



**1/1,095**

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**DAYS**

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The inside of Jensen's mouth tasted undeniably...pink.

A small part of Jensen's mind told him that colors didn't have tastes. That was absurd; sure, people could link colors to taste, but to say that colors themselves had taste? Pure silliness.

Static hissed. Maybe a faulty television.

No. Jensen knew what it was—a radio that was mangled—the tune garbled and rasping out its last breath. He smelled smoke and over the taste of pink—was blood.

The world was spinning, going in and out of focus so fast that Jensen didn't have a chance to get a good look at anything. All he could lock onto were the details. Asphalt. Flashing lights. The feeling of being hated—and hating himself. He could smell smoke and burning plastic. Someone close choked out a sound and it cut through Jensen, slicing right down to the bone.

He still had the sticky, too-sweet taste of *pink* in his mouth...



*March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Jensen woke up with a start, his whole body tense and drenched in cold sweat. His lips were parted and his throat was tight like it had been prepping to unleash one hell of a scream. His heart thundered against his ribcage and salty saliva filled his mouth. Jensen glanced over at the clock and groaned when he saw that it was two minutes until six. He shut off his alarm and rolled out of bed.

It wasn't until he was holding his razor in his fingers that he noticed that his hands were still shaking.

Sighing, Jensen reached for his electric razor and buzzed away all the fuzz that always seemed to spring up after a night's of restless sleep. It wouldn't be close enough for his liking, but even when he'd finished his fingers still jerked every so often.

A cheery whistle floated into Jensen's bathroom and even though adrenalin still had his heart beating overtime, Jensen smiled.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee always made Jensen think of Steve. Every morning without fail, Steve was up making coffee, only the best, for himself. The aroma was strong, reliable, and a comfort—just like Steve. Jensen shuffled into the kitchen as Steve reached his whistling refrain. Jensen made his way to the refrigerator, the cold rush of refreshing him as he took out a carton of orange juice.

Jensen watched as the orange juice left its carton and sloshed into his tall glass. Steve's coffee's steam wafted over him as he narrowed his still-sleepy eyes at Jensen.

"I didn't hear your alarm go off."

The orange flow stopped, and when the sharp taste of citrus burst over his tongue, Jensen knew it was the right thing to wake him up.

"Nightmare." Jensen rubbed his eyes, like maybe that would conjure up memories of what had woken him up *yet again* in such a frightened state. "Don't remember any of it." Steve frowned and Jensen could hear the gears in his friend's head clicking and whirring despite the early hour. The concern was...appreciated, but it still made Jensen's shoulders tighten up. "Probably for the best. Nightmares aren't exactly pleasant."

Steve opened his mouth but Jensen turned quickly, shielding himself with a long slug of orange juice and the pretense of making toast. It wasn't that Jensen typically blew off his friend's worry, but he already knew what Steve would say.

*Not if you've been having them every night for the past month and a half.*

What Jensen didn't have was the guts to tell Steve that it wasn't a month and a half of nightmares. Jensen let his toast burn, popping up right as spots of black began to spread over the bread. He dropped it onto his plate, the blue chipped one, and began to scrape butter over it. Steve swallowed whatever he'd thought of saying and instead chose to pinch Jensen's side.

"Christ, Jen, eat something. You're a nerd, not a model."

Jensen jerked away from the slight sting and crunched down on his toast.

"Shouldn't you be chopping lettuce or something?"

Steve laughed, his blonde hair shaking with his quivering shoulders.

"That's the beauty of assistants and interns." Steve tied his hair back, smiling entirely too wide for such an early hour. "America's Top Chef, baby." Jensen rolled his eyes, a sharp retort about the fact that Steve had earned that title some time ago withering away behind his teeth when a loud buzz made them both jump. Jensen almost crushed his toast in his fist. Steve's phone flashed and Jensen let his shoulders gradually lower back down. Steve laughed. "Shit."

He swiped his phone off the table; and the smile that spread across his face was one that immediately told Jensen that it was Christian. Steve's thumbs were already flying away on the keypad, typing out a response that was no doubt full of emoticons. Jensen crammed the rest of his toast into his mouth, a muffled goodbye barely making it past the half-chewed mass.

Jensen waved and Steve looked up from his phone.

"Wait, Jen, don't go on any more midnight pizza runs with Mike. That's probably what's screwin' with your sleep."

The sound of Steve's fingers scampering across his phone followed Jensen out the door, and he yawned. He checked his watch and frowned, jogging to the elevator.

A horrible nagging thought scratched and nibbled at the back of his mind. It squeaked and hissed, like a rat gnawing away at his brain cells one by one.

What would Steve do if he knew that Jensen couldn't remember the last time he hadn't woken up with his mouth open mid-scream from a nightmare he couldn't remember?



Mobles made out of sea glass splashed green and purple across the floor of The Vantoch Teahouse. Jensen walked into the quaint tea and coffee shop just in time to brush past a man in scrubs with a lazy smile, crazy blue eyes, and a piping hot cup of tea. Each one of his steps jingled, but Jensen was too tired to look for a bell.

Vicki caught Jensen's eyes and smiled.

"Why couldn't you have been here five minutes earlier?" She exhaled with a dramatic swoon. "He was here and I didn't have anyone to back me up."

Jensen dug into his pocket for crumpled singles as Vicki moved behind the counter, taking a teapot out and pouring a custom mixture into a tall cup.

"Who's *he*?" All Vicki had to do was glare at him and Jensen's mouth fell open. "The nurse? That was him?"

Vicki nodded, looking absolutely morose.

"Nurse Hotpants." Vicki pushed the cup toward Jensen as soon as he gave her the money. "You know...the worst part is that he's actually cool." She sighed, running her painted nails through her dark hair. "I almost wish he was a total square, you know?"

