thought he had molested him in his sleep. Pretty big signs, that's what they are. Like billboard sized. He should just ask Jared, just put it on the table for them to deal with. It's what a responsible adult would do. It's what the person he's trying to prove he is would do.

On the other hand there's the fact that he's stuck in LA with nowhere to go if it all goes to hell.

They keep their talk light over dinner, mostly on the subject of music and old memories, the kind that only makes them smile. They are surprisingly many, Jensen realizes. Not that he wasn't happy back then, most of the time, when Jared was around, it's just that in his head the memories have all blurred together. It takes Jared reminding him of different days, different events, to make him realize how much he's lost. It's unsettling because he thought he remembered everything about Jared. And he does, mostly, it's just his sense of time that's lost, making what were actually several Wednesdays and weekends spread over many weeks feel like one day.

After dinner they stroll home, breathing in the early night air and enjoying the atmosphere. Jared keeps close while Jensen tries to keep his distance, not sure he can deal with all this 'Jared' at once. Jared's presence is overwhelming, like drowning in champagne. Considering he's going to stay here a week, overdosing on the first day doesn't seem like a good idea.

By the time they get back he's dragging his feet, feeling exhausted to the bone. He hadn't slept much the night before the flight. Or really any night the last two weeks or so it seems. He knows he does fall asleep because he wakes up in the mornings but he feels just as tired as he did before he went to bed and he can't remember dreaming, not even bad ones. As stupid as it sounds he misses them, his dreams. Somehow they feel like the only place where he can let go and just be himself without having to worry about what might happen if he thinks or does the wrong thing. Without that outlet he should be bursting, high strung with built up magical energy, but the strange thing is he's not. In fact, being here is the most alive he's felt in weeks.

"You want a night cap?" Jared asks as soon as they close the door behind them. "Go sit down, I'll bring you a beer."

"Thanks."

He kicks off his shoes and walks into the living room, letting himself fall down on the small couch with a groan. His feet hurt, his head kinda hurts too, which is weird because it's not like he's been doing anything. Well, apart from that mini-movie thing for Jared earlier. That was draining, physically and emotionally. Not really something

he wants to make a habit of. Normal people talk, he reminds himself. Normal people use actual words, not a Vulcan mind melt or whatever that was.

“Here,” Jared says and Jensen pops one eye open to find a Bud in front of him. He scoots slightly up before accepting it, which leaves barely enough room on the other end of the couch for Jared to sit.

“You look beat,” Jared says as he takes his seat, nudging Jensen’s feet and finally just scooping them up and placing them in his lap. Jensen moves to pull them back but Jared puts a hand on his ankle and holds him put. “It’s ok.” Jared smiles at him. “Clean socks, remember?”

Jensen laughs and takes a sip from his beer. Something is poking him in the butt and he shifts on the couch but all it does is change the poking position from uncomfortable to downright intruding. He jerks away, scowling and Jared grins.

“Found the loose spring, did you?” He laughs when Jensen grimaces and rubs at the sore area. “Sorry. New couch is on the to-buy list.” He shrugs. “It’s a pretty long list.”

Jensen nods. He’s slowly realizing that Jared isn’t exactly living high. In fact, looking around, there’s not a single piece of furniture in the apartment that isn’t old and used. The TV is small with an old VCR and no DVD player or TiVo. The coffee table is scuffed and scratched and he remembers now that Jared and Sandy’s bed was only a queen, which, considering Jared’s size, can hardly be comfortable.

It’s not like him and Chris are well off. Being a struggling musician in New York doesn’t exactly pay good money, not even with extra jobs on the side. And even if Juilliard pays Jensen well enough the cost of living in the city eats it up pretty quick. It helps though that they aren’t renting but living in an apartment Chris bought with the money he got when his dad died. On the other hand keeping the place inhabitable with all of Jensen’s mishaps isn’t exactly cheap.

But despite that they’re in way better financial shape than Jared and Sandy seem to be. And still Jared made the extra trip to come visit him last month. Jensen eyes him concerned. He’d offer to pay for it if he thought Jared would let him. It’s obvious to him now how selfish he’s been. Every weekend he’s been hoping for Jared to come up to New York, never wondering how exactly he was supposed to do that.

“You’re quiet,” Jared says, rousing Jensen from his musings. “Everything alright?”

Jensen shrugs. “Just thinking,” he says and sips his beer. “Do you like it here? In LA, I mean.”

Jared gives him a contemplating look. “I guess,” he finally says. “Do you like it in New York?”

Jensen nods. “I do. I mean, I know it’s big and kinda... well, pretentious sometimes. New York, New York and all that, you know. But it’s got good people. And I love Central Park.” He smiles. “It’s so big it’s forgotten it’s just a park in a city. It thinks

it's the big outdoors. Like I said, pretentious." He laughs. "Try telling those fairies they're city slickers and you'll get pinecones thrown at you for a week. Believe me."

Jared smiles. His hand is still resting on Jensen's ankle, like he doesn't even notice how intimate that is. "So... No other place you'd rather be," he says casually and sips his beer.

Jensen stills. Oh. So that's what they're talking about. "If I could move here I would," he says softly. "You know that, right?"

Jared looks down, the smile slipping away. "Yeah, I know," he says but he doesn't sound convinced.

Jensen sighs. "I'm lucky to have my job, Jared. I'm not exactly the most observant of people but even I know any other school would have fired me a long time ago."

He shrugs when Jared looks at him in surprise. "I don't follow schedule, I hardly ever show up for meetings... Hell, sometimes I don't even show up for class. But when I do show up they're up and ready to watch over me if needed because... because they care, Jared." He swallows. "They make sure I eat and drink and don't sleep through the day. They go look for me when I go missing. They... they *really* care, Jared. Even if I lost my hands and could never play again I think they'd care."

Jared bites his lip, looking troubled and Jensen wonders if he's said more than he should. But it's not like Jared hasn't noticed how dependent he is.

"My whole life is wrapped up in that city. Starting all over again, even with you here, it would be hard, maybe even impossible." He sighs. "I'm not a helpless kid, Jared, but I'm definitely not Mr. Independent either. Even if most of the time I can function on my own there are times I don't. And those times might be enough that I'd... I'd give up. Without even realizing."

Jared looks at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You've seen the way I am. Imagine if you weren't there to nudge me out of it. If no one was." He shrugs, feeling uncomfortable laying himself so bare but it's about time he clued Jared in on what he's getting himself into. "When Chris is away I don't eat because I don't remember I have to. I don't sleep, I usually just play the piano twenty-four seven. I've actually passed out from exhaustion only to wake up and realize it's been something like two days without even a drink of water."

"Damn!" Jared breathes, eyes wide.

"Yeah. And what you were worrying about, me zoning out in the park? Imagine that happening in the winter when it's snowing. Because it has, more than once. Either the school sends someone out to look for me or Chris goes if I don't come home. Which only makes it hours in the freezing cold when it could be days. I'm just lucky I don't get sick."

“Somehow I doubt luck has anything to do with it,” Jared says slowly. Then he frowns and says, “Two days? I wouldn’t think Chris left you alone for that long.”

“He doesn’t. Not anymore.” Jensen quirks his eyebrow and Jared nods solemnly.

“Right,” he says. “And when you were at Juilliard, living at the dorm, I mean?”

“Chris would call every night to remind me to go to bed and make sure I had eaten. He got a pass to be able to get in and check on me if I didn’t answer. It wasn’t easy but we made it through.” He shrugs. “It was only a year after I got out. I wasn’t exactly in the best of shapes.”

Jared nods again, like he’s only getting his own thoughts confirmed.

“Look, I know it sounds insane. That *I* sound insane. To be honest I have no idea why he hasn’t given up on me a long time ago. And when I thought you were gonna...” He stops, feeling his face heat up. “I didn’t think it through. I’m very self-centered, you know. I keep forgetting other people have lives too, that the world doesn’t revolve around me.”

“I don’t think you’re self-centered,” Jared says quietly. “I think it’s to be expected, seeing everything from your own standpoint, considering what you are.”

Jensen looks at him in question.

“Unique,” Jared elaborates. “Right? That’s what you said, there’s no one else.”

Jensen swallows. “As far as I know. I don’t even know what I am. I’m not a witch or a wizard or whatever they call it, because there’s no such thing. I’m just... an accident.” He breathes in, shaking his head. “Magic books and spells and all that? It’s not real. I checked. I wanted it to be. I didn’t want to be the only one. But there’s nothing. Ancient runes, scribbles from the oldest magic books I could find. None of it works. It’s all crap. No more real than crosses and holy water. It’s just stories. Do you understand, Jared? There’s nothing.”

Jared opens his mouth, then closes it again. Finally he clears his throat and says, “You’re alone,” like he’s finally understanding what that means.

“I’m alone,” Jensen says. “I’m a freak of nature. I shouldn’t exist.”

There’s a long silence where he shakily sips his beer and Jared stares into space before finally saying, “Well, I’m glad you do,” sounding a little choked up. “And who knows, maybe there *is* someone else out there, just like you, thinking *they’re* alone.”

“God, I hope not,” Jensen says with a frown. “I wouldn’t wish this on anyone.”

Jared finally looks at him. His nose is slightly pink as well as the skin around the eyes, but he’s holding back, obviously for Jensen’s sake. “Is it really so terrible?” he asks. “I mean, with everything you can do?”



“It’s not terrible,” Jensen says and smiles a little, to let Jared know he means it. “It’s just lonely. And terrifying.”

“You never thought of just... coming out?”

“What? Like doing magic tricks in the street?” Jensen snorts. “I’d rather not be a sideshow freak, thank you very much. Besides, people would just run away. Or lock me up again.” He can’t help tensing at the mere thought and Jared squeezes his ankle reassuringly.

“I don’t know,” he says slowly. “I think most people would welcome some magic in their life.”

“Well, there’s always Criss Angel,” Jensen says and gives him a small grin.

Jared smiles back but Jensen can see his heart isn’t in it. In fact Jared looks far too serious for his taste. He bumps Jared’s stomach with his foot then starts jabbing his toes into the tight muscles. It’s so different from when Jared was a kid, all soft with babyfat, but the effect is the same. Jared yelps and twitches to try and get away, laughter bubbling in his throat as he curses and yells at Jensen to stop. Which he of course doesn’t until Jared tackles him and holds him down on the couch.

“What are you, five?” Jared laughs slightly out of breath.

He’s got his hip jammed between Jensen’s legs and is holding him down by the wrists. He’s all hot and sweaty from the walk, smelling of sunshine and beer and the wine they drank with dinner. The loose spring is digging into Jensen’s spine, Jared’s breath is warm and damp on his face and when Jensen stares into Jared’s eyes his own reflection stares back down at him, flushed and wide-eyed and desperate. Jared’s mouth is less than five inches from his own, open, smiling, inviting.

Jensen blinks. He blinks again. Then he goes away.



It’s been so long since Jensen has done this that at first Jared doesn’t realize what’s happened. He waits for Jensen to say something and when he stays silent Jared awkwardly lets go of his wrists and eases back, apologizing. Jensen just keeps staring at him with those big green eyes, breathing so slowly it’s hardly detectable.

“Jensen?” Jared frowns and cups Jensen’s chin, lifting his head slightly. His eyes follow, staring straight out of his head, completely unfocused. Crap. “Oh c’mon, Jen. Seriously?”

There’s no answer.

Jared sits back and watches him for a while, weighing his options. It’s getting late anyway and Jensen had obviously not been sleeping well the last weeks, so maybe that’s what he needs, just to rest for a while. He doesn’t look distressed like he’s

having nightmares, in fact he looks totally peaceful, if a bit vacant but that could be the blank eyes staring out at nothing.

When Jared stands up and pulls on Jensen's arm he follows willingly and walks like a zombie into the bedroom, laying obediently down on the bed when Jared pushes him down on it. It's totally creepy and at the same time kinda humbling to realize how much Jensen trusts him. He doesn't doubt that Jensen was telling the truth, that there is some kind of force protecting him, whether it's his own or some other kind. He's not sure how that protection works but he figures it would make sure bad people didn't take Jensen to bed. Or, you know, undressed him.

Only his jeans and socks in case this is it for the night. Nothing squishes your balls like sleeping through the night in your jeans, Jared knows that from experience. When he's done he tugs the covers up around Jensen, hesitating for a minute before reaching over and carefully closing his eyelids. Mainly because it's a bit creepy, Jensen staring out at nothing like that. It's possible it increases the chances of him slipping deeper into whatever world he's hiding in right now but somehow Jared isn't too worried about that.

It feels different from when he was in New York last, when Jensen himself was afraid of slipping. He's not disappearing this time, he's just resting his mind. He seems calm and relaxed and when Jared takes his hand it's dry and warm. It strange, Jared thinks to himself, that it doesn't freak him out more, Jensen being like this. Maybe he's finally getting the hang of this, of being Jensen's guardian, of sorts.

The strange tingling in the pit of his stomach though, that does feel weird. He frowns slightly. Maybe it's just the wine they had earlier, he does feel very hot and kinda antsy. A drop of sweat leaks down from his temple and he swipes at it with his thumb. It's almost like...

Oh.

No. Really?

He tilts his head, taking a closer look at Jensen. Hmm. Reaching over he gently eases one eyelid back. The pupil is wide and black with only a small rind of green around it. Jensen's lips are slightly parted and he's breathing a little too fast. When Jared touches Jensen's chest, palm over his heart, he feels it beating erratically under the skin, and Jensen lets lose a small sigh, almost like a whimper.

Jared doesn't know whether to laugh or die of embarrassment. He wonders what brought it on. Was it the tickle fight? That had been a bit... intimate. Combined with the alcohol that Jensen had warned made him all... well, horny. Jared had felt a little breathless himself and not just because of the tickling itself. Being that close to Jensen, his lips only inches away, it was so similar to what happens in his dreams right before they kiss. It had confused him enough that he almost leaned down and...

Maybe Jensen had sensed that. Maybe he had felt the same kind of déjà vu. But those are *his* dreams, right? Not Jensen's. Jensen didn't even remember what happened in Chris's room in New York. And he hadn't said anything about it happening since.

Jared eases down on the bed, head propped up on his hand. It's probably bordering on the wrong side of creepy, watching Jensen sleep or daydream or whatever they should call it, but he just can't help himself. Every night he's had Jensen's face this close... well, closer. A lot closer. Like, attached to his. But it wasn't actually *this* face, it was *a* Jensen's face. A magic Jensen's face who *this* Jensen doesn't even seem to know has been having a dream relationship with Jared. Not that he's sure *relationship* is the right term. Not when only one of them is actually relating. And that one isn't even sure why he's doing it.

But it's fascinating, studying *this* Jensen and seeing the difference. He looks better now than he did when Jared picked him up at the airport. Fresher somehow, like a sheet of dust has been washed off his skin. He also looks more real than the Jensen in his dreams who is more like a photoshopped picture with any hint of imperfection brushed away. And golden dust and the glint of jewels added for emphasis. Frankly Jared likes this version better. It's not quite as overwhelming and makes it easier to remember that for all his wonders Jensen is still just a man. A remarkable man, the only one of his kind, but still just a man with flaws and faults like any other.

Jensen's breath shudders and Jared drops his head into the crook of his elbow, closing his eyes. He should get up and leave Jensen to it. Not lie here and soak in the heat steadily rising from Jensen's body or listen to the low but hitched breathing slowly getting more rapid. Seriously, that is not what a best friend does. What the hell is wrong with him?

Wait, is he...? Now? Oh. Oh, wow. Jared shudders, sucking in his breath and barely keeping from losing it. Yeah, ok. That was... God. Freaky.

He can sense the moment Jensen wakes up but he doesn't move or open his eyes to acknowledge it, for his or Jensen's benefit he's not sure. He expects Jensen to get up or at least move away but after a few moments of ragged breathing Jensen just turns his head and buries his face in Jared's shoulder. They lie like that for a while, just breathing, and then Jensen asks, "What happened?"

Jared peeks out through slit eyelids but all he sees is a brush of hair. "Nothing serious. You just zoned out for a while," he says, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

"Right."

Jensen shifts over to his side, wrists crossed in front of his chest to take up as little room as possible. He squirms a little and Jared can't help wondering if he actually came, like physically. The thought has him flushing red and for a moment he's terrified Jensen will notice, that his face is an actual furnace of heat the way it feels. But if Jensen really did come he'd get out of bed to, you know, clean up, right? Because that can't be comfortable, his underwear being all... sticky. The heat in Jared's face goes up another few degrees and he has to physically restrain himself from shifting his legs because *that* would be obvious.

"Well, uh, thanks," Jensen says after a while. "For taking care of me."

"You're welcome."

He closes his eyes again when Jensen shows no intention of moving but just buries closer. It doesn't take long until his breathing slows down and his hands tumble open, fingers curled against Jared's arm. It's oddly comforting, having him so close and breathing warm air into his neck like... like Sandy sometimes does. Somehow it's more intimate than the brush of Jensen's fingers or the length of his legs running along his own. He'd only have to move his head a little to catch that breath and Jensen's lips. For real this time. Not a dream or a dreamworld Jensen but them, the real them. God, he wants to. He wants to kiss Jensen so bad it's killing him. What is *wrong* with him?

It's one thing to allow himself to do it in his dreams. They're not real he tells himself and it's not like he's hurting anyone. And is a person really responsible for what happens in their dreams? But now, thinking about doing it now, *wanting* to do it now...

He's in a relationship with a woman he loves. He shouldn't even be thinking about kissing someone else. And...

He stops, the usual 'I'm not gay' argument not working anymore. Not that he thinks he *is* gay but he's starting to think Chad might be right, about the unimportance of gender. Of all the arguments against even *thinking* of Jensen as something more than just a friend, the fact that he's a guy holds little to no weight. So, ok, maybe Jared is a bit gay. Or bi, whatever. Doesn't matter, it's not like he's drooling over guys in general. It's just Jensen.

Oh.

He blinks, carefully drawing in his breath to keep from waking Jensen up.

It's *just* Jensen. That's it. It's always been Jensen. There has never been anyone in his life as important as Jensen. No one he has missed as much, no one he's as happy to see, no one he thinks about as much as Jensen. Ten years without him and there never was a day he *didn't* think of Jensen, wondering where he was, what he was doing, if he was even alive. Ten years that he felt lost and drifting and... missing a part of himself.

Yes, he's been feeling miserable lately. Yes, it's been hard and confusing and literally tearing him apart, the whole situation. But it's not Jensen being back in his life that is making him miserable. It's that he's back but not *close*. The distance and everything it creates, *that's* what's killing him. What's killing both of them.

Chris is right. You can't have a long distance relationship with Jensen. Not just because he needs you close but because you need *him* close. Jared needs Jensen close, like right here, within touching distance. This thing they're trying to do, this whole weekend here and week there thing, it's never going to work. The whole time they're apart is spent miserable and half the time they're together is spent miserable as well, dreading the time they have to say farewell.

Jared slips as carefully as he can from the bed in order not to wake Jensen. He's got a decision to make, a decision that might change his life forever.