The beauty of Vicki's tea was that she made the blends herself; and Jensen liked to close his eyes and imagine every ingredient that went into them, breaking them down to the bare bones. When he opened his eyes, Vicki was still staring at him.

"I guess." He lifted his cup. "Thanks, Vicki."

"No problem." She waved him off as Jensen slumped into his usual seat, right by the door. "Stay cool, Jensen."

Jensen sipped his tea, watching the mobile rotate slowly. He didn't have to wait long before Christian walked briskly through the door. He had a Starbucks cup clenched in his hand, and Vicki crossed her arms. Christian flashed her a crooked smile that would make a cowboy's heart skip a beat.

"I know, I know, nothing corporate in your place." He looked over at Jensen. "Let's go." Jensen's knees were already locking, and he spared one look back in time to see Vicki stick her tongue out at Christian's back. Christian was dressed in slacks, a nice white, button-down shirt, and a black blazer, and even though he was shorter than Jensen he carried himself like a warrior. Well, a warrior who prided himself on hundred dollar ties and slick leather shoes. "No offense, but you look like shit."

Jensen's knees popped when he went down the steps into the subway, getting to the subway just as the train was pulling up.

"I haven't been sleeping well lately."

Christian slipped on a pair of sunglasses, ones that probably cost more than the shoes. His long dark hair reminded Jensen of shampoo commercials, too shiny and smooth that it couldn't be real.

"Insomnia?"

Jensen shook his head.

"No. Just...light sleep."

Jensen rubbed his eyes, and when he took his hand away, he was inside the crisp, sterile lobby.

The thing about not getting enough sleep was that time seemed to melt into one stringy, incoherent mess. Christian's phone chimed and Jensen wondered why he didn't just admit that he was going out with Steve. Christian reached out for Jensen's shoulder without looking away from his phone.

"I'll see you at lunch, man."

Christian sauntered away to the Finances and Law division; and Jensen wondered if Christian was in the closet. He turned and walked in the opposite direction, toward the labs.



Revolution Pharmaceuticals was perhaps the biggest pharmaceutical company in the world. The general public wasn't even aware of how much Revolution was involved their lives. Aspirin, chapstick, even Viagra were all products from the minds of Revolution. The not-so-general public, those who were subscribers to Forbes or scientific journals, knew additionally that Revolution was a monetary and intellectual powerhouse.

Four floors down and five ID card swipes later, the door to Jensen's lab hissed shut behind him.

The walls were white but had three-dimensional projections of different combinations drifting across them. Jensen took a sip of his tea—there were probably about three more left—when the door hissed open again.



"Make way, make way, the Duke of Erections has arrived!"

Purple converse popped out of skinny jeans as Michael Rosenbaum began to strut across the tile, his white lab coat flowing out behind him. If it wasn't against the dress code, Jensen was certain that Mike would have sewn on sequins. Jensen picked his head up off his fist, fixing Mike with a semi-concerned frown.

"Do we have a presentation for Viagra today?"

Jensen hated those; Revolution always poured so much money into them and it always came across more like a rock concert than a business meeting. Mike waved his hand like he was trying to disperse Jensen's negativity.

"No. I wish. They always throw the best parties." Mike cracked his knuckles as he pulled up holograms of the compounds he was working on. His current project was a better pain reliever for arthritis-related joint pain. It was scheduled to release next year and Jensen already knew that it was going to be a hit. "Let's get crackin'."

Jensen turned back to his own slides, to the base poisons he was studying. Mandrake, phytoplankton, and tetrachlorthylene. Jensen smiled and exhaled. It was always his belief that before progress could be made, the study of what hindered said progress was necessary in order to find the way forward.

Pen in hand, Jensen began to plan out a medication that would prevent and in a few years, with much more research and testing, even reverse memory loss.



Life was a series of routines.

Get up, walk three blocks to Vicki's, ride the subway with Christian, work, take the subway back to SoHo, walk four blocks home, sleep. Hypothesis, research, idea, breakthrough. Work, work, work.

It was around eight o'clock when Jensen pushed open the door to his apartment. He flicked on the light and immediately got an eyeful of Steve and Christian kissing, Steve's hand tangled in Christian's hair. Jensen closed the door loudly behind him and Christian tore

himself away from Steve so fast that it was funny. Jensen wanted to laugh but the sound didn't make it past his teeth.

"Relax." Jensen kicked off his shoes and hung up his coat. "It was obvious."

Steve crossed his arms, raising his eyebrows at the flustered man in their living room.

"I told you, man. Chill out."

Christian recovered his composure, though his cheeks were still scarlet. His arms were crossed over his chest and he jutted out his chin out like a pit bull backed into a corner.

"I'm not out at work, Jensen."

Jensen ran his fingers through his hair.

"Neither am I. Well, I think Mike knows. He doesn't count." Jensen wasn't annoyed about Christian; he was mostly irked about the fact that Steve somehow thought that Jensen couldn't keep Christian's secret. He turned to his Californian roommate. "What the hell, man? Why didn't you tell me?"

Steve shrugged, scratching the back of his neck nervously.

"It's kinda new, Jenny. And he's not exactly comfortable with the whole world knowing." The comment made Christian blow his bangs out of his face, muttering about getting water as he stalked off into the kitchen. Steve waited until Christian had left before he continued. "Besides, you've been kind of down lately."

The first thing Jensen wanted to say was, "Don't be stupid, I'm not depressed," but he couldn't quite commit to the denial. He didn't want to say that he felt depressed... He just felt like weights were being added to his legs every day. Besides, he had a great job, Steve as a great friend... Jensen had every reason *not* to be depressed.

Something pressed at the back of his mind, and it felt like an oncoming migraine.

"I'm fine."