Jared Padalecki is not fond of changes. He's never been good at them, never been good at seeing the positive side of them. Even now when he *knows* what he'll benefit from doing this, the negative repercussions are overwhelming in his mind. Knowing what he should do and actually making the decision to do it are two different things. He feels conflicted and unsure, wondering what he's doing, why he's doing it, what the hell it all means exactly. Feeling too young and naïve and far from the grownup he's supposed to be. Needing someone to tell him he's not making the biggest mistake of his life.

So he calls his mother.

They haven't really been close in the last few years, not since he dropped out of college and she was very clear in her disappointment with him. "I don't get it, Jared," she'd said, angry and exasperated. "I don't get how someone so smart and intelligent can be so... careless about their life. What happened to you?"

'You did,' he'd wanted to say. 'You and dad and everything changing too much.' But it wouldn't have been true. It wasn't her fault no more than it was Jensen's fault for disappearing. It was just Jared and his inability to deal with it all. Plenty of people went through much worse and got out perfectly fine. He supposes in many ways he's still that little kid who just wanted everything to be normal and boring and never change. He thought meeting Jensen had cured him but turns out all it took was for Jensen to disappear and all of Jared's insecurities and fears came rushing back.

"Hey, honey," his mother says and that's as far as she gets before he's pouring out the whole story, with all its twists and turns and impossibilities. Apart from the whole kissing thing and Jensen being in love with him. That he doesn't tell her.

When he finally goes quiet she doesn't say anything for a long while and he suddenly realizes she probably doesn't believe him. Not about what Jensen is and what he can do. Why should she? She didn't believe it all those years ago and that time she actually *saw* it. Jared rambling about pianos and flowers and goddamn unicorns is hardly likely to make her change her mind.

"Jared," she says carefully after what seems an eternity of tense silence, "do you love him?"

It's not what he expected at all and for a moment he sits on the edge of the sofa table, mouth open in search for words. "Mom, I didn't... Yes." He sighs. "Mom, it's Jensen. Of course I do."

"That's not..." She sighs. "Of course you do. Well, honey, sounds to me like you're miserable without each other. Why don't you just move to New York? You hate it in LA anyway."

"I don't hate it in LA," he argues, "and even if I did, it's not just me, mom. Sandy has her job here, her friends. She doesn't want to move."

She goes silent again. “Ok, let me ask you this,” she says after a while. “If it comes down to it, where would you rather be, in New York without Sandy or in LA without Jensen?”

That’s the question he’s been avoiding. The question he doesn’t want to answer and was foolishly hoping he never would have to. The question it all comes down to, eventually. “Mom, that’s not fair. I can’t just... It’s just not fair.”

“If Sandy doesn’t want to move to New York and Jensen can’t move to LA... It’s up to you, Jared. You have to decide where you need to be.”

It’s a subtle difference, using the word ‘need’ instead of ‘want’ but it still hits him, just where he needs it to. She has a knack of doing that, of pointing out what you already know but are hard set to acknowledge and however difficult it is he realizes that’s why he called her. Because he needed for someone neutral to see it. Someone who hasn’t been blinded by Jensen.

“I love her, mom.” He’s crying and he knows his mother can hear it but he just can’t help it. “If I leave her... she’ll be heartbroken.”

“And if you leave him?” she asks quietly.

His sharp intake of breath is an answer in itself.

After checking on Jensen who is fast asleep in bed Jared fetches a blanket and crashes on the couch, then spends the next few hours trying to avoid the loose spring and his own thoughts. Neither works. He keeps tossing and turning, groaning the worse his back gets and the clearer the reality of what he is about to do becomes. He can’t find any rest but then again he’s not sure he deserves it.

At around two in the morning Jensen comes out, bare feet making no sound on the worn linoleum. “Dude, this is stupid,” he says with a tired smile and offers Jared his hand. “C’mon, we’ll share the bed. Worked fine last time, didn’t it?”

Jared doesn’t object, just lets Jensen pull him to his feet and tiredly follows him into the bedroom. He’s asleep before his head hits the pillow.



Jared is watching him.

Jensen can feel his eyes on him, like fingers tipling over his skin. He wishes he could read Jared’s thought, just this once, just to know if they’re good or bad. There has been something different about him this morning, a shade of color Jensen doesn’t know how to interpret. Whenever he looks up Jared’s face closes, his eyes going blank and a smile that looks strained and uncertain playing upon his lips. Jensen wants to ask him if he did something, in his sleep maybe. If that’s why Jared looks so

troubled. He can't remember anything, not even dreams, but considering how he's been lately that doesn't say much.

Then again it doesn't have to be anything magical. They shared a bed. Maybe that's what this is about. It had seemed logical at the time; that couch wasn't fit for anyone to sleep on, let alone a giant like Jared, but of course it wasn't exactly normal, two guys sleeping together in such a small bed. Especially not if he's right in assuming that Jared knows how Jensen feels about him. But it hadn't felt awkward this morning even if he'd woken up wrapped up in Jared's arms. Nice and warm and terrifying but not awkward. And Jared had just yawned and rubbed his face and asked if he wanted first dibs on the shower, like this was a normal every day happening. The strangely colored cloud hadn't appeared until later, when Jensen got out of the shower and found Jared sitting deep in thought, towel wrapped around his fists like boxing gloves. And he's only gotten quieter and stranger since through their walk across town and to here. Jensen sips his coffee worried, offering Jared small smiles and plenty of opportunities to reveal what's on his mind.

He doesn't.

They're sitting in a small café in Hollywood, resting their feet after the long walk. Jared has a fruit smoothie that he seems to have forgotten and a bagel that he's hardly touched at all. Jensen is on his second cup of coffee and he's only got crumbs left of his waffles. For all the sun shining and the beauty of the palm trees around them he feels like he's sitting in a puddle of shadows. In a dark cave made of Jared's thoughts and worries that in his opinion Jensen is obviously not fit to know.

He can't really feel insulted by that. It's a feeling he knows well, not wanting other people to see all that goes on inside his head. Sometimes he gets darker than he should. Light is slippery, being happy isn't something that he can hold on indefinitely. But those are few moments and far between. Or they used to be before Jared showed up and Jensen's emotional walls crumbled to dust.

Sometimes he feels like it's all he can do to just breathe and try to keep his heart from exploding out of his chest. He thinks it might actually do that if he isn't careful, beat faster and faster until it splatters all over the wall. He's never before been so happy and never before been as sad. As hopeful or despairing, as confused and at the same time sure of what he wants.

He wonders... He wonders whether if he tried he could get Jared to love him. Could hex him to see nothing but him, to love no one else. Could make him miserable without him and happy by his side.

He's never made people do things for him, things they wouldn't otherwise. Oh he did try, when he was Inside. He wished and hoped and prayed for his mother to come get him but wherever she was it obviously didn't work because she never did. Then he'd begged and pleaded and commanded that they'd let him out instead. Stared at the doctors and orderlies with drowsy eyes and pushed his thoughts in their direction. They'd smiled at him and asked if he would like to take a walk in the garden. He wanted to cry but he'd just nodded dumbly and followed them out into the sun. He

couldn't feel its warmth on his skin, no more than he could feel the soft breeze or smell the scent of grey flowers in the air. He could just as well have stayed inside.

He's better now though. Now... Yes, he thinks that he could if he wanted to. Make Jared love him.

He doesn't know what bothers him more, that he's even acknowledging the possibility or that he knows Jared believes he can and maybe did hex him in some way. Jensen wants to tell him that he wouldn't. That he would never make Jared do anything he doesn't want. It wouldn't be real love anyway. It would just be smoke and mirrors, confused emotions that eventually would fade away and leave them all the worse off once they were gone.

"You ready to go?" Jared asks, shaking him out of his thoughts and he looks up, over at Jared. He's drained his smoothie and finished half his bagel. Jensen never even noticed him move. He wonders how long he was gone. Ten minutes or half an hour. However long it was Jared doesn't seem to be aware that it happened. Jensen's not sure whether that should make him feel relieved or even more worried.

"Yeah," he says and stands up. "I'm good."

He smiles and Jared smiles back. Like everything is normal and good. Jensen grabs his jacket and follows Jared out of the café's small yard. When he bumps into Jared at the gate, Jared laughs and puts his arm around his shoulder, steering him away from other potential obstacles. Jensen leans into him, breathing in the fresh air and the smell of Jared's cologne.

Maybe Chris is right. Maybe he should stop trying to read people and just go with what he gets. This, getting this, it's more than anyone can ask for.



"You're joking, right?"

They're in the kitchen, the venue for all their arguments it seems. Jensen is in the bedroom, playing the keyboard with his headphones on and the door shut. Jared can still feel the magic but it's vague, so subtle that if he didn't know he would think nothing of it. Sandy obviously hasn't felt anything. Then again Sandy is too busy being pissed off as hell to notice much else.

It's not fair to her, doing this with Jensen in the apartment, but there is no other choice. He's not going to let Jensen fly back alone on Friday. He's not going to let Jensen fly out of his life at all. But a part of him is not ready to give up on this yet, this life he has with Sandy. Maybe they can still make this work. Maybe it doesn't have to be one without the other.

He deliberately shuts out the small voice in the back of his head that keeps asking him, 'But when it comes to love, you will *have* to make a choice. Who are you going



to choose, Jared? Who are you going to love?' He can't... he can't think of that now. He doesn't even know if there is anything to think about. If he even is...

"What have we got here anyway?" he tells her. "Not like we've got family tying us down. And New York's got just as much opportunity for acting as LA."

Her eyes roll so far up he thinks they might get stuck there. "That's just bullshit and you know it. What about your job? What about *my* friends? You're actually considering just walking out on everything we've built up here? Our jobs, our friends, our apartment... any hope I have of a career?"

Jared bites his lip. "Not just considering," he says.

Her mouth falls open, cheeks flushing with anger. "What?!" she says incredulous. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"Sandy, I can't *not* do this," he says, pleading with her to understand. "It's Jensen. Don't you see? It's Jensen. I have to be there."

"No. No, I don't see, Jared. I don't see how someone you hardly even know can be more important to you than I am." Her voice breaks on the last words and he feels like a complete bastard.

"It's not like that. Sandy, please. It's... He needs me, ok? He... he needs for me to be there."

"You said he had a boyfriend," she says angry. "He has friends. Why does he need you? What the hell is so special about *you*?"

He flinches and he can see the moment her words catch up with her but she doesn't apologize even if her face flushes red.

"I don't know," he says. "I don't know why he thinks I'm special. Because you're right, I'm no one."

"Jared... I didn't mean..."

"It doesn't matter. He needs me. And I... *I* need *him*. Jensen is... *He's* special, Sandy. I can't know where he is and *not* be there. I can't."

"Why can't he move here then? Why are you supposed to drop everything for him? What the fuck is wrong with him anyway?"

"There's nothing wrong with him!" Jared says frustrated. "He just... He's different, ok? And it's not like he can get a job just anywhere. Or live wherever he wants. He's got a whole network of people looking out for him, I can't ask him to just start from scratch. Or ask Chris to move here too. It's... It's not possible. But I... *I* can move. I've got nothing here. I can just as well live in a shitty apartment and work a shitty job in New York as here."

“You have me here,” she says in a low voice and again he feels like the biggest jerk on earth.

“Sandy...” he tries but she shakes her head then looks up at him, eyes filled with tears.

“All those excuses you’re giving me, about his job and his friends, they’re just that, Jared. Excuses.” She pulls in her breath before continuing in a more steady voice, “Unless he’s seriously mentally challenged I don’t get why he can’t make the change for you. And if he is, what the hell kind of friendship are you gonna have with a guy like that?”

Jared clenches his jaw in anger. Not that he can’t see where Sandy is coming from but when it comes to Jensen he finds himself having less and less tolerance for people’s prejudice.

“Do you remember Jensen from school, Sandy?” he asks, keeping his voice as calm as he can. “Do you? Do you remember when he left? Didn’t you ever notice *anything*?”

“He was weird!” she snaps. “What else was there? He was weird and he made me feel weird. He kept talking to himself and he had this weird smile and he just creeped me out, ok?”

Jared sighs. “Forget it,” he says and starts to turn away but she’s instantly there, blocking his way.

“No. If you’re going to *leave* me and *everything* we have here for some *guy* I want to know *why*. Fucking tell me why!” she yells and hits him in the chest with her small fists. It hurts, every hit going straight to his heart. “Are you gay? Is that it? Do you love him?”

“Yes, I love him!” he snaps and she reels back, staring at him in disbelief. “Of course I love him. He’s *Jensen*, Sandy! Jensen!”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” she shouts. “Why is he so special? What the fuck does he have that I don’t?”

He just looks at her exasperated. How is he supposed to answer that? How is he supposed to explain everything that Jensen is, everything Jensen means to him and always has meant to him? How can he find the words to make her understand?

“Sandy, you have known me your whole life. You know me better than anyone.” She shakes her head but he reaches for her hand, holding it in his own. “Yes, you do. Remember what I was like as a kid?”

“Shy,” she sniffs. “And awkward.” She wipes at her eyes with her thumb, skillfully avoiding smearing mascara and make-up down her cheeks. “Scared of everything.”

Ok, he hadn't quite seen that one coming. He doesn't ask what she means even if he's curious, just nods and keeps his eyes on her, calm and honest. "And then I weren't. Right?"

"I guess." She sniffs again, biting at her lower lip. "Still awkward but... yeah. You weren't as unsure of yourself. You even stood up to Chad, I remember. He always was a bit of a jerk to you, totally walked all over you in fact. But after that, he got better."

"Right."

He's not sure he agrees Chad walked all over him but yes, he'd been a jerk. Until Jared had stood up one day, some weeks after Jensen left, and told Chad he'd had enough. That Chad could just hang with his basketball friends if they were so much cooler and more fun than Jared was. Then he'd turned and walked away, feeling triumphant and so horribly lonely he wanted to cry. He hadn't even made it to the edge of the school ground before Chad had caught up with him, confused and clueless but apologizing for whatever it was he had done. Things had been a lot better since. Chad was still a jerk but now he was a loyal one. It made all the difference.

"He did that," he says. "Jensen did that. Changed me. It was... From the moment we met he told me I was going to be a great person, that all I needed was to believe in myself. *He* believed that and so *I* started to believe it. He made me feel important and strong, not the chubby Jared who no one thought was anything special."

She looks down, uncomfortable. "Jared..."

"I'm not being bitchy here but you know you treated me like shit, Sandy. We'd been friends since we were babies and suddenly I wasn't good enough. I embarrassed you because I was short and fat and awkward. You and Chad both, you treated me like I was your second rate friend."

"God, Jared! I was a teenager!" she says, flushed red. "It was just a phase."

"I know that. I'm not blaming you, I'm just saying, that's how things were. And then I met him and he just..." Jared smiles softly at the memory of Jensen holding his hands and telling him he would be magnificent. "He looked at me and told me I was going to grow tall like a tree. That I would be an amazing person. That I was important. It kinda blew me away."

She clenches her jaw, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Ok. So he was a great teacher and the best person ever. Jeez. He's still just a guy. A very weird guy. And judging by what you've told me he's even weirder now."

"He's not weird..." Jared sighs. "Ok, he's weird but that's like saying the Empire State Building is tall or that... that Mona Lisa is a pretty painting. Jensen is... His weirdness is what makes him unique. He thinks different than other people. He lives in a different world. And that... that's what I love about him."

She draws in her breath. "You love him."

He pauses but it's too late for denial now. "Yes."

She nods, her eyes filling again. "Are you *in* love with him?"

Jared swallows. "I don't know," he says which is as close to the truth as he can get. It feels like being in love, but with Jensen and everything he is, how can he be sure?

She bites her lip, looking like she's about to start crying again, but instead she asks, "Is... is he in love with you?"

Jared hesitates. Just because Chris unintentionally told him how Jensen feels for him doesn't mean he has any right to tell others. But he can't lie either. "He hasn't said it but yes, I think he is."

"But he's... You said he had a boyfriend," she accuses.

Jared shakes his head. "I thought he did but no. Chris is just a friend. And... like a guardian, I guess."

"A guardian?" she asks with a frown and he can see what she's thinking.

"It's not... Jensen's not like other people," he says, having no idea how to explain it without telling her everything.

She huffs in frustration and pulls away but he grabs her hand again, keeping her from standing up and leaving. "Ok, but you can't... Don't tell him I told you."

"We're not exactly BFFs, are we?" she says sarcastically and he has to give her that.

He holds her hand in his, rubbing his thumbs over her wrist as he speaks, head lowered and eyes downcast. He keeps it short, omitting as many details as he can and being as vague as possible without sounding evasive. When he gets to the part of Jensen's parents having him locked up in a ward she sucks in her breath, clearly shocked.

"Oh wow!" she says, squeezing his hand.

"Yeah," he says, unable to look at her. He feels wrong, for not telling her everything and for telling her anything at all. He's betraying Jensen, however vaguely, but he just doesn't know what else to do. "Took him two years before he could convince the doctors he could be let out. But... it screwed him over, big time. He's not alright. But he's not damaged either. He's just... emotional. And he has trouble handling some things."

She sits silent for a while but then she says in a quiet voice, "Jared, they don't commit people to mental institutions just for wanting to go to college. That's not... There has to have been something more than that."

"There was, but I can't tell you that." He looks up at her, begging her to understand. "It's not mine to tell, ok?"

She sighs but doesn't push it. "Is he dangerous?"

Jared winces. "No! Of course not. He just... He lives in his own head a lot. And sometimes he needs help getting out of there."

"The coma thing."

Jared looks away. "Yes. That was... We weren't sure he'd make it out that time."

"And that happened because..."

"I left."

She covers her mouth with her hand, breathing into it slowly, eyes big and shiny. She's considerably calmer now but the hurt is still there, the anger and confusion boiling just under the surface. "Is that why you want to move to New York?" she asks finally. "Because he can't live without you? Literally."

"It's not just him." Jared swallows, trying to find the right words to explain. "When he disappeared all those years ago, do you remember what I was like?"

She nods. "I thought you were sick. Like seriously ill. I heard your mom tell my aunt that they were looking for doctors." She looks up at him. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to say it was true. Like maybe you had cancer or something," she explains. "Anyway, you got better."

He nods. Even if he hadn't known it at the time his mother had told him later how scared they'd been for him. "I was put on anti-depressants for a few months. It helped."

"Oh." She swallows. "It really got to you, losing your best friend. I get that. But Jared, it was ten years ago and he's not the same person."

He rubs his face, not sure how to explain it. "I know. But it doesn't matter. When I saw him again it was like everything that's been off the last ten years suddenly fell into place. Like I'd found a part of myself I'd been missing without realizing it. And every time I have to leave him it feels like I'm ripping that part out again. It feels like it did back then. And I can't... I just can't do it anymore."

They sit silent for a long time. He can't tell what she's thinking and she doesn't offer him anything, not even a glance. Finally, after what feels like forever, she looks up and says, "I want to meet him. If you're going to..." She stops, clenching her jaw. "I think I deserve that."

"Ok." He nods. "I was going to suggest it anyway. But Sandy..." He licks his lips, unsure. "It's not his fault, ok? He hasn't asked me for anything. Just... be nice." Her eyes flash and he sighs. "If you're angry be angry with me but don't... don't take it out on him. Please. I'm not sure how he'd take it."

Her jaw tightens but she doesn't argue for which he feels grateful.

“You want to meet him now?” he asks quietly but she shakes her head.

“Tomorrow. I need some time to... I need some time.”

“Ok.”

He stands up when she does but when he leans down to kiss her she raises her hand, stopping him.

“Is this...? Are we breaking up?” he asks in a low voice and her breath hitches.

“Are you going to do this no matter what?” she asks back.

He swallows but they both already know the answer. “I have to,” he says.

She closes her eyes briefly, breathing slowly in and out before opening them again. “Then yes, Jared, I guess we are,” she says and walks out.

He sinks down on a chair by the kitchen table, cradling his head in his arms. Three years of love and a lifelong friendship gone just like that. For a man he hardly knows and feelings he can't trust as being his own.

‘Am I? Am I in love with you?’ he thinks. ‘Is this real, Jensen? Is this really real? Because I think... I think I want it to be. Oh God, I think I want to be in love with you.’

*He opens his eyes and he's in the forest again.*

*“This wasn't supposed to happen,” he says annoyed and Jensen looks up at him where he's lying on his back in the moss, squinting up at the sun.*

*“What?” he asks, smiling happily.*

*“Me being here.” Jared turns around, looking for the door. It's not there. “I can't be here right now.”*

*Jensen's smile slips away, a glint of trepidation in his eyes. “Why?”*

*“It's wrong.”*

*“What?” Jensen says and sits up abruptly, staring at him stricken. His eyes are huge and dark in his pale face.*

*“No, not... I didn't mean...” Jared sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “I'm doing this wrong. This, me and you. I'm doing it wrong. I need... I need to sort out some things and this... it's messing with my head.”*

*“You want me to go?” Jensen asks, looking down. He sounds broken and still so resigned, like this is what he's been expecting all along.*

*“No. Stay. You, and the other you, if there are two of you. Stay. Please.” Jared falls down on his knees by his side, tilting Jensen’s face upward with a palm on his cheek. “I don’t want you to go. Ever.”*

*Jensen gazes at him, his eyes still glassy like wet marbles, but then he suddenly smiles. “You mean it,” he says. “This time... you’re really coming back.”*

*“Yes,” Jared says. “I’m coming back.” He smiles, rubbing his thumb lightly over Jensen’s cheekbone before letting his face slip from his fingers as he stands up. “I’m coming back,” he repeats one last time and then he closes his eyes.*

The sun is shining in through the window, bathing a yellow butterfly in an almost unearthly light where it flutters its wings against the glass. Jared looks around, at this place where he hasn’t felt at home for weeks and the answer is as plain as if it was written on the walls. It’s time for a change. Yes. It doesn’t matter if what he’s feeling is real or not, if it’s that kind of love or not. It’s *some* kind of love and that... that’s enough.



Jensen looks in the mirror for what feels like the hundredth time, straightening the collar of his shirt and brushing his thumb over his chapped lips. He doesn’t look any different than he did two minutes ago but he checks anyway, for lint on his pants and dandruff on his shoulders. There’s nothing. He’s ok. He’s fi... Is that a spot on his sleeve? It is, right? A spot or a smudge or...

“I need to change my shirt.”

Jared sighs from where he’s sitting on the bed, waiting. “Dude, you look fine.”

“There’s a stain. I think there’s a stain. Is that a stain?”

Jared stands up and walks over, inspecting his sleeve carefully. “It’s a knot in the fabric, Jen. It’s alright.”

“I should change my shirt,” Jensen says determined. “I’ll be too warm anyway. A t-shirt. Should I put on a t-shirt? I have clean t-shirts, right?” he asks and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

“Jensen, will you please stop fretting?” Jared snaps. “She’s not gonna care what you’re wearing, ok?”

Jensen’s hands still. “Right,” he says and buttons up again. “No, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He laughs and runs his fingers through his hair. “I guess I’m nervous.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Jared says and sighs. “I shouldn’t have... If you want to change, you should change. Whatever makes you feel more comfortable. I know this is hard for you.”

Jensen turns abruptly away from the mirror and looks at him sharply. “Why should this be hard for me?”

“Because she’s m...” Jared begins but then he stops, looking uncomfortable. “Because she wasn’t exactly your biggest fan back then.”

“That was a long time ago,” Jensen mutters, eyeing Jared suspiciously. “I’m gonna be fine.” He turns to stare at himself in the mirror again. Damn, now his hair is all spiky. He tries to level it down, flattening it with his palms. “I’m just nervous because she’s your girlfriend and I don’t want her to hate me. Because that would be awkward.” He casts Jared a glance in the mirror, hoping he’s thrown him off but if anything Jared looks just weirder.

“She’s not gonna hate you,” Jared sighs. The strange colored shade from this morning is even darker now. He looks kinda pale too. And sad.

Jensen turns from the mirror. “Did something happen?” he asks quietly. “Is something happening that I should know about? Is this...? Is she gonna tell me I can’t stay here?”

“No! Why would you think that?”

“You look...” He stops. “Never mind.”

“Jensen, what is...?” Jared starts but just then his phone rings. He sighs – again! – and flips it open. “Hi,” he says and now he definitely looks sad. And worried. “Yeah. Sure. Right. We’ll meet you there.” He snaps the phone shut and gives Jensen a strained smile. “We’re meeting her down in Griffith Park.”

“Oh.” He fidgets, pulling at the collar of his shirt. It feels strangling even if he has the top button undone. “Ok. Right.”

Jared sighs and walks over to the drawer where Jensen keeps his clothes, all carefully folded except for the shirt that he’d hung in Jared’s closet, next to the pink shirt Jared wore the first time they met again and only a few hangers away from Sandy’s summer dresses. She’s got pretty dresses, so feminine and small, undoubtedly fitting her perfect curves. No bulky jeans or t-shirts that smell of cologne. No stinky sneakers and sweaters with invisible cat hairs. She’s everything Jensen isn’t and God, what is he doing here? He should not be here. He should...

“Here,” Jared says, pulling Jensen back what feels like a heartbeat before slipping away. He’s holding out a blue t-shirt, smiling. “This one looks better on you.”

Jensen nods and fumbles with the buttons of his shirt again. His hands start to shake. It’s ridiculous how stressed he is. He’s just meeting Jared’s girlfriend. It’s no big deal. Not like they’re gonna start making out in front of him. Sure, they’ll probably hug and kiss, on the lips because that’s what couples do, and maybe hold hands and...

“Here, let me,” Jared says and pushes his hands away, swiftly unbuttoning the shirt. His knuckles brush against Jensen’s stomach as he reaches the lowest buttons and



Jensen pulls in his breath. "It's going to be fine," Jared says soothingly. "I promise you."

"I know." He steps back as soon as Jared has the cuffs undone, putting a little distance between them. "I'm just no good with people, that's all."

Jared smiles at him, like he just said something ridiculous, and Jensen frowns in response. "What?" he asks, shaking the shirt off his shoulders and handing it over.

Jared takes it and turns away, looking awkward. "Nothing," he says, arranging the shirt back on its hanger while Jensen pulls the t-shirt on.

Jensen doesn't push it, too nervous to really care, and instead turns to look at himself in the mirror again. Jared's right, it does look better on him. Right? Or maybe he now looks too casual. Like he couldn't even be bothered to make an effort for Jared's girlfriend. He reaches again for the shirt but Jared grabs him by the wrist, stopping him.

"You look great," he says turning Jensen to face him. "You look absolutely perfect." He smiles, that same amused smile from before, and shakes his head slightly. "Jensen, you're great with people. Everyone likes you."

He frowns. "That's not me. That's just my... thing."

"No, Jen," Jared says and smiles at him so fondly Jensen's heart skips a beat. "It's you." He looks like he wants to add something but in the end he just squeezes Jensen's shoulder and steps back.

"Ready?" he asks and even if he's not, Jensen says yes.

It's a long walk to the park but five minutes on the light rail is enough to have Jensen trembling. It's different from the subway back home. He feels more exposed, painfully aware of the cars on either side and he really can't deal with that now on top of everything else. Finally Jared drags him off despite his weak protests, arm firm around his tense shoulders. He calls Sandy while Jensen's trying to get his breath back, telling her they're running late. Great. She's going to love that.

By the time they reach the park they're both sweating from the heat and Jensen feels cross-eyed from fighting to keep his focus from slipping.

"She said to meet her by this entrance," Jared tells him, sounding confused, when she's nowhere to be found. "I guess she got delayed."

He pulls the phone out from his pocket while Jensen sits down on a bench and just breathes. Jared's voice is a murmur of stress and Jensen's stomach clenches. He's not sure whether to be comforted or worried that Jared seems as nervous about this meeting as he is.

“She stopped to get coffee,” Jared says as he sits down beside him, “since we were running late and all. She said we could meet by the playground. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” He closes his eyes and breathes in. “I’m ok,” he says and opens them again.

*He’s back in the vision of them in the future, when they’ll be old and wrinkled and still each other’s everything, but when he turns his head to look at Jared he’s not there anymore. The spot beside him is empty, the worn wood dusty and cold. He looks down and there is no wedding band on his finger. His hands are shaking where they rest on his bony knees, wrinkled and covered in liver spots. He looks out over the park and there are no children playing, no dogs bouncing around, and he realizes this is how he will end his days. Alone.*

“Jensen?”

Someone is shaking him and he jerks awake, sucking in his breath. Jared’s arm is solid around his shoulders, his eyes deep and shining with concern, so close their eyelashes are half an inch from catching..

“You alright?” he asks and Jensen nods shakily. “Did you zone out?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “Just something I saw. It’s not important.”

Jared frowns. “Like a vision?”

“I guess. But it doesn’t matter.” He stands up, brushing invisible dust of his hands. “It’s all lies anyway.”

He starts walking even if he hears Jared calling out his name, not even looking back when he hears him coming up behind him. He’s saying something but Jensen isn’t listening and finally Jared gives up and falls silent. They walk like that, side by side, neither of them talking. Jared keeps close, so close their hands keep bumping into each other and Jensen wants to grab Jared’s and weave their fingers together. To beg Jared to please, please, please don’t leave him. ‘I don’t want to die alone. Please don’t let me die alone.’

But he sees it now, how wrong he’s been. That’s what that was about, his vision. That it doesn’t matter what he wants or needs, all that matters is Jared. And Jared is not a part of his future. Jared has his own path to follow in a completely different direction. He can just imagine it, Sandy and Jared sitting by a fireplace, surrounded by their children and grandchildren and the dogs Jensen thought *they* would have. Happy and loved and perfect for each other.

It’s breaking his heart into tiny little pieces, shattering it like glass. He feels like he can’t breathe, like the whole world is closing in on him and will implode if he inhales. God, he can’t do this. He can’t be here. He needs to go away, to escape. He needs to...

No!

He sucks in his breath, jaw clenching. ‘No. Fuck you,’ he tells himself and his goddamn ‘thing’. ‘Ok, so yes, he’s not mine. He’ll never be mine. I get it. But right now I’m here and he’s here and fuck if I’m gonna let you ruin it. This, I’m gonna have this. This week, it’s ours and I’m going to enjoy every goddamn minute of it.’

“Jensen?” Jared says quietly beside him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he dismisses curtly.

Jared grabs his arm, stopping him in his tracks. “Tell me,” he insists. “You said you saw something. What did you see?”

Jensen swallows before raising his head and looking Jared straight in the eye. “Nothing,” he says because lying to Jared is just not possible.

Jared huffs in frustration. “Stop saying that. Just tell me, ok?”

“That’s what I saw,” Jensen says blankly. “Nothing. There is nothing. Nothing! Just me. No one but me.”

He turns away but after a few steps he stops. Where’s he going to go anyway?

“You saw us,” Jared says quietly behind him. “Together. All those years ago. That’s what you told me. And now there’s just you and not me anymore?” he asks in a low hurt voice.

Jensen closes his eyes. “Jared...”

“I know I let you down, Jen. I know... I know I’m not what you expected. But I’m trying. I am.”

“I know. That’s not...” He swallows. “It was far in the future,” he says quietly. “Like fifty years from now. Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Oh.” Jared looks troubled, frowning and nibbling lightly at his lower lip. “Does that mean I’ll be dead? That I’ll die before you do?”

Jensen blinks. “What? I don’t know. Christ, why would you say that?”

Jared shrugs. “I just can’t imagine you being alone fifty years from now unless I’m dead or something,” he says. “Can’t imagine there will ever be a time I’m not there for you.”

“It was in New York,” Jensen says flatly. “You live here, in LA, Jared, where you’ll eventually marry Sandy and have a family of your own. I suppose that’s where you’ll be, with them.”

Jared flinches and looks away. "I'm not... No," he says. "Dude, I'm only twenty three. I'm not ready for that. Or kids."

"But it's where you're heading," Jensen says, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. "It's where everyone ends up, sooner or later. Settle down, have a family. It's what people do."

"And you?" Jared asks, and there's something there in his eyes and his voice. Like he's holding his breath but doesn't quite know which answer he wants.

"I'm not people," Jensen says curtly. "And I'm never having kids."

Jared starts. "Why?" he asks, sounding shocked.

"Why?" Jensen looks at him exasperated. "Jared, I'd never risk passing this on to a child." He looks away, suddenly feeling awkward. "Plus, it takes two to tango and I'm not...I don't."

"You don't 'tango'?" Jared asks, his voice weird, and Jensen looks at him sharply, sure he's being made fun of but if anything Jared seems to be uncomfortable.

"I don't do relationships. How can I?" he asks and again it comes out bitterer than he means to. "I can't even take care of myself. Who'd want to take on someone like me?"

"Chris does," Jared says carefully.

Jensen swallows. "Chris is different."

"I would," Jared says even more quiet.

Jensen stands still, breathing in and out a few times. "No, you wouldn't," he finally says and this time he does walk away, leaving Jared to stare after him. After a while Jared catches up with him, a silent shadow of hurt. Jensen can feel it, like skin being rubbed off with every step they take.

"I'm sorry," he says at last. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Why did you?" Jared asks him, voice carefully blank.

"I just..." He sighs. "You have a life of your own, Jared. You have a future. Living with me you'd be... you wouldn't have that anymore."

"I know I'll never be as good as Chris," Jared says, which was not Jensen's point at all. "I mean..." He laughs awkwardly. "I keep screwing up. Chris, he... he knows you. Whatever happens he always knows what to do but me... I just screw up. Again and again."

He sounds so defeated Jensen wishes he'd never said anything. It's one thing him knowing the kind of relationship they're trying to build is doomed to fail, it's quite another slapping Jared in the face with it.

"Jared," he says, keeping his voice soft, "Chris has known me for eight years. He's used to all this stuff. You're not. It's not your fault I'm a freak of nature, ok?"

"I couldn't even handle one night without calling him for help," Jared admits. "When I was in New York."

"Dude, you shouldn't have to 'handle' anything." Jensen sighs, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "I know I'm weird and ... and needy but I'm not a kid. I've just grown used to him being there, taking care of things for me and pulling me out of trouble. It's pathetic, man. I know it is. And you know, I probably could do more myself but I don't. I just let him do it for me because it's easier. Because I've never taken responsibility for myself."

"You have a lot to deal with," Jared tells him. "You can't be expected to..."

"Of course I can," Jensen snaps. "Jared, I'm twenty-eight years old. And Chris is not gonna be around forever. One day he'll meet someone and that's it. No girl can be expected to put up with living with me." He swallows, the thought alone enough to make panic swell in his chest. "It wasn't supposed to be forever anyway, living with him. It was just a temporary solution while I waited for-" He hastily cuts himself off but it's too late.

"Me." It's not a question.

"Yes."

He wants to look away but he can't. Jared is watching him, seeming conflicted, like there are words he wants to say but he just can't get them out. "Jensen," he finally tries but Jensen shakes his head, not ready to hear it.

"Don't worry about it," he says and tries for a smile. "I'll be alright."

He turns away abruptly and starts walking. He has no idea where they're going but Jared doesn't stop him so it must be the right direction. He's acutely aware of Jared, walking at first a few steps behind him but it doesn't take long until he's caught up again, even though he's keeping a little more distance between them than before.

"Don't give up on me yet," Jared suddenly says in a low voice and Jensen has to dig his fingernails into the palms of his hands to keep from slipping suddenly away.

'I'm not giving up on you,' he thinks. 'I'm setting you free.'

Jared sighs and Jensen says nothing.

They reach the edge of the playground and Sandy's not there either. There are children playing, laughter and screeching filling the air, and everything looks so normal, so idyllic, that Jensen can feel himself getting nervous all over again. He doesn't fit in here. This isn't his city. This isn't even his world. He's intruding in so many ways, upon Jared and Sandy and everything they have and plan for.

He sits down on the grass, cross-legged, and digs his fingers into the ground, feeling the earth cool and breathing underneath him. He misses Central Park almost as much as he misses his piano. This park lacks its touch with nature. It's like it's forgotten it used to be wild land, not city property, and has buried its roots too deep to remember. His fingers itch to revive it, to give it a taste of jungle and wilderness, but he doesn't think it would be a good idea, considering. He placates himself with just a little wriggle, breathing out when a few dandelions and some clover pop up around his hands.

Jared doesn't say anything but after a while Jensen feels his hand on his neck, rubbing it lightly. "Will you be alright here if I go get us something to drink?" he says. "I'm parched."

Jensen can feel it now, how dry his mouth is. "Yeah, of course. I'm not gonna stray," he adds annoyed.

Jared's fingers still on his neck and Jensen feels like a jerk all over again. "I know," Jared says carefully. "It's just you seem a bit on edge and..." He stops. "Never mind. I can wake you up if you zone out. It's alright."

"Right." He doesn't look up.

Jared rubs his neck a final time before straightening up. "I'll be right back," he says. "It's just over there."

Jensen nods, not even looking where Jared is pointing. He lays down on his back, eyes closed against the sun. It's a clear day and it doesn't take long for the heat to seep through his skin and warm him up inside out. He'll get sunburned, the curse of his pale freckled skin, but it's not like it won't be healed before nighttime. The bright light is starting to feel uncomfortable when he feels a shadow cast over him and he opens his eyes to find a little girl smiling down at him.

"Hey," he says as he sits up, offering her a tired smile.

She doesn't say anything, just looks at him through slanted eyes and then she reaches out, her small hand lightly touching his cheek. Her fingers are warm and chubby and his anxiety begins to drain away, like water through a thick cloth. She lays her sweaty and dirty palm against his skin and he closes his eyes, breathing slowly and evenly until all the flickering dark colors have disappear, replaced by sunlight and blue sky. When he opens his eyes she is still watching him fascinated, but he can hear her mother calling for her, clearly anxious.

"Thank you," he says quietly and the little girl nods and smiles even brighter. She lifts her hand and pets his hair, stubby fingers running through the wayward strands.

“Sarah, you can’t...” Her mother says as she hurries up to them but her sentence cuts off short and she stops, smiling at him uncertainly. “Oh. Hello.”

“Hello.” He offers her a smile. “You have a beautiful daughter.”