Steve got a weird look on his face, like he was constipated. Jensen knew that face and it just made the sapling migraine throb and twist until it was firmly rooted in his skull. He went



into the kitchen, ignoring Christian, and dug through their pantry until he came across Steve's bottle of Excedrin.

Jensen popped two pills into his mouth, wincing as they dragged down the inside of his throat. He didn't care that he was technically supporting one of Revolution's biggest competitors; aspirin didn't cut it, not for his migraines. He heard Steve come in, speaking softly to Christian, and Jensen knew he couldn't escape his worried friend. Not in their apartment.

Heaving a resigned sigh, Jensen opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water.

"You're not fine. I know you, man." Jensen turned to face the onslaught like a man, and that was when he saw something odd. Christian stood in the corner, arms crossed and head down. A frown pulled his lips downward—and it wasn't the frown of a man caught in an awkward situation. Christian looked—frustrated, almost, and when his eyes lifted and caught Jensen's, he immediately looked away. Steve's hand closed around Jensen's wrist, making Jensen shift his attention away from Christian and his weird face. "I'm serious. When's the last time you cooked something?"

Icy water eased the burn in his throat and Jensen's shoulders rose.

"I've been busy."

Jensen's fingers absorbed up the chill from his water. He glanced at Christian, but the strange frown was gone, replaced with awkward, neutral politeness. Steve stood up straight, his feet a good distance apart. Jensen could tell that he'd lost this battle a long time ago.

"You should start dating again."

"No." Jensen shook his head as his chest constricted painfully for a reason that he couldn't pin down. "Steve, I'll do all the cooking—"

"I've already set up a dating profile." Jensen's whole body went slack, but not with relief. Steve's smile was cautious and sheepish. "You really shouldn't leave your computer out in the open, Jen."

Jensen bit his lip in order to keep the tsunami of shouting at bay because Christian didn't deserve to hear it, and he seemed to make Steve happy. Jensen didn't want to drive him away just yet. He clenched his fists.

"Steve, I swear to God, if I didn't love you—you'd be a dead man."

Tense silence grew between them, and then Steve sighed, his head bowed. Watching Steve deflate was akin to watching a sunflower wilt. Jensen knew that Steve did things for him only with the best intentions. He held out his water as a peace offering. Steve smiled and took it, taking a long swig before wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist and giving the water back.

"You've got a match." Steve's smile got a little brighter and he reached back for Christian's hand. "We're gonna go out. You should send your match a message."

Christian seemed more than happy to leave. The door swung shut and Jensen was alone, his half-empty water bottle in hand.



*Congratulations! You have a new match to your profile!*

The message seemed to mock him in its simple yet elegant font. Jensen's leg bounced as he stared at the happy exclamation. His profile was fairly accurate, and Jensen reminded himself to thank Steve for not uploading a picture. Overall, Jensen had to admit that Steve had done a pretty good job portraying him.

His cursor hesitated over the flashing mailbox icon. Jensen took a deep breath, finished his beer, and clicked.

He watched the spinning wheel as the new page loaded.

A profile without a picture appeared. *JarPad*. All Jensen could gather was that the mysterious JarPad also lived in New York City and that he loved dogs. It was frustrating, but also a comfort to know that the website took privacy seriously.

Spreading his fingers over the keys, Jensen began to type.

*Dear JarPad,*

*My friend set up this account for me and it looks like we've been "matched." I don't actually want to date anyone. I'm not saying this to be rude or anything, but I figured I would message you first before there was a misunderstanding.*

*Good luck finding a match.*

*Sincerely,  
JenAck*

Before he could second-guess himself, Jensen clicked Send. He got up and left his laptop out in the living room as he slipped into the bathroom, turning on the shower.

With his clothes piled in a heap on the floor, Jensen stepped under the spray. He half-heartedly massaged shampoo into his scalp. He hoped that JarPad wouldn't be too mad; at least Jensen had been polite. He closed his eyes, leaning into the spray. Keeping his eyes closed, Jensen let his hand wander down his abdomen, redirecting streams of water. His breath came out in misty puffs and he idly brushed his fingers lower—

The migraine's terrible weight returned and Jensen jerked his hand back up, fumbling to turn off the power.

Jensen dragged his hand down his face, wiping water from his eyes. He rubbed his temples, wrapping a towel loosely around his waist before shuffling out to the living room. Jensen didn't mean to look at his laptop, but his gaze happened to pass over it before he went into his room.

He had a new email.

Jensen paused, then huffed and sat down, clicking on the new message.

What loaded made Jensen's eyes widen with surprise.

*JenAck,*

*Haha, that's funny; my sister set up my account. It looks like we both have meddling friends. I'm not really interested in dating either, but would you mind if we kept emailing? As long as I tell her I am she'll be happy.*

*It would mean a lot to me. Even a blank email would be better than nothing.*

*JarPad*

Water dripped down Jensen's cheek, his face illuminated by the light from the screen. He wiped his hands off on his towel before he stretched his fingers over the keyboard.



That night, Jensen barely got any sleep. He kept tossing and turning, fading in and out of consciousness. When he glanced at the clock and saw that it was ten after five, he got up.

In his boxers and worn t-shirt, Jensen opened the refrigerator. He got out a carton of eggs, onions, sausage, and green peppers. Jensen breathed deeply as he diced up the green peppers and sausage. It was satisfying to wield the knife with the cutting board under his other hand.

His frying pan, shallow and stainless steel, felt good in his hand, and as he watched the butter melt across it, something inside of him relaxed.

Cooking was just like chemistry; it was all about finding the right compounds and bonds to create a great and satisfying taste. Jensen cracked open four eggs and whisked them together in a green bowl. He spun the spice rack until he found the dried slivers of garlic and sprinkled some in, following them with a dash of salt and pepper.