She blushes. “Thank you. For... for saying that.” She looks lovingly at the little girl, Sarah, who is still petting Jensen’s hair, deep concentration in her round face. “She can be a bit... Sarah, please.” She removes her daughter’s hand gently, blinking uncertainly when the small palm touches her own. He knows she can feel it, like a tickle or a light stroke of fingers he guesses. Butterflies fluttering through her veins. The girl looks up at her mother and laughs happily, their hands clasped tight.

“It’s alright,” Jensen says. “I don’t mind.” He smiles at the girl, laughing softly when she gives him a wide grin.

“We have to...” the woman says, her voice trailing off as she doesn’t move, eyes still staring at him dazedly. “We really should.”

He nods. “Goodbye,” he says and she turns reluctantly away, tugging at her daughter’s hand. Sarah frowns and he tells her, “It’s alright. I’m good now. Thank you.”

She lets go of her mother’s hand and runs up to him, throwing her short and chubby arms around his neck, a sloppy kiss pressed to his cheek. Then she’s gone in a flurry of laughter, leaving him with a wet cheek and the smell of strawberry milkshake in the air. He watches them walk away, the mother turning her head to look back over her shoulder again and again, probably wondering what just happened. The girl has already forgotten him, she’s running for the swings, her summer dress swaying in the soft breeze.

“So... no good with people, eh?” a voice says and Jensen turns to find Jared standing over him, holding two sodas and a cautious smile.

“Children like me now,” he says simply and Jared’s smile wavers.

“I can see that,” he says and sits down beside Jensen on the grass. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah. Me too.” He takes the bottle offered to him and twists the cap off. “Her name is Sarah and she’s going to be a poet,” he says and smiles a little.

“You could see that?” Jared asks surprised.

“Her mother told me her name. But I could see all the words inside her head, dancing. Beautiful words.” He follows Jared’s gaze, watching her. “Beautiful girl.”

“Yes,” Jared says quietly but when Jensen turns his head Jared isn’t watching her anymore, Jared’s watching him, his brow slightly furrowed and teeth worrying his upper lip.

“It’s going to be alright,” he says and gives Jared a smile. “See? No twitching.” He holds out his hand, steady as a rock. “I’m fine now.”

Jared nods. “That’s good, Jen,” he says, voice vacant.

Jensen sighs. “I’m sorry I was a jerk. I was just frustrated. With me, not you.” He offers Jared a small smile. “Are we ok?”

Jared looks slightly taken aback. “Of course we are. You have nothing to apologize for. I’m just…” He stops. “Don’t worry about it,” he adds and smiles back.

Jensen holds his gaze for a while but when Jared offers him nothing more he decides to let it go for now. They sit sipping their sodas and watching the children play until Jared yawns and Jensen nudges him amused.

“Tired?” he says and Jared nods, stifling another yawn and blinking his eyes. Jensen snorts but a moment later he’s yawning as well and he shoots Jared a fake annoyed glare. He *is* tired though, stress always does that to him, the effort of staying in a world his mind wants to flee from exhausting him. Yawning once more he lies down on his back, hands behind his head as he squints up at the sun.

“She should be here soon,” Jared says but after a while he eases himself down on his back as well and it doesn’t take long until he’s snoring softly. Jensen turns his head and looks at him. He looks younger in his sleep, more relaxed, but there are still lines of worry around his eyes. Jensen reaches out, stroking lightly over the furrowed brow with his fingertips. Jared sighs and his face smoothes out.

“Sleep,” Jensen whispers. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

Jared mumbles something inaudible, his head turning toward Jensen’s voice before settling down again. Jensen watches him for a while, the slow rising of his chest stretching the fabric of his t-shirt. The small twitches of his eyelids, irritated by the bright sun. Just Jared, his face, the little boy barely visible anymore under the grownup surface.

“I need to let you go,” Jensen says in a low voice and Jared frowns in his sleep. “You don’t deserve this. You are supposed to be happy.”

Jared sleeps on and Jensen sighs and closes his eyes. The bright sun burns his eyelids, burns the skin on his nose. Even his lips feel hot and dry and the freckles on his arms are multiplying by the minute. He breathes in, tasting summer in the air.

When he gets back home he’s going to spend the next two weeks in the park, soaking in the sun. Getting those light particles into his bloodstream, that heat into his bones. Just him, lying on the grass with his iPod blaring in his ears, getting lost in the world of music and the heat of summer and forgetting there ever might have been anything else out there waiting for him. Because it’s true, he needs to let Jared go. Even without the vision, if the last couple of days have shown him anything it’s that Jared can’t do this. He can’t be what Jensen is asking of him. He can’t live with his heart in two places. And it’s not fair of Jensen asking him to.



So he has today and four more days and then it's farewell. 'Farewell and goodbye and thank you for trying. It's alright. It's alright. I'm going to be alright.'

He's jerked awake by something wet touching his nose and opens his eyes to a velvet soft brown snout, rubbing his cheek.

"Hey," he says surprised. Dogs aren't usually that drawn to him, not the way other animals are. He doesn't know if it's because they're by nature protective of their owners and feel that there is something different about him that might be a threat, or if they can see Minna, crouched behind him with a raised back and hissing madly. "Hey there, buddy."

The dog feels familiar somehow but that doesn't mean much. Chances are this one isn't even a real dog. Shapes are recyclable, like souls. It feels real enough though and he sits up, rubbing it behind its ears.

"Where did you come from?" he asks and the dog pants in his face. "Oh man, your breath stinks," he groans and laughs when the dog licks his nose. "Ok, that's just gross."

"Harley, what are you doing?" a female voice says to the left of him. "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over...oh."

He looks up to find a petite brunette staring at him, eyes wide. She looks very much like she did ten years ago. Except grown up and heartbreakingly beautiful. Small and slender, with slick dark hair bouncing around her tan face, eyes deep brown and lips full. He bets if she smiles she looks positively glowing. It doesn't seem fair. And at the same time exactly what he should have expected. Of course. Of course this is what Jared's girlfriend looks like. Absolutely perfect.

"Hello, Sandy," he says and stands up, offering her his hand. "I'm Jensen."

"I know," she says slowly. "I remember."

"Right." He smiles awkwardly, hand hovering. "The weird kid."

She blushes and quickly takes his hand, shaking it. Her hand is small and delicate in his and he's suddenly and shamefully aware of the dirt smudging his fingertips. He lets her abruptly go which makes her take a step back, unsure.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," she says. "I was... I guess I was a bit of a bitch back then."

"No. You were right, I was weird," he says and shrugs, discreetly wiping his finger on his jeans. "Still am."

She smiles and he tries to smile back but he probably just looks weirder.

Jared breathes out a loud snore and they both look down at him.

“He was tired,” Jensen says. “But I’ll wake him up.”

She shakes her head. “In a minute. Let’s talk first.”

She looks around then sits down on the grass, petting the ground beside her. For one confusing moment Jensen thinks she’s asking him to sit by her side but then the dog, Harley, pushes by him and flops itself down close to her, tongue lolling. Ah. Right.

Jensen sits down as well, keeping a polite distance between them. He scratches Minna behind the ears but stops when he catches Sandy looking at him funny. Right. Not real. He’s not quite sure what to do with his hands so he lays them on his thighs where his fingers soon start tapping out the song playing in his head. It probably looks weird as well but it’s either that or digging his fingers into the dirt again and flowers growing before her eyes are not something she should see.

Jensen looks at her, wondering what she wants to talk about. She looks nervous, almost anxious. He knows Jared hasn’t told her about his magic because they’d talked about what to do to cover it up if something happened. But the rest... It might explain why she looks so tense. Why Jared had looked so guilty.

“What did he tell you about me?” he asks curious and she quickly looks away, blushing. “Ah. Right.” He laughs softly to himself then looks up at her, smiling a little. “The crazy stuff, right? Yeah, that *is* awkward.”

“He didn’t...” she starts but stops, averting her eyes. When she looks up again the awkwardness is gone, replaced by defiance. “He said you needed him. Is that true?”

Jensen flinches. He has no idea what to say to that. Yes, of course it’s true but it’s not a need he expects to have fulfilled. Like ever. It’s just something he’s going to have to live with. Or die with. However that goes.

“I do need people,” he admits quietly. “I mean, I have this... thing. It’s hard to explain. But yeah, I’m kinda... needy, I guess.”

She nods, worrying her lip and looking like she’s not even listening. “Are you in love with him?” she asks.

He blinks. “What?”

“Are you in love with Jared?” she repeats, her voice shaking a little. “Is that what this is about?”

“I...” He stares at her. Oh. His fingers tap faster and faster, the music growing louder in his head. “What?”

“Jared. Are you in love with him?” she says again, a little louder, a lot angrier. “I want to know. I think I deserve to know. We’ve been together three years but you... you just met him. You just met him, Jensen, and I can’t see why you think you can just...” She breathes out, her voice shaking. “He’s *my* boyfriend. And you... you’re clearly *not* alright. I’m sorry, but you’re not. And Jared, you know he’s got enough on

his plate without adding your problems. It wouldn't be fair on him and I'm sorry but this is just not fair on me. This is not fair on me, you just showing up and *ruining* everything we've built up the last three years."

Jensen blinks. Her anger and desperation is red and stings like acid. He tries to speak but there's no air in his lungs. The music is deafening, the manic drumming of his fingers hurting his thighs. 'Jared,' he thinks. '*Jared!*'

"Are you even listening to me?" she says, raising her voice even further.

He's losing focus, fast. Any minute now he's gonna...

"Oh hey, you're here," Jared's groggy voice says and Jensen sucks in his breath. "Sorry, I... What's going on?"

'Jared!' he thinks. Everything is a blur of green, then blue, then dark, dark red... 'Please. I need...'

A warm hand covers his left one, stilling his fingers and with that the manic pounding of the low notes goes quiet in his ears. "Jensen, wake up," Jared says in a low calm voice and Jensen's right hand instantly stills as well. He blinks, the music fading as the world slowly comes back into focus.

Jared is watching him, smiling softly. Whatever was worrying him before seems to have slipped away as he slept because he looks peaceful and calm, and the conflicted sadness that's been in his eyes the last couple of days is gone. "Hey," he says in a warm voice and squeezes Jensen's hand. "You alright?"

Jensen licks his lips and nods.

"I asked you not to do this," Jared says without looking away. His voice is suddenly hard and for a moment Jensen freezes, thinking he's talking to him. "Sandy, I *asked* you."

"I have a right to know!" she says and Jensen flinches. "He can't just barge into our lives and..."

"He didn't barge into my life, Sandy. He was always there." Jared gives Jensen's hand another firm squeeze before letting it go and turning around to face Sandy. "He's always going to be in my life. That's never going to change."

"I can't just..."

"Sandy." There's something in the way he says her name, so softly, his shoulders relaxing and the anger in his eyes making way for quiet sadness. She looks up at him, her face crumbling as she shakes her head.

"No. Jared..." she pleads.

"I'm sorry."

Jensen looks from one to the other, feeling lost. He's missed something, he knows it, but he can't seem able to read them.

"He did this," she says, her lip trembling, and Jensen hitches his breath in sudden understanding.

'Oh God, Jared, what are you doing?' he thinks. 'You don't know what you're doing.'

"We were fine and then he came and..."

Jared shakes his head. "We weren't fine, Sandy. We haven't been fine in a long time. You know that."

"So we work on it! We..."

"Sandy." He gives her a sad smile. "No. I'm not going to change my mind."

She stops, looking down, her face flushed. "So you're just gonna throw everything away for *him*?"

"Jared," Jensen says in a low voice, "what is she talking about?"

Jared is silent for a moment, watching Sandy with a sad resigned expression on his face but when he turns to Jensen his eyes are calm and he smiles a little. "I'm moving to New York," he says and Jensen's heart stops.

"What?" he says, his voice shaking. "You're... what?"

Jared looks a bit sheepish. "This is not how I planned to tell you."

"But I thought..." He swallows, looking at Sandy who is biting her lip, looking angry and devastated. "I thought you couldn't. You said... Jesus, Jared! It's not fair on her."

Sandy looks shocked at that, eyeing him with sudden comprehension. "Don't you get it? *We're* not moving. *He* is." She stands up, grabbing Harley by the collar. "He's leaving me for you," she forces out through tight lips and then turns around and stalks away, shoulders shaking.

"What?" Jensen turns to Jared slowly. "No. No, you can't do that. That's not... Jared, you can't *do* that!"

Jared blinks. "What? Why?"

"Because... God, Jare. You are so much better than that. You deserve so much better than me." He closes his eyes. "I never should have come here. I should have let you go. I never should have *come* here!"

"Jensen."

“I was going to let you go. I was. Just this week and then I was going to say goodbye and let you go.”

“Jensen, will you please stop and listen to me.”

“No!” He opens his eyes, glaring at Jared. “I’m not worth it, ok? I’m not fucking worth it! You love her! I can see it. You love her so much and you’re just going to throw that away for *this*?” He beats his fist hard against his chest, nostrils flaring. “I’m a fucking mistake, Jare. I will ruin your life, just like I ruined my parents’ lives, like I’m ruining Chris’s life. I will not do that to you.”

Jared stares at him, looking absolutely stricken. “But you said... You have been waiting for me for ten fucking *years*, Jensen. You *want* this. You want this more than *anything*. Why are you saying this now, now that I’ve finally gotten my shit together and figured it out? Why are you...?”

“Because I was wrong. I was wrong, Jared. I thought because I loved you...” He stops, heaving for breath. Shit. Predictably Jared doesn’t look the least surprised at the revelation but he does look absolutely broken by the past tense.

“Loved?” he asks in a low voice.

He should make this easy on them. Should tell Jared that he doesn’t love him anymore. Doesn’t want anything to do with him. But this is Jared and he just can’t... He *can’t* lie to him.

“I thought because I loved you I should have you. But...” He shakes his head, biting his lip. “God, Jared. Now I just want you to be happy. She loves you. You love her.”

“I do love her,” Jared says quietly. “But I love you more.”

Jensen swallows, shaking his head. “Jared...” he says exasperated.

“No, Jensen,” Jared says in a firm tone, “I love you. Ok? Not just... I love you like you love me. That kind of love.”

Jensen goes absolutely still. His heart is hammering in his chest, fast and hard and an inch away from breaking. Jared’s watching him, Jensen can feel his gaze burning its way through his skin but he can’t look up because... what if it’s not what he thinks? What if Jared means something completely different? Something that at this point might be just the thing that will push him over the edge.

“These last few weeks,” Jared says quietly, “I’ve been thinking so much. About you and me and why I can’t seem to live without you. Wondering and trying to figure out what you’d done to me, what your magic had done to me. And then I finally realized I was thinking too much. That I shouldn’t think, I should just feel. And I did and I realized... I realized this was how I felt. Love. For you. Like... Like I think I was meant for you and that maybe you were meant for me. That that’s why you’re screwed up without me and why I keep screwing up trying to be without you. Because that’s not how we were supposed to live. Not apart but together. And I think maybe...”

maybe if we do that things will not be so screwed up. Because you're not the only one, Jensen. You're not the only one that feels lost and alone and like half a person. You're not the only one that can't... I can't live without you. I can't live without you, Jensen. And I love you. So much. So much it aches and hurts and I think I might die if you don't want this anymore. If you don't... Jesus, Jensen, can you just please kiss me?"

Jensen closes his eyes for a long moment. Then he looks up, his ragged breathing loud in the sudden dead silence of the park. But Jared is still there and he's looking at him with eyes that are full of plea and hope and fear and so much love that Jensen thinks maybe, maybe...

He reaches out, his hand shaking slightly when he lays it on Jared's cheek. Jared closes his eyes, his breath hitching, and then he leans forward, meeting Jensen halfway.

It's soft and warm and perfect. It's the kiss of his dreams, the kiss of his visions. The kiss he's been waiting for his whole life. Jared's lips shake as he breathes into Jensen's mouth, his hand coming up to clutch at Jensen's neck and draw him closer. Jensen parts his lips on a sigh and it's like Jared had been waiting for that exact invite because he licks slowly and hesitantly over Jensen's lower lips before slipping his tongue inside his mouth, hot and wet and... oh God, yes!

He doesn't remember moving but he must have because they're suddenly up in each other's arms, kneeling on the grass and bodies pressed flush against each other. Jared's hands are in his hair, fingers pressing desperately into Jensen's skull, and he's kissing him like it's the only thing keeping him from flying apart. Soft kisses, hard kisses, gentle kisses and desperate kisses. Deep kisses that taste like coffee and small biting kisses that have Jensen trembling and whimpering. He feels dizzy, like the whole world is turning way too fast and all he can do is hold on to Jared, hands fisted in the back of his shirt and hips pressed so close he thinks they might be melting together into one person.

"Love you, love you... God, I love you," Jared chokes out between kisses and Jensen sucks in his breath, filling the lungs with his words. It starts like a ball of heat in the middle of his chest and then it's rolling through his body, an avalanche of warmth spreading out to his fingers, his toes, the tips of his ears. Everything is bright and good and beautiful.

"Yes," he says and laughs into Jared's mouth. "Yes, yes, yes. This!"

He kisses Jared again and the whole park explodes in a jungle of flowers.



“Hey,” Jared says and nuzzles into Jensen’s neck. “Maybe we should get out of here before the American Horticultural Society comes to investigate.”

“Hmm?” Jensen blinks his eyes open slowly, looking like a sleepy five year old. “What?” he breathes out as his eyes slip closed again, clearly not ready to move.

Jared smiles, kissing him on the ear. “We’re lying in the middle of a jungle. That’s *not* supposed to be here. I’m surprised no one’s come running already.”

He can hear people walking nearby, talking excitedly and slightly apprehensive about the wondrous and sudden floral explosion that has taken over the whole park. Thankfully they’re hidden by the excessive growth, high grass and ferns obscuring the view to their makeshift nest. Still, lying here kissing for what must be close to an hour, they’re probably pushing their luck.

Not that it wasn’t worth it. Jared didn’t know just kissing could be so... mindblowing. Of course, until now his kissing adventures hadn’t included Jensen. Just thinking about it is enough to form a pool of heat in his stomach that has his breath shortening to shallow pants. He pushes the thought away from now. There’s kissing in the middle of a park and then there’s doing other stuff in the middle of a park. Jared isn’t sure even Jensen can conjure a jungle wild enough to hide that.

“This is going to be on the news, you do realize that?” he adds as he realizes it himself, nudging Jensen lightly with his nose to get his attention.

“Don’t care.” Jensen rolls over, burying his face into Jared’s neck. “Don’t wanna move,” he mumbles and Jared can feel him smile against his skin. A hand sneaks under Jared’s t-shirt, warm fingers running up to his chest and settling on his sternum, leaving a trail of tingling skin in their wake. “Sleep here,” Jensen sighs, his arm going slack as he starts breathing softly into Jared’s ear.

Jared chuckles and kisses him again, just pressing his lips into the edge of Jensen’s hairline. His hair tickles Jared’s nose and he can taste the salt of Jensen’s sweat when he runs his tongue over his lips. That is the most amazing part of it all. This, the reality of it. He has Jensen here in his arms, warm and relaxed. He has the taste of him on his lips and he’s breathing in his scent. All of it, real. It’s not that he expected someone to snap their fingers and it would all go away, it’s more that in all his thinking, trying to figure out how he felt and what he wanted, he never really thought of what choosing this would actually mean. That the choice would give him this, a living breathing Jensen in his arms, in his *life*. A Jensen who won’t disappear if he opens his eyes.