He poured the eggs with all the add-ins into the pan; the resulting sizzle was like an hour-long massage condensed into a few seconds. Jensen's lips curled up into an easygoing smile as he watched the eggs bubble and get fluffy.

After a beat, slow claps and a low whistle sounded from the doorway. Jensen jumped, whirling around to find a groggy Steve leaning against the doorframe.

"You know, I was only semi-serious about the cooking thing," Steve yawned, his bare feet shuffling against the floor as he slowly made his way to Jensen's side. "Christ, you made a feast."

Fighting past the adrenaline, Jensen shoved Steve.

"Jesus, you scared me."

Steve shrugged and took the spatula to flip the omelet.

"I woke up and smelled somethin' good coming from the kitchen." Steve opened one of the drawers and pulled out his lucky apron. "Move over, I'm makin' waffles."

The aroma of great food filled the kitchen. Jensen and Steve worked side by side, passing utensils and bowls back and forth without hesitation. By the end the entire counter flourished with breakfast food. Scrambled eggs and omelets, waffles, bacon, and orange juice. Steve lifted his fork to clang it against Jensen's and they were off, eating up their hard work.

Soon, Jensen was stuffed and Steve leaned back in his chair, his hands resting on his stomach.

"Buh." Steve grinned. "I won't have to eat for a week."

Jensen licked his lips and smiled a little.

"Amen."

Jensen slid off the bar stool, walking back to his room. He picked a pair of jeans up off the floor, sniffing them to make sure they weren't too rank before he put them on. He dug through the closet for a nice shirt and was halfway through pulling it over his head when Steve's voice floated in from the kitchen.

"So was your match any good?"

With his arms stretched up over his head and his shirt bunched up around his shoulders, Jensen paused. He quickly shoved his shirt onto his body and slipped on his sneakers. Steve was pulling his hair back, his hair tie hanging from his teeth.

Jensen grabbed his laptop and slipped it into his bag, smiling in a way that seemed natural.

"It was interesting." Steve quirked his eyebrows and Jensen rolled his eyes. "I'll see how it goes. I'm neutral."

Steve spat the hair tie out into one hand, swiftly fixing his hair into a firm ponytail.

"That breakfast wasn't neutral, Jenny."

Jensen tugged on his coat and left, but not before flipping Steve off.



*JenAck,*

*Thanks for helping me out I know I could lie but I'm really bad at it. Is it technically still a lie? Well, whatever.*

*My sister stopped by to make me breakfast this morning. I shouldn't have been surprised that it was a hot pocket...but I was looking forward to Eggo waffles. Oh well.*

*Cheetahs can run up to sixty-five miles per hour.*

*At least these emails can be educational.*

*JarPad*

The email came in at eight. At the time, Jensen had been in the subway with Christian, but he opened his laptop in the lab at nine thirty and clicked on it immediately.

He snorted at the cheetah fun fact. A small crash made Jensen jerk his head up.

"Oh my shit, I thought you were choking." Mike clutched at his heart theatrically. "You're not choking, are you?"

"No." There were days Jensen had to remind himself that Doctor Michael Rosenbaum was handily considered a genius in their field. It looked like today was one of those days. "I was laughing."

Mike relaxed, grinning.

"I don't know which is more terrifying: you choking, or you laughing."

Jensen raised his eyebrows, leaning back a little.

"How is me laughing scary?"

Mike snorted.

"Easy, dude. Geniuses laughing is a pretty big sign that they're about to become mad scientists."

Jensen narrowed his eyes.

"Mike...you laugh all the time."

As if to prove Jensen's point, Mike threw his head back, his boisterous giggles filling up the lab. He wiped his eyes, winking at Jensen.

"Yeah. And I'm a mad scientist." Mike wagged his eyebrows, lowering his voice. "Come over to the dark side, padi-wan. We have cookies. And hunky sidekicks."

Jensen rolled his eyes. He turned back to his laptop, the cursor blinking.

*JarPad,*

*Hot pockets are not a part of a nutritious breakfast. This isn't my educational fact but that doesn't make it any less true.*

*My breakfast was an assortment of omelets, waffles, and bacon. Usually it's tea and toast but I woke up early so I treated my roommate and myself.*

*Gold is from supernovas that condensed and exploded at the beginning of the universe.*

*JenAck*

A brief feeling of genuine excitement bubbled up in Jensen's stomach when he clicked send.

It took a while for JarPad to respond, and in that span of time Jensen had almost completely filled up his side of the wall with all sorts of chemical bonds and compounds; red for detrimental, blue for possible cures. Mike preferred to work on the computer, but Jensen had to do his calculations by hand. There was something about the feeling of a marker sliding against the wall that just made Jensen feel like he was getting something done.



Jensen was halfway through a salami sandwich when his computer blipped. There was another email, JarPad's response.

*Is that true?*

*(Hyperthymesia is the phenomenon when someone can remember every moment of his or her life, including birth!)*

Jensen's lips twitched and he quickly typed out a response.

*Yeah. One of my professors in college opened the class with that fact.*

*(One of the effects of cyanide besides death is that it turns the blood purple.)*

Just over a minute passed before JarPad's next email appeared.

*Lucky you. One of my classes opened with our professor threatening to slice open our Achilles tendons if we ever messed a lecture.*

*(Everything, unless it's a feather or paper, falls to earth at a rate of 9.8 meters per second per second.)*

A lump of chewed salami caught in the back of Jensen's throat and a coughing fit overwhelmed the laughter that threatened to pass his lips. He recovered and began to type.

*Really? That's basic physics—and also the only real physics fact I can remember from high school.*

*(The statue of David isn't perfect; there is one vertebrae missing.)*

Even though the sun was too bright and people bumped into him in the subway, Jensen couldn't help smiling on the way home. Even the smell of smoke, rotting garbage, and cat piss didn't seem as disgusting as it usually did. Instead, he let his laptop bag swung from his shoulder as he wondered what JarPad's response would be. He almost began to hum during the elevator ride up to his apartment.

Steve had left a note on the refrigerator that said he was spending the night with Christian. Jensen flopped down on his bed, pulling out his laptop.

*Whatever, man. Thinking up random facts is harder than I thought and I was never a huge Snapple fan. There, that's a fact.*

Jensen had a schedule; he wasn't without things to do. He had to shower, put away clean dishes, and get around to dinner whether he cooked or called in yet another order of Chinese. He smiled at the curt email and hit Reply.

*It's the sentiment that counts. Fact.*

This time, he didn't have to wait more than fifteen seconds for JarPad's reply.

*My name is Jared.*

Jensen smiled.

*I'm Jensen.* He paused, not quite ready to hit Send. He held his tongue between his teeth as he continued to type. *Should I order out or cook dinner?*

He watched the letter icon blink, the enveloped sealing as it flew through cyberspace to Jared's inbox. He drummed his fingers over his stomach and closed his eyes; the little electronic tone signaling a new email was like a crystal bell amidst the hysteria of the city. Jensen smiled.



Jensen used to be a morning person. He remembered that he had been able to easily wake up at five easily and feel refreshed and ready to face the day. Just over three years ago, Jensen hadn't had dark circles under his eyes and a thin stomach lining with periodic ulcers.

He woke up drenched in sweat and he immediately ran into the bathroom, dropping roughly to his knees and squeezing his eyes shut, dry-heaving and trembling above the toilet bowl.

Nothing came up. It rarely did. Jensen fell back, raking his hand through his hair. His fingers were still shaking and he had the strangest too-sweet taste in his mouth. He smacked his lips together, trying to get rid of it, but it was useless.

After a few semi-calming minutes, Jensen was able to get back up on his feet. He went to wipe his eyes and felt how wet his face was. He pulled his hand away, going to the mirror.

Sure enough, his eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

When Jensen staggered back to his bedroom, he saw that it was three in the morning. His heart was still pounding, and Jensen resigned himself to remaining conscious. He lugged his laptop to the kitchen and decided to shift his focus onto what recipe he should type up for his morning email to Jared.



Jensen tugged at his purple tie, fidgeting where he sat in the Revolution corporate lobby. Mike was also in a blazer and slacks, though he was much more relaxed because Michael Rosenbaum was more than a little insane. Jensen checked his watch for the seventeenth time in the past ten minutes and Mike groaned, his head falling back.

"Dude, *relax*."

"Fuck you, Mike."

Mike rolled his eyes, his face scrunched up into a frustrated scowl.

"It's not the first time you've been evaluated. Christ, we're both awesome; we know it and so does Kripke."

Jensen glared at Mike.

"Abrams is going to be there too, asshole."

Suddenly Mike's calm confidence evaporated and the blood in his face drained away until he was paler than an albino ghost.

"Since when?"

"Since the email Revelation sent out this morning. Everyone got it."

Mike whined.

"But nobody reads those!"

The secretary, who had been diligently ignoring them, glanced up with a professionally bored expression on her face.

"Mr. Ackles, Eric and JJ are ready for you."

Jensen stood up, brushing off his knees, and Mike began looking himself over, scrambling to pick lint balls off his jacket.

"Shit, shit, *shit*, this has a fucking stain on the sleeve!"

The secretary's lips pulled down into an annoyed frown as she ushered Jensen through the smoky glass doors that led to the founders of Revolution Pharmaceuticals. Mike's fretting got softer and softer, and Jensen took a deep breath before pushing open the door to Kripke's office, affectionately termed "the dragon's lair."

Everyone who knew anything about the legal drug business knew the names Eric Kripke and JJ Abrams. Eric was a miracle worker with money; even during the economic fallout, Revolution's stock hadn't so much as wavered. He was financially creative and in charge of all things marketing. JJ was a whole different phenomenon altogether; his skills lay in chemistry. If Jensen and Mike were considered geniuses (and they were), then JJ was God.

"Hey, Jensen. Have a seat."

Eric was enthusiastic, as he always seemed to be. He waved Jensen in, oozing energy. Usually, a quarterly review was done by Eric alone in his office, and more often than not it ended up in a conversation about whatever fantasy sports team the company was operating at the time. But this time, another man sat in Kripke's chair. He had curly dark hair, glasses with thick black frames, and a stare that could slice through diamonds.

Side effects of meeting JJ Abrams for the first time include but are not limited to: light-headedness, dizziness, irrational giddiness or anxiety, sweating palms, light nausea, and the sensation of staring into Paradise.

JJ got up, and Jensen's first thought was, "He's shorter than I imagined." He moved with a grace that made Jensen's head spin, and he held out his hand.

"It's great to finally meet you, Jensen. I've heard a lot about you."

When Jensen slid his hand into JJ's, he saw stars.

"U-um, it's great to meet you too, sir."

"Please," JJ smiled like *it was no big deal*, "call me JJ."

Jensen managed to nod; if he'd tried to speak he would have ended up wheezing. Luckily, he remembered that he could sit, so he did. JJ and Kripke sat on the edge of Eric's desk, side by side. Eric drummed his fingers on his knee, his one foot swinging, bumping against the wood to a frantic beat.

"So, what's the latest, Jensen?"

It took a considerable amount of effort to tear his eyes away from JJ long enough to answer.

"I've made considerable headway with the memory strengthening drug; by the end of the month, I should have at least five formulas ready for testing."

Eric clapped his hands together once.

"Awesome. Sounds great, fantastic."

JJ adjusted his glasses, leaning forward.

"What's your process? If you don't mind my asking."

Jensen's mouth was bone dry and he had to take a moment to clear his throat.

"I like to study poisons, so I've been working with phytoplankton, mandrake, and tetrachlorthylene."