He pulls back, just enough so he can see Jensen’s face. His eyes are closed, eyelashes dusting his cheeks, and his lips are slack, partly open as he breathes. Jared can’t remember ever seeing Jensen so peaceful. Probably because he never has been. Lying snuggled up to Jared in this exotic jungle of flowers he looks so honestly happy, like he’s finally found his place in the world. Maybe *that* is the most amazing thing of all. That of all the people in the world, Jensen chose him.

Or maybe the world chose them. Jared thinks about that for a while. Of coincidences and accidents, leading them to one another. The first time he saw Jensen, sitting under that tree. If this is Fate were they meant to meet then? Was he supposed to walk up to Jensen that day, eighteen years ago? How would that have changed his life, both of their lives? Would it have been easier? Harder?

He breathes in the smell of Jensen's hair and thinks that maybe, *maybe* Jensen being so monumentally screwed up is partly his fault. For not giving Jensen those extra eight years. Things happen for a reason, yeah, but sometimes they just happen and sometimes things turn out differently than they were meant to. Like them losing each other for ten years. He can't see any reason behind that except Jensen's parents' inability to see what was supposed to be and screwing things up by trying to change them to fit their wishes.

"I wish I could turn back time," he says quietly. "I wouldn't be such a coward."

"If you turn back time you just end up doing the same things," Jensen mumbles. "Not that it's actually possible. Trust me."

"I thought you were asleep," Jared says embarrassed.

"And I thought you were supposed to be happy, not brooding." Jensen raises himself up on his elbow, looking down at Jared with a fond smile on his face. "Why would you want to turn back time anyway?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. "I just feel we've lost so much. Time I mean. First time I saw you I was six years old." He looks at Jensen and smiles. "I think we could have made awesome friends when we were kids. Gotten ourselves into all kinds of mischief." Jensen grins and he chuckles, blushing slightly. "Not that kind of mischief. Pervert."

The hand on Jared's chest moves down, stopping just above his belly button. Jared holds his breath, fighting not to squirm, but when nothing else happens he realizes Jensen isn't teasing, he's probably not even aware of what he's doing. Instead he's frowning slightly, obviously thinking Jared's words over. "Maybe," he finally says, "I don't know. I wasn't a lot of fun back then."

Jared raises his eyebrow, surprised. "Why do you say that?"

"Well..." Jensen shrugs. "I didn't know how to play the piano then. And as for the magic, I couldn't control anything I did. Sometimes things happened, sometimes they didn't. It didn't really have much to do with me. I mean, I didn't even know it *was* magic. So... I don't know. I guess I was pretty boring."

"Jensen," Jared says, staring up at him incredulous. "You think that's the only reason I love you? Because of your magic and your music?"

A look of discomfort flits over Jensen's face but he smoothes it out soon enough. "No. I mean, not really," he says casually but the doubt is obviously there and one



look from Jared has him averting his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe.” He glances at Jared. “You don’t?”

“Dude.” Jared reaches over, cupping the back of Jensen’s head and pulling him down until their foreheads rest against each other. “I love *you*, ok? If you lost your magic, I’d still love you. If you never played again, I’d still love you. Hell, when you’re old and fat and grey I’m still gonna love you. That’s never gonna change.”

Jensen breathes against his mouth, their faces so close his eyelashes catch on Jared’s when he slowly blinks. “What if I don’t?” he says in a very low voice.

Jared stills. “Don’t love me?” he asks.

“No! Christ. I meant... What if... what if I don’t grow old?”

Jared frowns. He slides his thumb under Jensen’s chin and tilts his head slightly up so he can see his face. “Why would you say that?”

Jensen’s gaze slides briefly away but then it returns, like he needs to see Jared’s reaction. “I can’t get sick. I heal way faster than I should. What if I don’t grow old when I should? What if you grow old and... and die and I’m left behind?” His face is passive but there’s fear in his eyes and Jared suddenly remembers the vision Jensen had on the way over here. Oh.

Well, maybe Jensen is right. Maybe Jared will die before he does. A year, maybe even ten ahead of him. But hell if he’s going to wait for Jensen until the end of time, all alone sitting on some stupid cloud.

“Jensen, that’s not gonna happen,” he says firmly. “Ok? You’re not immortal. You’re... different, yes. And you’ll probably look way better than me when you’re eighty but you *do* age. You look older now than ten years ago. You already have crowfeet by your eyes, which by the way are ridiculously adorable.”

Jensen gazes at him for a long time but then he smiles a little. “You saying I’m wrinkling?”

“Well, you are closing in on thirty.” He laughs when Jensen scowls at him. “I just hope you can keep up with me. According to research you’ve already reached and *passed* your sexual peak several years ago.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what that was,” Jensen says thoughtful, grinning when Jared laughs. “I don’t know though. I feel pretty peaked. Maybe we need to put that theory to the test.” He licks his lips and this time when his hand moves a little lower it’s definitely deliberate.

The smile drops off Jared’s face. “Yeah?” he says, swallowing. “You want that?”

Jensen’s hand stops abruptly. “You don’t?” he asks hesitantly. “I mean...” He starts pulling his hand away but Jared catches him by the wrist.

“I do,” he says. “Christ, Jen. This... what you were doing? It’s making my head spin, man.”

Jensen smiles, still looking a bit unsure. “Yeah?” He relaxes, his palm resting on Jared’s belly, fingers stroking gently through the treasure trail. “You like that? Me touching you?”

“I think ‘like’ is an understatement,” Jared laughs shakily. “Jesus, Jen, your fingers. It’s like... Those are some magic fingers, dude!”

Jensen blinks, looking honestly surprised. “I’m not doing anything,” he says confused. “I’m just...”

He rubs his fingertips over Jared’s skin. Like before it tingles, like champagne bubbling under his skin and he sucks in his breath. “Oh wow!”

Jensen’s eyes widen. “I’m not doing anything,” he repeats, starting to look a little freaked out. He pulls Jared’s shirt up, staring at the exposed skin. “You look alright.”

Jared laughs. “Dude, of course I do. Not like you’re gonna turn my skin purple or whatever.” He hesitates. “Are you?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never done this before!” He pulls away and sits up. “You feel alright? Not... weird or anything, right?” He swallows. “Like... I don’t know, suicidal or something?”

“What?” Jared’s laughter dies on his lips when he realizes Jensen is absolutely serious. “Jen, are you kidding me? Why would you say that?”

“Forget it.” Jensen laughs nervously. “It’s nothing.” He rubs his neck and looks around. “You’re right. We should probably get going.”

“Jensen,” Jared says firmly, laying a hand on Jensen’s arm. “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing. I just... haven’t had the best experience with... sex. That’s all.” He shrugs.

“Oh.” Jared sits up as well, trying to read Jensen’s blank face. “Are you talking about when you... that thing you told me about? When you were inside? Because you haven’t... I mean, Chris told me you haven’t been... dating.”

Jensen’s face flushes deep red. “I’m going to kill Chris,” he mutters but it sounds more embarrassed than angry. “What exactly did he tell you?”

“Just that. No dating or... anything.” It’s hard to see which one of them is more embarrassed. “Is that why? What happened to you in there? And don’t tell me nothing happened because... I already know you were drugged and I know how you are when you’re drugged so...” He swallows. “I’m just a bit worried, man. That I’ll do something that I shouldn’t. Because of that.”

Jensen sits still for a long time but then he nods. "I guess... yeah. But it wasn't... Nothing happened to me, ok? No one did anything to me. It wasn't like that. It just... freaked me out a bit. Not the sex, that wasn't... Not that. But after."

"You want to tell me?" Jared asks him quietly.

Jensen is silent for a while but then he nods again, slowly. "I think... yes. If you want to know." He looks over, face serious. "Anything you want to know, I'll tell you. I'm done with keeping secrets from you."

Jared shakes his head. "It's not about that, Jen. I just... If you want to talk about it, that's all."

Jensen watches him, a thoughtful look in his eyes but then he turns his head and stares out over the ocean of flowers.

"His name was Mason and he cried the whole time," he says, his voice strangely vacant, and Jared goes absolutely still. "He sucked me off. It was ok, I guess. I didn't feel much. He said he needed to fuck me and I think I said, 'Ok, yeah.' I don't really remember. I just wanted him to stop crying, mostly because I wasn't able to. Cry, I mean. It's weird but I really wanted to for some reason, to just cry. I don't know."

He shrugs as if it doesn't matter and Jared's heart clenches painfully.

"Anyway, he used my own come that he'd spit into his hand. I felt him push his fingers inside and I remember thinking that if I never got out of there at least I wouldn't die a virgin." He laughs quietly to himself as if it's funny somehow. "It didn't hurt but then again nothing did. I was too doped up for that. I didn't really feel anything except weird. Then I fell asleep." He nods to himself, a small frown wrinkling his nose. "I don't even know if he actually did it or not. By the time I woke up he was dead. Hung himself with a rope made of his own ripped up sheets."

Jared sucks in his breath. "Oh God."

Jensen licks his lips, his eyes strangely passive. "I think they blamed me. Or, you know, figured I had something to do with it. I never shared a room with anyone after that."

Jared puts a hand on Jensen's arm, wishing he'd just look at him. "Hey, you didn't do that. You didn't turn him suicidal, you know that right?"

"That's what Chris says but..." He shrugs. "I might have. Somehow. I just don't know."

"Jen, c'mon. He obviously wasn't stable. I mean, crying through sex isn't exactly normal."

"I guess," Jensen says blankly but when he pulls back and looks at Jared he seems tense. "I don't regret it, not really. I regret what happened to him, what it did to him,

being with me. But not... not actually doing it. It was like... a passage. Something I had to do to figure out some things about myself.”

“Like that you were gay?” Jared asks quietly.

“More than I wasn’t.” Jared’s surprise must have been obvious because Jensen blushes, looking away all awkward and uncomfortable. “You ever feel attracted to guys, Jared? Before.”

Jared shakes his head. “No. I mean, I’d sometimes wondered what it was like, mostly because of what you told me back then, but I never... No.”

Jensen nods. “Me neither. They don’t do anything for me, which would make me straight, right? Except I don’t feel attracted to girls either. I look at them and there’s nothing there.” He shakes his head. “I would think it was part of my whole ‘weird’ thing, some kind of asexual curse or whatever, except... well, there’s you.” He looks over at Jared, smiling hesitantly. “I’ve always felt attracted to you.”

Jared bites his lip, still having trouble grasping just how much he means to Jensen. “I guess that makes you Jaredsexual,” he jokes and Jensen visibly relaxes, laughing a little before looking away again.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“So that’s why you never...?” Jared asks hesitantly.

Jensen nods. “Just never wanted to,” he says, like it’s just that easy. “Don’t really see much point in having sex just because people think you should.”

Jared frowns. He can’t really fathom how that’s possible, not feeling any sexual attraction at all. “You told me you read gay porn,” he says slowly. “And those dreams you have that make people... feel stuff.”

Jensen looks at him and laughs, probably at the confusion that can be read all over Jared’s face. “It’s not like I’m a eunuch, man. Everything works just fine down there.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Jared can’t help saying and Jensen laughs again, flushing red even if he looks more mischievous than embarrassed.

“Yeah, well... I have a very vivid imagination, you know,” he says with a quirk of his eyebrow.

Jared laughs. “Yeah, I know.” He can feel his face heating and Jensen grins.

“So... I just imagined what I wanted. *Who* I wanted.” He stops, seeming to search Jared’s face for signs, maybe that he’s freaking out, but all Jared has to offer is the further reddening of his cheeks and an undeniable heat in his belly. After a moment’s heated silence Jensen adds, “I guess I just wanted to know what to do when... *if* we ever...” He pauses, smiling awkwardly. “That’s all.”

“Oh. Right.”

So Jensen’s been jerking off to images of the two of them in his head. Or possibly having sex with a solid and tangible version of Jared in his own magical world. From maybe as early as the day they first met when Jensen had seen a grown up Jared for the first time. Maybe he should feel freaked out about that but all he feels is incredibly turned on.

“So,” he says, trying to make them both feel less awkward, “you’ve never had real sex and I’ve never had gay sex. Man, we’re gonna be the worst lovers ever.”

Jensen throws back his head and laughs. Jared looks at him with a grin, waiting until he starts to calm down before adding, “Well, at least if *I* am, *you* won’t know the difference.”

And Jensen starts laughing again, his shoulders shaking and his eyes leaking at the corners as he fights for his breath. It’s amazing, watching Jensen laugh like that. Jared can’t remember ever seeing him so honestly happy and unreserved. It kinda makes him want to tell all his lamest jokes, just to keep Jensen laughing until he passes out from lack of air. There is no trace of nervousness, no ticks or twitches, no brief frowns of hesitation. He’s just letting it all out there, his most honest deepest feelings and he’s fine. He’s absolutely fine. So yes, maybe the sun is shining a little too bright, maybe the flowers smell a little sweeter than normal, but there’s nothing bad in that. There’s nothing bad at all.

Maybe, Jared thinks, maybe that was the answer all along. Maybe that was why Jensen kept messing up, because he was never really happy. All his accidents and scary screw-ups, they never happen when Jensen is laughing or smiling. Or just watching Jared like he is right now, with eyes that say so much, now that they’re finally allowed.

“Are you really worried?” Jensen asks softly. “I mean, you’re kinda new to this whole thing.”

“What thing? Oh, the gay thing?” Jared laughs. “Not that new actually. Considering I’ve been kissing you every night for the last two weeks.”

“What?” Jensen asks with a frown. “When were you kissing me?”

“Let’s just say you’re not the only one with a vivid imagination.” At Jensen’s raised eyebrow he laughs awkwardly, rubbing his neck. “Yeah, here’s the thing. I’ve been having these... dreams. About you and me. Oh and a unicorn! You showed me a unicorn which was like... wow! Anyway, we were kissing. Me and you, not me and the unicorn, obviously. Like every time I fell asleep I’d be back in some enchanted forest with you and then... we’d end up kissing. And just.. making out. A lot. And it was... Well, let’s just say I’m not really worried about the gay thing.”

He looks up to find Jensen staring at him, looking slightly pale. “Jensen, are you alright?”

“Those dreams,” Jensen says quietly, “your dreams... That must have been me. My dreams. Somehow.” He shakes his head. “Because all that time... I didn’t have any. At all. And that never happens.”

“Yeah, I know. Chris told me.” Jared watches him, worried. “Jensen, so what if they were? It’s ok. Believe me, I didn’t mind.”

“It means I put the thought into your head.” He frowns, his eyes flickering. “It was me. I made you... I made you love me. I did that.”

It suddenly hits Jared what Jensen is saying and he doesn’t know whether to shake him or pull him close. “Jensen, that is such bullshit,” he says firmly. “You didn’t do anything. If those really were your dreams then the only thing they did was push me in the right direction.”

“But you were with Sandy. You loved Sandy. And then I...” He rubs one hand over his face. “I was never going to do anything, once I knew about her. I didn’t mean to do anything.” He shudders. “But I did. Christ. I *hexed* you.”

Jared grabs his hand, squeezing it. “Jen, listen to me. You didn’t do this, ok? It was going to happen anyway. We were supposed to happen.”

Jensen shakes his head. “You don’t believe in all that destiny crap,” he says. “You told me that.”

“Dude, I was thirteen. I’d just stopped believing in Santa. I had faith issues, ok?” He smiles, patting himself mentally on the back when Jensen gives him a small smile back. He doesn’t look convinced though, just guilty and sad and like he’s a breath away from hating himself.

“You know, you’re right. I love Sandy, I do. I always have. That’s just it. I’ve known her since before I could walk, Jen. And she’s pretty and funny and sexy as hell. When we hooked up I was barely twenty and had already been through like ten relationships because I found out too late I had nothing in common with all those girls. And then Sandy came back from college and here was this girl who I already knew, already loved and was everything else I thought I wanted. So I just stopped looking and thought this was what I’d been missing. And it wasn’t until I found you again that I realized how wrong I was.”

He takes Jensen’s both hands in his, waiting until he finally looks up at him. “The reason I fell in love with you wasn’t because of anything you *did* but because I finally realized *you* were what I’d been looking for. That *you* were what I’d been missing.”

He sighs when Jensen just looks away. “Listen to me. Even if we’d never met again, you and me, my relationship with Sandy wouldn’t have lasted. We’d been arguing more than we got along. Way before I found you. She’s angry now and yes, probably hates the both of us but she’s not stupid. She’ll realize soon enough that we weren’t going to make it. With or without you in the picture.”

Jensen shakes his head. “You can’t know that.”

“Yes, I can. Know how? We never made plans. We never said, ‘Ten years from now we’re gonna have two kids and a house with a white picket fence,’ or asked ‘Will you still love me when I’m old and grey?’ Because deep down we knew we’d never last that long.” Jared reaches out and cups Jensen’s face, running his thumbs gently over the smattering of freckles under his eyes. “But you? There isn’t a place in time I can imagine my life without you. Not tomorrow, not fifty years from now. Not ever.” He smiles. “When I’m old and ugly and you’re still as pretty as you are right now you’re gonna wish you could get rid of me.”

Jensen laughs at that, the tension draining somewhat from his eyes. “I will never want to be rid of you,” he says softly then bites his lip, looking up at Jared with hesitation. “Are you sure? Because you have to be sure, Jared. If you change your mind later after all this...” He stops, drawing in his breath. “I don’t think I’ll be able to handle that.”

He swallows and Jared knows he doesn’t mean he can’t go on without him or that it might break his heart. He’s talking natural disasters and the ending of the world unless he stops it, the only way he knows how. It’s an enormous responsibility, taking on not only Jensen’s heart but his whole life. But it’s not as if he ever expected anything different.

“I’m sure,” Jared says and pulls him in, resting their foreheads together and breathing in Jensen’s air. “I’ve never been surer of anything else in my whole life.”

He kisses Jensen, pressing their lips together as he closes his eyes, trying to breathe all his feelings into Jensen’s mouth. ‘C’mon, Jen’ he thinks. ‘With all you can do, can you not feel this? Can you not feel how much I love you?’

Maybe it works because suddenly Jensen whimpers, a low almost keening sound that goes straight to Jared’s gut, and then he’s kissing Jared back, just as hungrily as when they first started. His hands come up to clutch at Jared’s arms, fingers digging into his biceps, almost desperately, and he keeps making that sound, like he’s afraid if he stops to breathe Jared will disappear. In the end it’s Jared who pulls away, gasping for breath and grabbing Jensen’s shoulder to keep himself from falling over.

“We need to get home. Now. We need to get home now!”

Jensen just nods, his eyes dark green like the ocean and the freckles pale in his flushed face. They stumble to their feet, still holding on to each other like drowning sailors, Jensen gazing dazed at Jared while Jared looks around trying to find the nearest exit.

“This way,” he says and pulls Jensen along, laughing almost hysterically when they trip over the ridiculous growth surrounding them. “God, we’re gonna get lost. In a fucking park!”