"Oh, working backwards." JJ smiled. "I like that. If I'm working on a tougher project, I like to start at the cause, too."

While Jensen's mind was somewhere in the stratosphere, Eric's brain began to run wild. The only way Jensen could tell was that Eric leapt up and began to pace.

"We'll release it with a new and improved Celebrex, that one's been due for an update for a while. The fifty-five to sixty-five market is gonna go nuts."

Eric faded into marketing and advertisement jargon. JJ sat back, a bemused curl on his lips. His eyes slid to peer at Jensen from behind his glasses.

"We should grab a diet Coke sometime."

"Really?" Jensen immediately wanted to swallow his words, and JJ had the decency to laugh. "I mean, yeah."

Eric waved his hand, ending the intense debriefing.

"All right, Ackles, you're done. Keep up the awesome work!"

Jensen floated out of the corporate division. He slipped his hand into his pocket, sliding his phone open so he could immediately fire out a text to Jared.

*Out of the big meeting. It went really well. Have you left for the conference yet?*

Christian came out of the elevator and waved at Jensen. Jensen waved back and slowed down as the corporate lawyer made his way over. In the meantime, Jensen's phone chimed.

*Not yet, still saying goodbye to my pups. I hate leaving them.*

"How did the meeting go?" Christian smiled, and it didn't have as much strained politeness as it had before; only a small bit remained. "JJ is pretty cool."

Describing JJ as "pretty cool" was an atrocity of an understatement and it was only because Steve liked Christian so much that Jensen bit his tongue. He nodded.

"Yeah."

Jensen didn't know what to say in order to continue the conversation, so he just stayed silent. He watched Christian's shoulders tighten with every passing second, but Jensen honestly couldn't think of anything to say. It wasn't that he didn't like Christian; he was sure that he was a fine guy, and he must be one of the best lawyers or else Revolution wouldn't have him.

Still, Christian had started talking to Jensen out of the blue a few years ago. Research and corporate never mixed, and yet Christian had somehow managed to seek Jensen out. For what, Jensen wasn't sure, but he did know that it didn't feel like a coincidence. Christian sucked in a breath, tucking a few locks of hair behind his ear.

"Well, I'll, uh, see you around. Tell Steve I, um, I said hey."

Christian booked it, never looking back. Jensen rolled his eyes and slid his phone back open.



Jensen knew quite a few things about Jared, considering he'd never met the man. He knew he was a physical therapist and worked mostly with children. He loved dogs and had two. His sister was heading off to college soon. He loved food but couldn't cook worth a damn, and when he got a song stuck in his head, he sang it around the hospital until everyone felt his pain.

Some of the subtler things Jensen knew about Jared were that he was really funny and actually seemed to *get* Jensen's weird sense of humor. He took a genuine interest in Jensen's love of chemistry. Jensen didn't know if it was weird that he looked forward to hearing from Jared every time he woke up.

It was a Friday when things went to the next level.

Jensen's foot had been bouncing all day. Jared's conference was over and he had to take a plane home. Jensen kept bouncing away until Mike chuckled a Sharpie at him and told him to chill out. Then, a few seconds later, Steve texted him to tell him to chill the fuck out and to fill him in on what was up when he got home. Jensen looked up fast enough to see Mike tucking his cell phone away. Even though he had been caught texting Steve, Mike still had a smug, victorious smile stretched across his face.

As soon as the clock struck five, Jensen beat Mike to the door. When his phone chimed, Jensen almost dropped it, he'd taken it out so fast.

*Hey, just landed. I'm beat, so I'm afraid the big low down is going to have to wait until tomorrow. I'll give you a little teaser: Drinking games with anatomy charts are awesome.*



Jensen broke into a smile that didn't taste sour. When he typed, he had to backspace due to the fact that his fingers were shaking and pressing the buttons more than once.

*That's not fair, making me wait for such an obviously fantastic tale about what happens when nerds get drunk.*

Jensen burst out of Revolution, breathing in the city air deeply.

*You're one to talk. You probably take drink mixing way too seriously.*

Jensen rolled his eyes, even though Jared couldn't see it.

*Whatever. Get some rest and maybe I won't feel so gypped tomorrow.*

Usually, their texting bursts ended like that, and so after the short ride on the subway, Jensen was surprised to see a new message waiting for him.

*Want to meet up over coffee?*

Jensen's heart decided to take a long vacation in this throat. He only managed to respond once he was in the elevator.

*Like a date?*

The walk from the elevator to the door had never felt so long in his life. With each step Jensen wondered if he'd finally crossed the line, if he'd managed to fuck up this awesome, easygoing relationship. Then his phone chimed.

*I like the way you think ;)*

Steve opened the door and his eyes widened.

"Holy shit, what happened?"



The last time Jensen had dated...hadn't gone so well. It hadn't ended in abuse or cheating; Jensen just hadn't been comfortable with it. After all, it didn't turn a lot of men on when Jensen woke up from horrifying nightmares.

Jensen couldn't even remember the guy's name; it had been years. It may have begun with a "B." Brian, Bret, Brad... Jensen couldn't remember. What he did remember was the breakup, the tense silence over lukewarm coffee as the guy shifted uncomfortably after giving his clichéd "it's not you, it's me" speech. Jensen remembered feeling a brief moment of relief before the guy broke the silence.

"Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror?" Jensen couldn't remember the man's face; only the ice-cold jolt of terror that paralyzed him as the guy went on, unaware of Jensen's internal panic. "It's not like you're ugly."

That much, Jensen knew to be true, but it wasn't what left him uneasy for weeks after. It was due to the fact that... Jensen didn't know why. He hadn't even realized that he was doing it until then.

Jensen still took as little time as possible in front of the mirror. Every time he met his own eyes, a feeling of crippling nausea washed over him.