“If it was a ‘fucking’ park we wouldn’t be having this problem. We’d just do it right here,” Jensen says shakily and Jared laughs even louder.

“Unless your magic comes with self-lubrication, getting home is sort of essential,” he points out, making Jensen stop with a growl and pull him down for another kiss. When they come apart again Jared is feeling dizzy and so damn turned on he thinks he might come in his pants if Jensen kisses him one more time. They’re never gonna make it, he suddenly realizes. It took them half an hour to walk here. It’s impossible.

“Jensen,” he says gently, holding him at arms length so he can look him in the eye, “how much do you want to have sex, right now?”

“You got to ask me that?” Jensen pants. “Fuck, get me behind that bush and spit on your fingers and I’m good to go, man.”

“Ok, now you almost made me come in my pants,” Jared groans, resting his forehead against Jensen’s. “But that wasn’t what I meant. You think you can take a cab home? It’s only about ten minutes.”

Jensen looks at him incredulous. “Jared, right now I’d check myself into the nearest nut house if it meant getting you naked.”

Jared grins so wide he thinks his face might split. “Well, alright then.” They hurry out onto the sidewalk and Jared almost falls in front of the first cab he sees as he tries to haul it down. Thankfully it’s empty and the driver stops, glaring at them when they stumble into the back seat.

“No sex in cab,” he says and they both burst out laughing. “No sick in cab either,” he adds suspiciously. “No drugs, no drinking, no funny stuff.”

“No funny stuff,” Jared says solemnly and Jensen starts giggling again, like it’s the funniest thing ever. Jared manages to ramble the address and adds, “Just get us there as quick as possible.” He glances at Jensen, raising his eyebrows. “Jensen, lights? Think you can...?”

Jensen grins and cracks his knuckles. “I’m on it, boss,” he says, wiggling his fingers dramatically but as soon as the car pulls into traffic his eyes squeeze shut and he’s got Jared’s hand in a deathgrip. Jared pulls him in, allowing him to press his face into the slope of his neck, fingers spread soothingly over his back.

“Just making out on the couch,” he whispers. “No one here but you and me and Bruce Willis blowing up shit on TV.”

Jensen laughs shakily. “Yeah,” he breathes and his teeth start nibbling at Jared’s collarbone, making him shiver. Jared lets his fingers slide up to rub at Jensen’s hairline, feeling his skin flush as Jensen’s pulse speeds up under his fingertips. Jensen’s breath is hot on his neck, his fingers sweaty as they relax their rigid grip on Jared’s hand. It’s amazing how hot it is. The driver sends them annoyed glances in the rearview mirror but Jared couldn’t care less.

They don’t hit a single red light all the way home.





They stop to kiss while Jared fumbles for his keys in front of the building. They kiss on the way up in the elevator, the doors already sliding close again when Jared shoves one foot between and wrestles them out into the hall in front of his apartment. He presses Jensen up against the door, kissing his neck and practically humping his leg, gasping when Jensen's hands slide up his back. He drops his keys when he tries to blindly open the door and the short loss of contact when he bends down to pick them up again is enough to have Jensen's knees buckling. He starts sliding down the door, caught at the last moment by Jared's hands, hoisting him up by his armpits.

"Whoa," he says and laughs. "You alright there, Jen?"

"Dizzy," Jensen admits, fisting Jared's t-shirt as he tries to get the world to stop spinning. "Think I forgot to breathe."

"Yeah, that can happen." Jared jiggles the keys in the lock, smiling down at him with such fondness it makes Jensen feel breathless all over again. "First time I made out with a girl I fell over and almost crushed her underneath me. Talk about embarrassing." He shoves the door open and pulls Jensen in with him. "Of course I was fourteen..." he says smugly.

"Shut up," Jensen wheezes and pushes Jared up against the door, places and sides reversed, kissing him until Jared's knees threaten to buckle as well. "Never did this before, ok? I'm just a bit..." He groans when Jared latches on to his neck, sucking the skin in between his teeth. "...overwhelmed."

"Never made out before?" Jared pants and licks a trail up to Jensen's ear which proves to be his next nibbling project. "Seriously?"

"Never kissed," Jensen elaborates as he silently tells his feet to get back down on the floor. "Not real people."

Jared goes absolutely still and for a moment Jensen thinks he's finally managed to freak him out but just as he's about to pull back Jared grabs his face between his big hands, long fingers reaching from the edge of Jensen's jaw to the top of his hairline.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?" he growls into Jensen's mouth, sucking his lower lip in between his teeth before letting it go with a snap. "This? You? It's just mine?" Jensen gasps as Jared fucks his mouth with his tongue, his hands gripping Jared's hips to keep himself steady. "Bed. Now!"

He doesn't have any time to argue, not that he *would*, before Jared's grabbing his ass and pushing him backwards through the living room and to the bedroom, finally just lifting him up and dumping him unceremoniously on the bed.

"God, I want you so much," Jared is saying as he's pulling his t-shirt over his head and all Jensen can do is just lie there, staring up at him with wide eyes, trying to imagine what it will be like, having all those miles of skin draped over him. He's aware that he should be doing something, like possibly taking off his own clothes but

it's hard to think let alone move when he's got Jared stripping right in front of him. It's not until Jared's stepped out of his boxers that he looks down at Jensen, seeming to realize he's the only one getting prepared.

"Jensen? You okay?" he says and walks over to the side of the bed, cock bouncing with every step.

"Huh?" Jensen says, completely unable to take his eyes off Jared's dick being right *there*. Jesus! All those dreams and fantasies, they were so off. Like miles off. Or more like, you know, inches. Several in fact. He never really paid that much attention to details such as size, seeing as it was all in his head anyway, but goddamn, that is not small. He hitches his breath and licks his lips, starting to feel dizzy again.

"We don't have to do this," Jared says suddenly and Jensen's eyes finally manage to snap away from Jared's dick and up to his face. Jared is looking flushed and embarrassed, one hand slipping down to cover his groin. "Seriously, we can just..."

"I want to suck your cock," Jensen blurts out. "I have no idea how and I'll probably do it all wrong but Jesus, Jared, you got to let me suck your goddamn dick."

Jared blinks. "What? Oh. Ok." He pulls his hand awkwardly away, precome sticking to his palm and Jensen groans deep down in his chest. "You sure?"

"Have you seen your dick?" Jensen asks exasperated. "Yes, I'm sure!"

"Ok, ok." Jared laughs a little, hand still hovering hesitantly above his dick. "You want to... Should I...?"

Jensen sits up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, and grabs Jared by the hips pulling him closer. He deftly avoids Jared's cock and instead presses his nose into Jared's treasure trail, breathing in the warm and slightly spicy scent. He laughs softly when Jared's starts breathing heavily, making his stomach move like waves.

"Smell so good," he mumbles, nuzzling into the groove by his hipbone. "Fuck, Jared. Wanted this for so long."

"Nngh," Jared groans, one huge hand coming to rest on the top of Jensen's head. "Jesus, Jensen. You... What you do to me."

Jensen looks up at him and then he presses a kiss into the skin right above the red indent from Jared's boxers, watching Jared's face for a reaction. He's not disappointed. Jared's eyes roll back in his head as he gasps out Jensen's name, fingers fumbling for purchase in Jensen's short hair. Another kiss a little lower and he's got Jared panting, hips jerking forward seemingly involuntarily because he whimpers an apology, rambling, "Sorry, sorry. God, Jen, you're... What are you doing?"

Jensen grins and moves lower, ignoring the almost painful grabbing of Jared's fingers in his hair and the steady flow of cursing and pleading showering over him as he kisses and sucks the skin in between his teeth.

“Please, Jen,” Jared’s saying. “Please, just... Please touch me, just fucking touch me. You goddamn tease. What are you... Oh Jesus. Yes. No. I can’t... Oh. Oh God.”

There’s a limit to how long it’s worth drawing it out though and Jensen reaches his just as Jared sounds ready to either pass out or kill him.

“This?” he says and licks a trail up Jared’s cock. It tastes a little like seaweed. “This what you want?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, not that he really expects one seeing as Jared’s sucking in his breath like he’s just been rescued from drowning, but slips his lips over the head of Jared’s cock and lets it slide into his mouth.

It’s more difficult than he imagined and somehow nothing like what he’d read in books. The dry skin catches on his lower lip, pulling it down and exposing his teeth, something he knows he’s not supposed to do. And he can’t really lick his lips to moisten them when he’s got a cock the size of a baseball bat in his mouth. Ok, he can stick his tongue out which wets his lower lip and Jared seems to like it as well, Jensen’s tongue licking the underside of his cock like that because he gasps and jerks his hips forward, pushing his dick even deeper into Jensen’s mouth. Which is a bit more than Jensen bargained for.

He pulls off, sputtering, tears springing into his eyes. He’s vaguely aware of Jared apologizing but is too distracted to really listen. He should be better at this. Seriously, it was never this hard when he was doing it in his head. Which, ok, maybe not so strange, but there has to be a better way.

“Get on the bed,” he says, moving to the side. “On your back.”

To Jared’s credit he doesn’t argue but crawls up on the bed and lies down, staring up at Jensen with wonder in his eyes. “Jesus, Jen! Your mouth!” he says, sounding dazed. “You’re gonna kill me.”

Jensen frowns. He didn’t really think he was doing that great. “Yeah well,” he says awkwardly, “I’ll try not to.”

Jared laughs and then he groans when Jensen gets to work again. This time he makes sure to lick all of Jared’s cock, getting it slick with spit, before he lets it slide back into his mouth. He has to hold Jared’s hips down – he’s really got some control issues with those things – to keep him from choking him again and after some adventurous sucking he tries gliding it further in, swallowing to keep his gag reflex from making him throw up all over Jared’s dick. Because that would be awkward.

He’s finally starting to get the hang of it when Jared’s fingers tighten in his hair. At first he thinks Jared’s just trying to guide him but then he realizes Jared’s attempting to pull him off, gasping, “Wait! Waitwaitwait, Jensen, Jensen!” and he figures he might as well indulge him.

“What?” he says as he sits up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand only to discover half his face is slobbery with spit and precome. This blowjob thing is a bit

more messy than he anticipated. He should probably go wash his face or at least wipe it on his t-shirt or Jared might think he's a drooling idiot. But before he has time to lift the hem of his t-shirt Jared's hauling him up and kissing him, seeming unbothered by all the wetness. In fact he's adding to it with all those kisses, half of them not being anywhere near Jensen's mouth.

"God!" Jared groans. "Jesus fuck. You... God, Jensen!"

"Yeah?" Jensen laughs. "It was good?"

"So good. Oh God, so good." Jared rolls them over, bringing Jensen dangerously close to the edge of the bed. "Want to taste you," he says, pushing Jensen's t-shirt up to his armpits. "Want to know what you taste like."

"It's a bit like seaweed," Jensen starts to say but the words get stuck in his throat when Jared latches on to his nipple and sucks it into his mouth.

The thing about dreams is that they are based on reality. Jensen can easily conjure a world where the flowers smell heavenly sweet and the grass under his feet is silky and cool. The air there feels fresh when he breathes it in and the sun is warm on his skin and everything he touches feels as real as it would out here. But when he kissed Jared in his dreams it felt like kissing the soft flesh of his palm. When Jared touched him it felt exactly the same as when Jensen touched himself.

This... This is so completely different.

Jared's fingers on his skin feel hot enough to burn, like they might actually leave pink tracks in their wake. A large hand is spread over Jensen's chest, holding him down as Jared works him with his tongue and teeth. Just as well because Jensen thinks he might literally fly off the bed if he didn't. He's biting his lip so hard he can taste copper, breathing through his nose to keep from moaning out loud. When Jared latches on to one nipple with his lips while rolling the other between his fingers Jensen can't hold back anymore. His legs kick the covers, hips pushing upward in desperate search for friction as his fingers dig into Jared's biceps.

"Yeah," Jared is mumbling. "Just like that. Is that good? You like that?"

He tries to say yes but it just comes out as a strangled moan and then he's panting and jerking as Jared holds him down with one leg over his thighs and works on kissing and sucking his chest until he's close to tears from frustration.

"Jared!" he finally manages to hiss. "Please! I need..."

Jared laughs but Jensen is too worked up to really care, especially when Jared's mouth finally moves further down, licking a trail down Jensen's belly while his fingers work on opening Jensen's jeans.

"You want this?" he pants between licks and kisses. "You want my mouth on you?"

“Ungh...” He’s barely coherent enough to lift his ass when Jared starts pulling his jeans and boxers down, the heat of Jared’s hands on his bare skin enough to make him gasp for breath.

“God, you’re so beautiful. Jesus, Jensen, you’re so goddamn beautiful,” Jared’s rambling, his hands stroking over Jensen’s hips and down his thighs, big and warm.

He wants to say ‘Not as beautiful as you,’ or just ‘Christ, get on with it,’ but he can’t get a word out. A warm breeze sweeps over his dick and he almost comes when he realizes it’s Jared’s breath, hot and heavy where he hovers over him. He holds his breath, eyes squeezed shut and thighs trembling, and he waits. Time seems to stand still (he almost opens his eyes to make sure that he didn’t actually freeze it) but then suddenly he’s swallowed down into heat so wet and soft it’s almost more than he can take. The bed vibrates and it isn’t until Jared starts chuckling, Jensen’s dick still in his mouth, that Jensen realizes he’s the one doing it.

“Sorry, sorry,” he whimpers, fumbling until he grabs hold of the edges of the bed and forces it still. He doesn’t let go, not even when everything’s gone quiet again, but holds on, heels digging into the mattress and stomach bellowing while Jared licks and sucks him slowly and gently, like he’s got all the time in the world and nothing else he’d like to spend it on. It’s agonizing and infuriating and so, so *good!*

He’s not going to last. If he had anything to compare it to he’d be embarrassed by how little it takes but it’s hard to gather enough thoughts for that or anything else when his brain seems to be boiling in his head along with the blood in his veins.

“Jared, I’m gonna...” he tries to warn but all he manages is a garbled version of Jared’s name and then he’s arching off the bed, coming harder than he’s ever done before in his whole life. It washes over him, like waves of almost painful pleasure, tightening every muscle in his body and shaking every nerve until finally he crashes down, sucking in a weak breath before going absolutely still.

He’s vaguely aware of Jared crawling up the bed until he’s lying beside him, one hand under his crumpled t-shirt and spread over his collarbone, his sweat-damp hair brushing Jensen’s temple where he snuggles up on the pillow beside him. He’s panting slightly, puffs of warm air that smell weird and familiar blowing over Jensen’s face, and when he slides one leg over and in between Jensen’s own he can feel Jared’s hard cock slipping in the sweat pooling by his hipbone.

“You okay?” Jared asks, out of breath and clearly amused. “Jen?”

“Mhum,” Jensen mumbles. He thinks he needs to be breathing deeper, just to stop his head from spinning as much, but his lungs are too tired to make the effort.

Jared laughs shakily. “You think maybe you could put us down again?”

Jensen cracks one eye open, just enough to see the ceiling less than two feet away from his nose. Oh. He slowly uncurls his fingers from the edges of the bed and it lands with a thud on the floor, creaking loudly but thankfully deciding to stay in one piece, at least for now.

“Never taken anyone halfway to heaven before,” Jared says smugly and Jensen does a lame attempt to slug him but his hand falls limp half way. “I was good, right? I was kinda worried but then I thought, ‘Jared, you love ice cream and popsicles and all kinds of sucking things. Just do it like that.’ So I did. I think I did pretty good. Right? Jen?”

“Uhm,” Jensen mumbles, still too wiped out for words.

“Yeah? So on the scale of one to ten?” Jared asks, the smirk evident in his voice.

“Twelve. Billion.” Jensen turns his head and catches Jared’s grinning lips in a kiss, if only to shut him up.

They lie like that, Jensen still on his back, feeling boneless and more relaxed than he’s ever been in his life, and Jared curled up by his side, hand on his chest and toes nudging his calf. They kiss slow lazy kisses, Jared’s fingers stroking Jensen’s arm and stomach, like he just can’t stop touching his skin.

“Knew you’d taste good,” Jared mumbles into Jensen’s mouth and he can’t help laughing a little. “Didn’t expect all that skin though.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re not circumcised,” he explains, his cheek flushing warm where it presses against Jensen’s nose. “So that was different.”

Jensen pulls back, looking at him wary. “I thought you’d never done this before?”

“I haven’t! But you know, I’ve seen... like other guys. And they’ve all been... you know.” He laughs, clearly embarrassed. “I kinda pictured your parents more conservative.”

Jensen snorts. “They were. I’m the weird one, remember?” When Jared just looks at him in question, Jensen rolls his eyes and says, “I told you, people can’t hurt me. That includes cutting pieces off my dick.”

“Oh.” Jared’s eyes widen. “Oh! Even then? So you... what? What happened?”

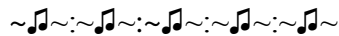
“According to my dad I blew out all the lights. Well, after first peeing the surgeon right in the eye. He wasn’t too happy.”

Jared laughs. “Well, I’m glad. I like you intact. Even there.”

“Kinda blows my chance of ever getting a piercing though,” Jensen says and grins when Jared laughs into his ear.

They kiss again, a little deeper and even slower. Jensen can feel Jared’s cock still lying heavy against his thigh, patiently waiting. ‘Want me to do something about that?’ he plans to ask, all bold and confident. Offer to continue his rather sloppy attempt at a blowjob or maybe jerk him off, seeing if Jared likes the same things he

does. Or maybe they could... if Jared wants to. Jensen wants to. So damn much. He wonders if that makes him a sad case, being so desperate for someone to shove their dick up his ass. But it's not just someone, it's Jared. And he's been waiting twenty eight years for this. That doesn't mean he's not nervous. Fuck, he is. So damn nervous. Because he has no idea what to expect, except that it's probably going to hurt. No drugs this time to take that away. But it's good. It means it's real, that it's actually happening. That he'll feel it, for days even, the proof of what they've done. Of what they are. Together. For real. Because hey, he's got a boyfriend now! The thought makes him want to giggle, like a teenager. 'Aaww, Jenny,' he can hear Chris saying, 'you boys going steady now? Is he going to give you his letter jacket? Are you in lurve?' And he'll have to punch Chris in the arm and then pull him in and hug him, just hold him close and maybe sniffle a little because God, he's been waiting for this so long and now he's got it! He's got Jared and Jared loves him and he's never going to leave again. They're going to go back to New York and...



Jared lies on his side, watching Jensen sleep, a soft smile playing upon his lips. He's still half hard, the need pulsating through his veins and pooling at his groin like warm soup, but it doesn't matter. He can wait. Sex is great. Sex with Jensen is going to be mind blowing. But this, just lying here by Jensen's side, watching the way his eyes move erratically under his eyelids and feeling the warmth of his slow breath on his face... Just being here, *that's* the grand prize. That's the biggest prize of all.

The rest... the rest is just a bonus.

He must have drifted off as well because the next thing he knows it's dark outside and Jensen is lying on his side, watching him. Jared blinks the sleep out of his eyes, yawning and stretching his back as much as the small bed allows him before giving Jensen a soft smile.

"Hey," he says and Jensen smiles back before leaning in to kiss him.

"You were dreaming," he says when he pulls back. Then adds quickly, "Don't worry, I didn't peek."

"Peek?" Jared rubs his eyes, frowning slightly. "At my dream?"

Jensen's eyes go blank for a second but then he shakes his head and smiles. "Never mind," he says. "That wasn't you."

"Uh, ok." He doesn't feel the need to ask, which either means he's getting used to Jensen's weird ways or he trusts him to share the important stuff. Whichever it is, it's good.

"I'm sorry," Jensen suddenly says. "For falling asleep on you." He averts his eyes, looking almost shy as he nudges Jared's thigh with his knee. "You didn't get any."

"It's not all about coming," Jared says kindly. "Snuggling is nice too."

“And you thought you weren’t gay,” Jensen snorts, laughing when Jared scowls at him. “Sorry. You’re right. Snuggling is great.” He sighs happily. “I could do this all day. In fact let’s *just* do this.” He moves in closer, burying his nose in Jared’s neck and running his fingers up his arm. “Just snuggle and kiss and sleep.”

“Uhm, ok...” Jared says, shifting to try and keep his hardening cock from being as obvious.

“Honestly I’m not sure the whole sex thing is for me,” Jensen says thoughtfully. “I mean, it’s nice and all but it really wipes me out.” He yawns. “But I guess it’s alright on weekends. Or holidays.”

Jared blinks. What? “Uh... Yeah. I guess.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Jensen asks, looking up at him with sleepy eyes.

“No, of course not.” He smiles awkwardly. Apparently the bonus is just for special occasions. He can live with that. It’s not like he doesn’t have a right hand. Seriously, it’s fine.

“My snugglebuddy,” Jensen says, his voice all soft and sweet, and then he bursts out laughing. “God, you should see your *face*! You are so *easy*!”

Jared punches his arm, feeling his cheeks flush. “Jackass,” he mutters. “See if I ever get you off ever again.”

“Aww, don’t be like that.” Jensen grins, his hand running down Jared’s waist and slipping along his hipbone. “You really thought I meant it? You idiot. I’ve been lying here for over half an hour, waiting for you to wake up so you could fuck me.”

Whatever sharp retort Jared had ready on his tongue is lost as he chokes on his own breath, face turning red. “You... What? *Now*?”

Jensen frowns. “You don’t want to?” He glances down then looks up again, raising one eyebrow. “Looks to me like you do.”

“Jesus! Of course I do. I just...” He swallows. “Aren’t we going a bit fast? I mean, we haven’t even dated yet.”

“You want to date first?” Jensen asks incredulous. “Seriously? Awkward dinners and mushy movies and walking each other home, hoping for a kiss by the door? *Seriously?*”

“Uhm, when you put it that way...” Jared laughs awkwardly. “No, not really.”

Jensen keeps his eyes on him a while longer but then he suddenly smiles and shakes his head, looking embarrassed. “You’re right. I *am* being a jackass. Of course we can date first.”

“I just meant...” Jared tries but Jensen puts a finger on his lips, silencing him.



“Hey, I’ve waited twenty eight years, I can wait a little longer.” Jensen smiles softly. “So date, huh? I can date.” He pauses. “Dates still include blowjobs, right? Because I really want to blow you. I want to try that thing you did with your tongue...”

“Oh God.” Jared grabs him by the neck and kisses him hard. “I don’t wanna wait.”

“You don’t?” Jensen asks, looking confused.

“I really, really don’t.” He mouths his way down Jensen’s neck, kissing in every word. “Sex. Now. Yes!”

“But you said...”

“I talk too much. Really. Never listen to anything I say.” Jared rolls them over until he has Jensen pinned down, looking up at him with wide eyes. “I want to fuck you, Jen. I really, really do.”

Jensen laughs a little breathless. “Yeah? You sure?”

Jared rolls his hips, smirking when Jensen sucks in his breath. “I’d say that answers your question.” He kisses Jensen’s neck, his shoulder, the curve of his collarbone. “Want you so much.”

“Yeah,” Jensen pants. “Yeah, ok. This is gonna be good?”

It takes Jared a moment to realize it’s a question. He pulls back and looks down at Jensen, taking in the flushed cheeks and the wide pupils, the kiss-swollen lips parted and wet. The look of nervous determination in his eyes.

“Yes,” Jared says and leans down, kissing him softly. “It will be good, Jen. I’ll make it good for you.”

Jensen visibly relaxes. “Well, duh,” he says like there never was any question. “You better.”

Jared grins and kisses him again, drawing it out until he has Jensen panting beneath him. “Just lay back,” he says, “relax, and let me do the work.”

Jensen nods, his breath hitching. “Lazy sex? I can do that.”

Jared laughs. “Just don’t fall asleep on me this time,” he jokes then starts kissing Jensen again.

After a while he can feel Jensen relaxing, the strained tension making way for thrumming anticipation. When he runs his hand down Jensen’s side he arches into it and as he gets closer to Jensen’s dick the hitched breathing turns into low whimpers. He halts at Jensen’s hip, keeping his palm flat over his hipbone as he kisses down his neck and mouths at his shoulder.

“This ok?” he mumbles and Jensen lets out a small moan that gets cut off and when Jared glances up he sees that Jensen is biting down on his lip, his eyes squeezed shut and he seems to have stop breathing.

“Hey,” Jared says, nudging Jensen’s jaw with his nose, “you don’t have to be quiet. It’s ok.”

Jensen’s eyes blink open and he blows out a shaky breath, lip slipping from between his teeth. “Feels good,” he whispers. “Feels so good, Jare.”

“Yeah? Let me hear it. Let me hear how good it feels.” He slides his hand over Jensen’s stomach, skillfully avoiding the hovering dick as he sucks at the tender skin at the grove of his neck. “I want to hear you, Jen. C’mon.” Finally wrapping his fingers around Jensen’s cock, he starts stroking it, coaxing him in a low voice. “C’mon, Jen. Tell me how you like it. Tell me what you want.”

“Oh God,” Jensen whispers, sucking in his breath, and then suddenly it all comes rushing out in a stream of babble and moans. “Fuck, Jared, feels so good. Please, don’t stop. Please, I want... I want your mouth. I want your goddamn cock. I want... just touch me. Oh God, please touch me. Your hands, I love your hands. You have amazing hands. I can’t... Please, please, please... Wanted you for so long. Wanted this. And it’s nothing... it’s nothing like I thought. It’s so, so much better. So, so much better. Oh God. I love you, I love you so much. Please. Please, please, please...”

It does something to Jared, listening to Jensen beg like that. He sounds so desperate, almost broken, his voice hoarse with need and his words tumbling out, like his brain hasn’t caught up with the transition from thought to talk. Every touch, every kiss and lick and nibble brings out new sounds, new words and it feels almost like Jared’s playing a piano of his own, bringing out the music Jensen has never allowed to be heard.

Jared’s so hard it’s almost painful, his dick rubbing against the sheets as he slides lower and lower on the bed until he’s got Jensen’s knees pushed up above him. For the first time ever he remembers Joan Bree with gratitude. She may have strung him along and screwed him over, slutting around with half the football team behind his back and finally dumped him the day before his birthday, but right now he can easily forgive her all of that. Because Joan Bree? Was a girl who loved sex. In every way possible. And boy did she like to give instructions.

Jared smiles and licks his lips. Well, he always considered himself a good student. It’s time to see how good he’ll do on this test.

Jensen doesn’t seem aware of the pillow being pushed under his hips or his legs being nudged even further apart. He’s whimpering, sweat glittering on his skin and pooling on his stomach, and Jared takes a moment just appreciating the sight in front of him before lowering his head and sticking his tongue out.

The first lick has Jensen arching off the bed, cursing “Fuck” and slamming his fists down on the bed. “Jared, wha’-?” he begins but it turns into a moan when Jared licks

again and again, getting the muscle wet and soft and ready before he plunges his tongue inside.

It's different than it was with Joan. Muskier taste. Hairier. Definitely tighter. But just as much of a turn on as he remembers. He tried to do it to Sandy once but she'd refused, finding it weird and dirty. He didn't tell her that's what he likes about it. His tongue in someone's ass, it's filthy and wrong and God, so fucking hot. His tongue in Jensen's ass? It's hard to say who's moaning louder.

He spreads the cheeks further, thumbs on either side of the wet entrance, pushing his tongue deeper inside. Jensen's thighs are trembling so hard now the bed is shaking again and it's like a vibrator against Jared's cock, rattling his balls to the point that he has to lift his hips to keep from coming.

"Oh God," Jensen is saying, almost sobbing. "Oh God, oh God, oh God... Please. Please don't stop. Jesus. Jesus God, please. It's so good. So, so good. I'm gonna die. You're gonna kill me with your tongue. Oh. Oh God."

Jared grins, slipping one finger into his mouth and then slowly sliding it inside the heat. The rambling cuts abruptly off and Jared stills, thinking maybe it's too soon or too dry. He's got a tube of KY in the drawer of the bedside table for later but he'd thought maybe he could start out with just his spit as long as it's just one finger. Seems he thought wrong. Idiot.

Just as he's about to pull out again Jensen lets out a low keening sound and then he pushes down, obviously wanting more.

"Oh God, Jared. Yes. Yes."

Jared breathes out in relief. He sticks out his tongue again, sliding it in alongside his finger, working to get Jensen even looser. The babbling has started up again, a little more curses and a lot less divinity, and Jared can't help grinning. Seems Jensen's dirty side doesn't just come out when he's drunk.

"Fuck, yes. Yes. God! There! Fuck! Jesus fucking Christ! You're gonna... You're gonna kill me. You're gonna... Fuck, fuck, fuck, No! What are you doing?" he yells when Jared pulls out and sits up. "Get back in there!"

Jared laughs. "Easy, tiger. I'm just getting some slick."

"Ok, ok," Jensen pants, closing his eyes and dropping his head back on the pillow. "Just hurry the fuck up, will ya."

"Yes, sir." He's already gotten the tube out, smearing a generous amount on his fingers. "Watch out, it's cold," he adds and then deftly slips two fingers inside.

"Oh Jesus...ngh!"

"That good? You like that?"

He sits on his heels, watching Jensen's face as he works his fingers in and out. If he didn't know better he'd think Jensen was in pain, his face all screwed up and clenched teeth bared as he sucks in air through his nose. But there's no mistaking the frantic push against his fingers or the keening sound vibrating Jensen's throat.

"You like that, Jen? My fingers in your ass? Yeah? My tongue was in your ass and it tasted so good. Filthy fucking good. You hear me? I fucked your ass with my tongue." He leans over, breathing into Jensen's face. "Want to taste it, Jen? Want to taste yourself?"

Jensen's eyes spring open and he lunges forward, catching Jared's mouth, kissing it hungrily. It takes Jared completely by surprise and he almost falls over in his eager to kiss Jensen back. He's got his fingers working down below and his tongue fucking Jensen's mouth and he's so hard he's about to burst. God, he wants... he *needs* to get in there. Which is when he remembers... Fuck. Reluctantly he stops, pulling at Jensen's lower lip with his teeth before letting it go with a snap.

"I want to fuck you. God, Jen, I want to fuck you so much."

"Yes," Jensen hisses, staring at him hungry. "Yeah. Do it."

He swallows. "I don't have any condoms. But I swear I'm clean! Jesus, Jen, I swear. I'm tested and I haven't been... not anyone else. Just..." He stops, not stupid enough to mention Sandy now of all times.

Jensen just stares at him incredulous before growling, "For fucks sake, Jare, stop stalling and just get in there!"

Jared blinks. "But... Are you sure?"

Jensen groans. "Dude, even if I didn't trust you, which I do, I can't get sick, ok? So just... Get your goddamn dick into my ass!"

Jared licks his lips. "I'll be careful, I promise. I'll be so careful..." He looks down and it seems impossible that he'll fit in there. He moves his fingers inside, just checking one last time that it's as wet and loose as it can get, before pulling out and squeezing out a buckload of lube, smearing it on his dick. "Just let me know if it's too much," he says, holding Jensen's impatient gaze. "Promise me."

"I promise. C'mon, man, You're big but you're not that big. I can take it." Jensen grins, nostrils flaring nervously.

Jared nods. He glances down again, finding the right position and then he locks his eyes with Jensen as he starts to push slowly inside. He can see the moment it becomes too much, in the widening of Jensen's eyes and the small twitches of pain by the corner of his mouth and so he stops, waiting until Jensen starts to breathe normally again before slowly continuing. It's agonizingly tight and so hot, almost too hot. Inch by inch and breath by breath until finally he's sheathed inside, balls nudging Jensen's ass.

“Ok?” he whispers and Jensen nods, licking his lips. They stay like that, just breathing while they stare into each other’s eyes, until Jensen reaches up and pulls Jared down for a kiss. It’s hot and sloppy, more mouthing at each other’s lips than actual kissing.

“Move,” Jensen whispers hoarsely and licks Jared’s lips. “C’mon, Jare.”

Jared nods. He pulls back slowly then pushes back inside, watching Jensen intently as he sets up a slow rhythm, rocking back and forth with the movement. It’s insanely hot, sliding in and out of Jensen’s body. In all his thinking and wondering what choosing Jensen would mean, he’d never actually pictured this.

Jensen beneath him, pupils impossibly wide in a pool of deep green, cheeks flushed and sweat beading at his temple, darkening the roots of his hair. The slight shadow of stubble remembered in the reddening of Jared’s own cheeks. Hands gripping Jared’s biceps, fingers digging in so deep he knows there will be bruises to show for it tomorrow. Jensen’s chest heaving for air, the deep blushing of his skin making the freckles stand out like specks of gold.

Jensen, gazing up at him with his lips parted in wonder, like Jared’s the most amazing person in the whole world.

Jared shudders, accidentally breaking the rhythm and shifting his angle, and Jensen lets out a surprised gasp, eyes widening even further.

“Again,” he whispers. “God, Jare, do that again.”

Jared nods, biting his lip and thrusting in a little harder, trying to find the same spot. This he remembers from his weekend with Joan and her selection of toys. That, right there, feeling like...

“Nngh!”

Jensen arches his back, slamming his hands palms down on the bed and throwing his head back. He’s back to being silent, biting down so hard the tendons in his neck stretch like wires, eyes squeezed painfully shut. Not that Jared can blame him, he’s rather lost for words himself. He can feel himself climbing, getting closer to the top with every thrust but he holds off, wanting Jensen to get there first. He looks down and there’s Jensen’s cock, dark red with blood and straining toward his belly. Jared’s hand shoots down, wrapping sweat-slick fingers around it.

“Yes,” he groans, stroking Jensen hard and fast. “C’mon. Come for me. Come, Jensen. Come.”

‘Now, Jensen, now! Oh God, please, Jen, I’m gonna...’

Jensen’s eyes snap open, glowing green, he parts his lip in a soundless gasp and... the whole world goes blindingly white.



## Epilogue

“Socks? *Underwear?*”

“Yes,” Jensen snorts, not looking up. Four t-shirts, two pair of jeans, some nicer pants if they go out to a fancy dinner. Shirts... are two enough? Maybe he should take a white one too?

“Passport, camera, phone...” Chris continues and Jensen rolls his eyes.

“Yes, yes, yes. I’ve been over this with Jared already.”

“Jared?” Chris scoffs. “Jared would forget his own head if it wasn’t attached to his neck.”

Jensen gives him a stern look even if he can’t really deny it. Jared isn’t exactly the most organized person there is. “But he wouldn’t forget mine,” he points out and Chris laughs a little.

“Well, yours is a lot prettier.”

“You know what I mean,” Jensen says and throws a roll of socks at Chris’s head that he easily catches and throws back into the suitcase.

“Yeah, I know.”

Jensen smiles to himself at the fond tone in Chris’s voice. The way to Chris’s heart is through cold beer, a juicy steak, good music and, most importantly, Jensen. Jared is rapidly proving himself on all accounts. Well, three out of four but Chris is working on improving Jared’s music taste, one CD at a time.

Jensen keeps on going mentally through everything in his suitcase, ruffling through its contents when he’s not sure whether he put something in already or not. He’s aware of Chris watching from where he’s leaning against the wall, a bottle of beer held loosely in his hand. He’s the picture of tranquility and it would be very convincing if it wasn’t for the yellow aura around him and the distinct smell of raw onions in the air.

After a while Chris clears his throat. “So... almost ten hours on a plane. What you’ve got to keep you from being bored to death? Literally.”

Jensen shrugs. “Got my iPod, some sheet music, Maeve Binchy newest book...” He ignores Chris’s laughter. “Earplugs, notebook, pen, candy for Jared... I think that’s it.”

“Minna?”

Jensen shoots him a look but Chris just looks back, completely serious. “I’ll put her in right before we leave,” he says. “You know how she is about flying.”

“Yeah.”

Jensen turns back to his suitcase. Everything’s a mess again. Humming lowly under his breath he takes every item out, one by one, and puts them on the bed before starting again with a clean slate. T-shirts, shirts, jeans, underwear, everything folded carefully, creases straight and meticulous. He brushes a few stray cat hairs off his nicer pants before he remembers that no one can see them but him. If he turns around now he knows he’ll see Chris rolling his eyes, lips turned up in a fond grin.

Jared calls it OCD, with a smile and a kiss to make sure Jensen knows he doesn’t mean it badly. Not that Jensen would care if he did, it wouldn’t change what he is or that Jared loves him anyway. Some things are supposed to be a certain way and so what if he’s a little more anal about it than can be considered normal? Old habits die hard.

But when he does turn around he’s met with a different look. An almost forlorn one that Chris quickly tries to hide but the ghost of it lingers long enough that Jensen sees it clearly.

“I’ll be alright,” he says gently. “I wouldn’t be going if I wasn’t sure I could handle it.”

“I know,” Chris snorts. “I’m not worried about you.”

“Oh.” Jensen frowns. He regards Chris curiously. There’s something there, something familiar, almost like... *Oh*.

He puts down the last pair of socks and walks over, leaning against the wall by Chris’s side, their shoulders bumping amicably. “You’ll be fine,” he says, smiling softly when Chris glares at him irritated. “I’ll call you. Every day even. And you’re going to be busy with Steve anyway.”

“Dude, I’m not...” Chris starts but stops and averts his eyes. He looks like he’d rather be having a root canal than this particular discussion. “It’s just that it’s a very long time,” he finally admits through gritted teeth. “Three weeks.”

Jensen nods. “I know.”

“Guess I’ve gotten used to having your sorry ass around.” Chris shrugs. “Whatever. It’s good practice for when I move out, right?”

Jensen sighs. “Dude, I’ve told you, it’s your apartment. We should be the ones moving.”

“What am I gonna do with a kiddie proved apartment, huh? Excuse me, ‘Jensen improved’ apartment,” he corrects himself when Jensen elbows him. “It’s a lot easier this way.”

“Still don’t get why you insist on leaving,” Jensen mutters. “I’m gonna starve to death. You know Jared can’t cook for shit.”

“You make a mean pasta though.” Chris frowns. “Well, you make some kind of pasta.” He laughs when Jensen scowls at him. “I’ve been the third wheel long enough, man. Jared’s doing fine. You’re both doing fine. And you need your space.” He grins. “Plus I’m raising your rent. Papa needs some dough now he’s finally free to pick up some ladies.”