Steve's long exhale drew Jensen out of the mess that was his own head.

"You're overthinking this, dude." They were both standing in front of Jensen's closet because Jensen had two hours to pick a shirt and it was like his whole wardrobe had been turned into rags. "Just wear what you normally wear." Jensen grimaced and Steve huffed. "I could call Chris. He has a surprisingly good fashion sense."

"No." Jensen rubbed his temples. "No, don't—don't call him."

Steve raised his eyebrows, then turned back to the closet. He pulled out a nice button-down white shirt with a tank top to go underneath.

"White makes your eyes pop." Before Jensen had a chance to mock Steve for being a walking cliché, Steve continued. "So I don't want to be that drama guy, but what's your deal with Chris?"

Jensen's stomach knotted up, but he stripped his shirt off anyway.

"I don't have a *deal*. I'm glad he makes you happy." Steve just fixed with him that *stare* that meant that he wasn't buying Jensen's bullshit, and Jensen sighed. "He just keeps trying to be friends with me. He doesn't have to and it's weird." Jensen looked at himself in the mirror and was surprisingly happy with what he saw. "You're right about my eyes."

"God, you're a dumbass!" Steve jammed his hands into his pockets. "Sometimes people want to just be your friend because they *like* you."

"Yeah, Steve, but he's a lawyer." The silence between them was so thick that it almost made Jensen choke. Then Steve laughed so hard that indignant anger bubbled up in Jensen's chest. "I'm serious, Steve!"

"I know!" Steve wiped his eyes. "That's what makes it so good." Steve already had his phone out, his thumbs flying over the keys. "God, Chris is going to love this."

Jensen hated his best friend sometimes.

"Fuck you, I'm leaving."

Steve just waved him off.

"Let me know if you get to second base!"

Jensen slammed the door in a way that he hoped came off as manly and not petulant.



Vivid streaks of turquoise and indigo splashed over Jensen's white shirt. He looked down at the colored light reflected off of Vicki's mobiles. She finished up with her last customer of the early lunch rush and headed over to the third table from the door, right where Jensen had told Jared he'd be. Vicki whistled.

"You look handsome today. Hot date?"

Jensen felt his cheeks get warm.

"Um...yeah, actually."

The self-appointed (but rightly so, in Jensen's opinion) master of tea and coffee's mouth fell open. Jensen might have found it funny if he hadn't been so nervous. Vicki quickly recovered and bounced on her heels.

"Oh, Jensen, that's awesome!" Vicki bumped her hip against the table. "You got all dressed up—that's so cute!"

Jensen buried his face in his hands, his stomach tying itself up in knots.

"I haven't been on a date in so long, I don't know what to do."

"Hey." Vicki shook his shoulder gently. "I didn't say it was bad, it's *cute*. Now buck up and tell me what he's like."

Jensen peeked through his hands and the knot of anxiety lessened. This was Vicki, bohemian tea queen. She was wearing a long brown skirt with sandals and a flowing blue top. Her hair was tied up except for a few stray beaded strands. She was comfortable in her own skin, and Jensen never saw her put on a mask for anyone. He envied her so much; sometimes he wondered if she could tell.

"I don't know what he looks like; well, he said he'd be wearing a blue shirt and sneakers with bright shoelaces." Jensen smiled sheepishly before snapping his fingers. "Oh, and he's really tall."

Vicki winked at him.

"I'll keep an eye out." She fiddled with the beads in her hair, the mobiles giving her an ever-changing skin color. "If you've never met before—oh, you do the online scene."

Jensen nodded only because it would take too long to explain. He tried not to slouch too much and hoped the dark circles under his eyes weren't as apparent as they usually were.

Vicki stuck by him, not talking but staying close. Jensen was glad to let her look and see if anyone in a blue shirt wandered by the store. Jensen was about to shakily ditch the teahouse and the date when Vicki inhaled sharply.

"Oh God. Jensen, sweet Jesus—Jensen he's, he's just..."

When Jensen looked up, he understood why Vicki had lost her usual unique way with words. The man who walked into the shop looked like he belonged in GQ, not SoHo. He stretched up so tall that he wouldn't need a horse to be a knight. His hazel-green eyes were bright and eager, doing a quick sweep of the store.

"Hot" didn't do Jared justice. Hot was juvenile, something to say because of either a lacking or unimaginative vocabulary. What Jared had—the look he'd been blessed with was *timeless*.

Jensen felt a smile grow and he stood, expecting that his anxious but hopeful sentiment would be returned.

That was when Jared's eyes finally came to a halt on him.

The tension sent a thin but dangerous crack through the air. Jared's once open and warm face shut down. His lips pulled down into a frown and his whole body became tight and hard. Jensen couldn't breathe. He knew first dates could be awkward but this was not disappointment or masked discontent.

What Jared had on his face was a fury unlike Jensen had ever seen.

"You've got to be kidding me." Jared growled, and it looked so sad and *hateful*. He glared at Jensen, and Jensen knew that a stare like that would haunt him for the rest of his life. "Unbelievable. Fucking unbelievable."

Jared turned sharply and slammed his way out the door, making Jensen and Vicki flinch.



*August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009*

Jared Padalecki yawned, his two dogs weaving in and out of his legs. He rubbed Sadie behind the ears as Harley bumped him with his nose. Jared checked his watch and grimaced because it was already five minutes past the time he wanted to leave, and even *Top Chef* wasn't enough to keep him from getting jittery.

"Megan, come on! It's only one weekend, what more could you need?"

"Coming, coming, coming!" Megan thundered down the stairs in pajama shorts and a high school sweatshirt. "Chill out, Jared."

It was too late to get in an argument, so Jared just nuzzled his puppies.

"Chad will be here in the morning; I'll be back soon, I promise."