He rubs his fingers together, a sleazy smile on his lips, and Jensen rolls his eyes. “Nice. You’re ditching me for prostitutes.”

“Well, *they* put out.”

Snorting Jensen snatches the bottle from Chris’s hand and takes a sip, grimacing when all he gets are the last tepid drops. He turns the bottle in his hands a few times, shifting it from one palm to another before carefully letting it go. It floats over to the bedside table, rocking slightly when it lands before straightening itself up.

“Showoff,” Chris mutters but he looks duly impressed.

Jensen’s getting better at controlling the smaller stuff, moving things and such. Still working on actually being able to fetch beer from the fridge though. But it’s good exercise. It takes the edge off, lowering the build up of energy over the day so he can have a more quiet night. Him and Jared. It’s been a year and Jared still wakes up a few times over the night, either in this world or Jensen’s, just to check up on him.

“We’ll talk every day,” Jensen says quietly. “And you know Jared’s gonna be calling you all the time.”

“Christ.” Chris pushes himself off of the wall, scowling. “I’m not the one with abandonment issues, remember? I’ll be fucking ecstatic to get you out of my hair for a few weeks.”

He starts to walk away but Jensen grabs his hand and pulls him back. “You know I love you, right?”

Chris glares at him incredulous. “Are you serious? What the fuck is this, Oprah?”

“Chris,” Jensen says patient.

“Jeez, yes! I know!” He growls when Jensen pulls him in for a hug, allowing him to hold on for a little while before pushing away. “Can I go now or do I have to call your boyfriend and tell him you’re sexually harassing me?”

“Again?”

They both turn their heads to find Jared standing in the doorway, doing a lousy job of pretending to be enraged.

“What have I told you about sexually harassing other people, Jensen?” he says in a stern voice as he walks into the room.



Jensen rolls his eyes, trying to suppress a grin. “Not unless it’s Chad. Which, seriously, is a sucky rule.”

“Yes, but it’s such fun watching him squirm.”

Jared leans over and Jensen lays a hand on his neck as he pulls him down for a kiss. It lingers a little longer than can be considered casual and when Jared finally pulls back he eyes Jensen with concern. He shakes his head and mouths ‘later’ which Jared seems to accept for now because he gives him a small nod before looking around at the unusually chaotic room.

“You’re packing *again*? Didn’t we go over everything already? Twice?”

“Third time’s the charm,” Chris says lightly and pats Jared on the arm. “I’ll be waiting so don’t start anything, alright?”

Jensen barely manages to suppress a laugh when Jared goes red in the face. It’s funny but despite his dirty mouth in bed, other people mentioning their sex life still gets Jared as embarrassed as when his mother asked him over dinner if they weren’t making sure of staying safe.

“Oh shut up,” Jared says and kisses him again.

He smells of New York City summer and red licorice and Jensen gets lost for a moment in *Jared* and *this* and *here*. He can feel his nerves tingling, the soft vibration in his fingers heating up Jared’s skin. ‘You do this to me,’ he thinks. ‘You make me want to freeze time, to shut out everything but this, everything but us.’

Sometimes he wakes up, heart hammering in his chest, sure that if he reaches over to the other side of the bed there will be nothing there but air. It’s a kind of panic he’s well familiar with from when he used to wake up too afraid to open his eyes in case he was still Inside. The difference is that hardly a minute goes by before there’s a warm palm laid on his arm or his hip, stopping his panic before it becomes dangerous. And he’ll roll over to find Jared fast asleep but somehow still knowing he’s needed. It’s amazing.

“We have to be at the airport in less than an hour,” Jared mumbles against his lips, bringing Jensen back to the present, and he pulls reluctantly away.

“Yeah, I know,” he sighs, pressing his palm briefly against Jared’s chest, just counting his heartbeats, before stepping back and letting go.

He gets back to repacking, giving Jared a smile when he starts helping, folding and placing everything in the suitcase exactly the way Jensen likes it. Their hips brush, their hands sometimes bumping into each other. A smile here and a grin there and as soon as the suitcase has been zipped close and put down on the floor Jared’s got Jensen on his back on the bed, fingers working nimbly at his belt.

“Chris is gonna kill us,” Jensen laughs in a low whisper.

“Guess you have to be quiet then,” Jared says with a smirk. “Just this once.”

Jensen’s about to tell him that him being loud is all Jared’s doing when strong fingers suddenly wrap themselves around his cock and his words turn into a half yelp as he sucks in his breath.

“Sshh,” Jared teases, mouth on Jensen’s jaw. “Quiet,” he says and laughs softly when Jensen whimpers, “Fucker,” and bites down on his lip, breath held tight at the top of his throat.

Jared’s grip is tight, his movements sure and confident, stroking and twisting and flicking his thumb, just the way Jensen likes it. It doesn’t take long until his hands are gripping the rumbled covers, twisting them in his fists, eyes squeezed shut and jaw clenched tight.

“Open your eyes,” Jared whispers, hand speeding up. “I want you to look at me.”

His eyes spring open, staring at Jared who kisses him hard before sliding down the bed, eyes never leaving his. There’s not even a hitch in his stroking until at the final moment when he moves his hand to the base of Jensen’s dick to make way for his mouth, closing around and sucking the head. Jensen comes with a strangled yell, breathing it into the palm of Jared’s hand that covered his mouth at the last second, his body shaking and his heels kicking the covers. Then like always he goes slack, boneless and worn out and breathing heavily through his nose.

The hand leaves his mouth, long fingers lingering over his swollen lips for a moment and he makes a sloppy attempt at kissing them that has Jared laughing softly. He’s vaguely aware of Jared licking him clean and pressing kisses into his stomach before moving up on the bed and kissing his mouth, lips slick with spit and come. Jensen kisses back, or at least he opens his mouth and allows Jared to do whatever he wants while he himself tries his best not to fall asleep.

“You look so fucking pretty like this,” Jared mumbles into his mouth. “All fucked out.”

“Mmm,” Jensen hums sleepily. He fumbles with his hand until he finds Jared’s zipper and pulls it down, slipping his fingers through the slit of his underwear.

“Fuck,” Jared breathes. “Jensen, we can’t. We have to... Oh God! We have to get going. If you... Fuck. I don’t have time to change my pants. Jen...”

“Sshh, I’ve got it,” Jensen whispers. “Quick, clean and easy.”

He kisses Jared quickly on the lips before sliding down the bed, deftly pulling Jared’s dick out through the open zipper of his jeans. He licks his lips, glancing up at Jared through heavy lidded eyes to make sure he’s watching and then he slides Jared’s cock into his mouth. Just holds it still there for a while, enjoying the heavy weight on his tongue. He slips his fingers under Jared’s t-shirt, pressing his fingertips into the skin above his hipbones, and then he closes his eyes and starts humming.

He can feel the vibration under Jared's skin, running through his veins and tickling every nerve as it spreads through his body. Jared is laying absolutely still, his stomach bellowing madly under Jensen's fingers and small hitches of breath shaking him.

'Yes,' Jensen thinks. 'Come for me. Like this.' Jared's hand lands on top of his hand, heavy and gentle, just touching him, and Jensen pushes a little into it, just to let Jared know it's ok if he wants to hold on. But he doesn't, he just curls his fingers slightly so his fingertips sink into Jensen's hair and Jensen can feel the heat of the soft pads touching his scalp.

'Love you,' he thinks, and Jared gasps. 'Yes. Can you feel it? That is my heart, beating for you.'

'Yes!' he hears Jared answer in his head. 'Oh God, Jensen, I love you. I love you so damn much. Jesus Christ, you're gonna kill me with your goddamn mouth!'

Jensen starts laughing and just like that Jared comes, hand still gentle and heavy on Jensen's head, not a sound from his lips except a few quiet gasps.

Jensen kisses the tip of Jared's cock before tugging him carefully back in, zipping up the jeans and straightening his t-shirt. Then he looks up, smiling at the blissed out look on Jared's face. His cheeks are red, his pupils blown wide, and he's gazing at Jensen with that same look of wonder that he still gets every time, even after a year of being together.

"Whoa, Jensen," he whispers. "What was that?"

He smiles. "Nice, right? It's a bit short though, I thought I might have to start again from the beginning..."

"Not the music, you idiot," Jared chuckles and pulls him up, kissing him hard on the mouth. "That voice in my head, that was you, right? I'm not going insane, am I?"

"I hope not," Jensen laughs. "I think one certified psycho is enough for one relationship."

"Shut up. Dude, that was..." Jared breathes out. "Jesus, Jen, I could feel... I mean, I knew, I *know* you love me but I could feel it like... right here." He lays a palm over his heart, his hand slightly shaking. "Did you... I mean, when I...?" He stops, swallowing.

Jensen gazes down at him. "Every time," he says. "That's how I feel it every time. Even if you just think it." He smiles, making Jared blink against the sudden brightening of the room. "Like now."

He leans down and presses their lips together, just a brief chaste kiss before pulling back. "Shall we give Chris a couple of minutes to pull himself together or just walk in on him?" he asks with a grin and Jared goes deep red. As if on cue Chris starts banging on the door, sounding slightly out of breath.

“If you two are finished in there can we get going? We have to be there in twenty minutes.” They can hear him cursing as he walks away, something that sounds like ‘Goddamn freaks’ and ‘Can’t wait to get rid of you’ and Jensen has to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud, especially when he sees the mortified look on Jared’s face.

“He’s lying. You know he’s going to miss all the free orgasms,” he says and Jared goes even redder.

“Jensen,” he hisses. “Seriously, the only reason I’m able to have sex with you while anyone else is within a hundred miles radius is because I *don’t* think about that particular aspect of it. So can you please stop mentioning it all the time?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Jensen says with a smirk and gets up, offering Jared his hand. “C’mon. It’s Vienna time.”

Jared shakes his head as he lets Jensen pull him to his feet. “Correction: It’s driving-through-New-York-traffic time, followed by waiting-in-one-queue-after-another-at-the-airport time and finally spending-ten-hours-on-a-plane-with-screaming-kids-and-vomiting-drunks-hoping-it’s-not-gonna-crash time. *Then* it’s Vienna time.”

“You forgot Jensen-and-Jared-join-the-Mile-High-Club time,” Jensen says and grins when Jared instantly brightens. Then he adds, “How many people are on a plane? I could go for a record...” and ducks with a laugh when Jared tries to slap him over the head.

It’s a quiet ride in Chris’s truck, the both of them in the back seat with Jensen tucked under Jared’s arm, his eyes closed and music playing in his ears. He can feel the vibration of Jared’s voice, talking quietly to Chris, but Jared’s heartbeat is slow and steady under Jensen’s palm and his long fingers run calmly up and down his arm. Minna is purring on his lap, enjoying the short bout of freedom before she has to get back into the backpack. Her soft paws knead his thigh, claws catching on the denim and sticking through into his skin. It’s a welcomed if slightly painful distraction.

He’d love to say he’s getting better but the truth is he still feels as terrified every time they have to drive through city traffic. It’s stupid and humiliating and he hates himself for being so weak. They took a roadtrip during spring break, just testing the waters, and once they were off the heavily trafficked roads he was able to relax, even open his eyes to check out the scenery a few minutes at a time. Apart from that whole incident with the piano at Cape Cod everything went fine. (Seriously, if he got what he wished for every time he tried he would have wished Jared back ages ago. So blaming him for magically conjuring a piano out of thin air just this once, well that’s just stupid. How the hell was he supposed to know that would happen?) So now they are planning a drive to Florida to see Jared’s mother in August. She’s been up to New York once and has ever since been nagging them to come visit. Mostly to be able to feed her ‘growing boy’ properly, Jensen suspects.



After eight years of everything being more or less the same it's strange to have so much change in the course of just one year. Jared being in his life of course being the biggest one of all. The three of them living together has had its rough patches but mostly it works. He knows Chris still makes Jared a bit nervous just as Chris still feels a little jealous of Jared, stealing so much of Jensen's time away from him. Not that he'll ever admit it. Still doesn't keep him from declaring Tuesday and Thursday nights his, seeing as Jared is working late shifts at the coffee house those days. Which usually means he'll come home around midnight, tired and smelling so deliciously of freshly roasted coffee Jensen isn't sure whether he wants to kiss him or bury his nose in Jared's hair, just smelling him. So he ends up doing both until Chris rolls his eyes and bids them good night, threatening to hose them down if they don't take things behind closed doors before things go too far.

It's only temporary, working there, even if Jared loves it and Susan loves having him there. Something great lies in Jared's future, Jensen just knows it, and so he'd nudged and pushed and pressured until Jared had finally given in and allowed Jensen to help him fill out college applications for next fall, a reverse of what happened so many years ago. Psychology and human behavior. And a course on Witchcraft in History, just for the fun of it.

"You ever think maybe *you* are the great thing in my future?" Jared had asked him amused when he'd put the last application in an envelope, ready to be mailed out. "That maybe you're the reason I'll be amazing and magnificent and all those other embarrassing things you keep saying about me?"

Jensen had just rolled his eyes and sealed the envelope with tape, just to be sure. "Dude, I'm not your Yoda," he'd snorted.

"Well, you are kinda short..." Jared had said and so Jensen had had to punch him in the arm. Then kiss it better.

It hasn't all been rainbows and puppies. Jensen has his moments of doubt when he worries that Jared will wake up and realize he's bitten off far more than he can chew.

That he's left his girlfriend and childhood best friend for a clingy pathetic loser that most days can't remember what he had for breakfast. Jared keeps telling him he's an idiot, that even if breaking up with Sandy had been one of the hardest things he's ever had to do and he still hates himself for hurting her like that, there has never been even a moment when he regrets it.

"It got me you," he says and before Jensen has time to say, 'That's exactly my point,' Jared's lips are on his and he forgets what made him bring it up in the first place.

When Sandy had shown up one day in September, Harley in tow and looking like she was about to face the death squad, Jensen had disappeared into the piano studio, a hissing Minna under one arm. He had no idea how long she had stayed, only that by the time he became aware of Jared standing in the doorway watching him, the walls had become wet and shimmering green with fear and jealousy. He had abruptly stopped playing, embarrassed and anxious, not daring to turn around. After a moment's silence Jared came up behind him, nudging him until he shifted over on the bench, making way for Jared to sit.

"How about something a little lighter?" Jared had asked casually, wrapping one arm around Jensen's waist. He'd tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the tangents before starting to play a one handed and rather shaky version of *Dream A Little Dream Of Me*. "So I guess we have a dog now," he'd added and given Jensen a smile. "Think Minna will mind?"

### *Dream A Little Dream Of Me / Yiruma (2:12)*

Jensen had looked at him, searching for any signs that he wasn't happy, that he wished for a way out. There weren't any. Jensen had breathed out, leaning in a little closer. "She'll deal," he'd said and Jared's arm tightened around his waist.

"Yeah?" he'd said cautiously. "Not jealous?"

"Not jealous. Just..." He'd swallowed. "Worrying we might like the dog more, I guess. Being real and all. You know, normal."

Minna had glared at him from the top of the piano, obviously not impressed by his lame allegory but Jared had just turned his head and kissed his ear.

"I'm never gonna like the dog more," he'd said softly and then cringed as if he'd just realized he'd accidentally called his ex-girlfriend a bitch. Which would possibly mean Jensen was the pussy. He frowned. Jared laughed sheepishly as if he knew exactly what Jensen was thinking. "C'mon," he'd said and nudged Jensen's shoulder. "Play with me."

Jensen had let his fingers rest lightly on the tangents for a moment, just to get the vibration of Jared's music into his bones, and then he'd joined in. The walls turned a bright shade of pink that under any other circumstances would have been horribly embarrassing but as it were he hadn't found it in him to care. Not with Jared pressed up against his side, warm and solid, humming terribly off key into his ear.

And then it's Mac, suddenly showing up a few days after they got back to New York, having chased them from LA. Jared was right, the incident in the park had made the news. Nationwide. That, along with the very embarrassing white out he'd caused their first time together, turning on every light bulb in the city before blowing them out with a bang, had been enough to make her jump on a bus from Boston where she was at college and come looking for him.

He hadn't realized how much he missed her until she was suddenly there, all grown up and beautiful and holding on to him like she was afraid he'd disappear into thin air if she'd let go. It had taken some time to convince her that just because he zoned out and was unreachable for a couple of hours didn't mean he wasn't happy to see her. She tries to come and visit as often as she can and she calls every other week, talking happily about college life and never mentioning their mother even once. Jensen still doesn't know how she is or where she lives and he tries to tell himself he doesn't care. But he knows one day he will ask and Mac will tell him and he'll go see his mother, if only so he can make sure she's alright and maybe let her see that he's not the monster she thought he'd turn into.

But mostly it's the little things, the every day moments that sometimes make him stop in his track, thinking, 'This is my life now. This is actually my life.'

Jared snoring into his hair in the mornings, still sweaty from his morning run with Harley, not having bothered to take a shower before crawling back into bed. Chris and Steve challenging Jared to a drinking contest and laughing their asses off when he starts losing count of his shots after barely half a dozen. Jared's underwear mixing up with Jensen's in the drawer, their socks tumbling together in the dryer. Jensen wearing Jared's t-shirts, all wide and comforting, as he lounges on the couch laughing at American Idol. The smell of Jared's shampoo in the air, the taste of him on Jensen's tongue whenever he thinks of him.

Waking up in the park to Jared tickling his nose with a red oak leaf. The little Post-It reminders written in Jared's handwriting and with little hearts above the 'I's. Getting a text message around noon, saying *'There's a sandwich in your bag. Eat it. <3 J'*. Finding gloves in the pocket of his coat that he knows he didn't put there. The pillow on his couch at work that smells like Jared because he wore it under his sweater on the way over, not caring that he looked like the world's tallest pregnant woman. Calls reminding him to wake up, to come home, to get out now if he doesn't want Tom to drag him to Marlow's for another karaoke night. Voicemails just to tell him, "Dude, I think I saw Woody Allen on the subway" or "If Chad calls, you made that thunderstorm in LA because he was about to cheat on Sophia. Just go with me on this." Or, "I love you. Uhm, it's me. Jared. Love you. Hi."

"Jensen, we're here," Jared says, tugging at the cords to his earplugs. "Wake up."

Jensen blinks his eyes open. "I wasn't gone," he says, stuffing his iPod and earplugs into his backpack before coaxing Minna back inside as well. "Just thinking."

"Oh?" Jared grabs his hand, kissing the knuckles. "About what?"

“This,” Jensen says as he allows Jared to pull him out of the car. “Us.” He closes the door and leans against the side of the truck, smiling. “Everything.”

Jared hoists his backpack up on his shoulder and turns around, stopping short when he sees the look on Jensen’s face. “Yeah?” he asks, his voice catching slightly.

Jensen nods. “Yeah,” he answers and Jared pushes him up against the car, kissing him until the world starts spinning and Chris starts yelling at them to stop molesting his goddamn truck, voice thick like gravel.

This. Being happy. Being amazingly magnificently happy and being fine. Being absolutely fine.

Fin.