Megan slung her bag over her shoulder and, with one final goodbye to his dogs, Jared left with his little sister in tow.

The thing about late-night driving was that it all depended on the company. Alone tended to be boring, but with company, it was be easier to stay awake. Megan clutched her pink iPod and soon filled the car with a poppy tune. Her slipper-clad feet bounced as Jared drove them out of the city. She sniffed, rubbing her hands together.

"So holy shit *Top Chef*."

Jared sucked in a breath dramatically.

"I told you the California guy would make it."

"Steve, Jared. His name is *Steve*."

Jared rolled his eyes.

"What, it's not like I'm ever going to meet him." Jared flexed his fingers over the wheel, easily taking the exit to the highway. "I hope he wins."

Megan nodded.

"Me too." She glanced over at Jared. "Do you need coffee?"

Jared shook his head.

"Nah." He smiled at his little sister. "You've got enough energy for the both of us."

In the dark of that spring night, Jared felt content with his life. He was finishing up his last year of med school and Megan was managing to turn into a level-headed young woman. At sixteen years old, she was growing nicely, even though it was only Jared raising her. She drummed two pens against her legs to the beat of the song, her hair flying as she swung her head back and forth with a chaotic elegance.

Jared rolled the window down, letting the chilly air fill the car. The sky was clear and obsidian, glittering with stars.

Some nights, the world seemed perfect.

"Are you going to paint my name on your stomach?" Megan smiled in that crooked, charming way only a teenager could pull off. "I'll score a million goals if you have my name on your stomach and booby tassels."

Jared snorted. On the long road ahead of them, the light went from green to yellow.

"For booby tassels, I'm gonna need more than a million."

The car came to a stop at the red light. Megan rolled her eyes.

"Oh come on." She pouted, but Jared knew it was only for show. "Why did you stop? It's not like anyone's here."

Megan sank back into the seat as Jared turned to her. The light was still red.

"I don't want to get pulled over."

Uproarious laughter filled the car and Megan took time to stop and wipe her eyes.

"By who? There isn't a cop for a," she waved her arms around, "thousand-trillion miles."

This time, they both laughed. It was the dead of night and it felt like they were the only people in the world, driving in that clunky little green Volvo. Megan's cleats and soccer jersey were in the back and Jared had a duffel bag full of changes of clothes and body paint that he'd managed to keep a secret from his sister.

The light was still red. Megan looked up at Jared.

"What if I score a thousand-trillion goals?"

Jared chuckled and he pinched her arm.

"How about this: If your team wins States, I'll wear the booby tassels to your first Nationals game."



Megan gave a whoop—and the light wasn't red—it was a bright, bright *white*, that was so close, too close, too close, *TOO CLOSE*—



2012

Jensen was frozen, the door's thunderous slam echoing in his head. Vicki was just as shocked, her fingers knotted in her skirt. Jensen's legs moved, slow and stiff at first, but soon he was running out the door, bursting into the bright sun.

City noise overwhelmed him but Jensen was able to make out a blue shirt, *Jared's* blue shirt, in the mid-lunch rush. Jensen ran forward, not caring that he bumped into people as he struggled to catch up. It only took a block, and he chided himself for falling out of shape. He surged forward and grabbed Jared's wrist.

"Hey!" Jensen felt a small bubble of anger rise. Okay, so maybe he was weird, a nerd, and recently anti-social, and maybe he had nightmares he couldn't remember that made him dry heave until he couldn't see straight, but he hadn't *done* anything to Jared, besides text and email him. Jensen hadn't had a *chance* to fuck up yet. "Hey!"

Jensen tugged on Jared's arm and the taller man whirled around. Jensen flinched; for a moment, he swore that Jared was going to hit him.

"I swear to God, if you don't get away from me—"

"What are you talking about?" Jensen's voice cracked and he felt his hand shaking, but he still held on tight to Jared's wrist. "*I just met you!*" Jared yanked his arm away so fast and so hard that Jensen stumbled forward before he caught himself. "What the hell is your problem?"

Jared's jaw clenched and this time, he stepped up into Jensen's personal space, and there wasn't a doubt in Jensen's mind that if Jared put his mind to it, he could wipe the floor with Jensen.

"I can't believe you're just gonna stand there and—"

"Jared!" A woman's voice sliced through the air and the hand that had grabbed Jensen's collar froze before quickly releasing him. Jensen looked around, his heart pounding, but he couldn't find his savior. Then Jared stepped to the side, deflated and resigned. A fierce and confident young woman in a wheelchair seemed to materialize behind him. Her hazel eyes burned as she crossed her arms, glaring at Jared. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

No one made a sound; Jared looked guilty, Jensen was just plain old befuddled, and the girl was furious. Jensen found himself inhaling, his voice wavering when he spoke.

"I think...I think Jared has, um, mistaken me for someone else."

They both turned to him, one with smoldering, out-of-nowhere hatred, and the other with a sassy frown. It was the girl who quirked her eyebrow.

"You're Jensen, right?" Jensen nodded and the girl huffed. "Then there isn't a mistake." She thrust her hand out. "I'm Megan."

Jensen smiled, mostly out of relief; Megan was everything that Jared described her to be and more. That, and she didn't appear to want to hurt him. He shook her hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

Megan laughed, and then Jared had his hands on the back of her wheelchair, looking away from Jensen.

"C'mon, Meg, let's go."

"Jared, what is your *deal*?"

She was hissing under her breath as Jared turned her around, and the look that Jared sent Jensen said that if Jensen knew what was good for him, he'd stay put.

So he did. He watched Jared wheel his sister away until the New York City crowd swallowed them up.



Whenever things got really bad, Jensen had a pair of pajamas that he liked to take refuge in.

They were red flannel plaid pants riddled with holes and a hoodie that was at least three sizes too big for him. Jensen remembered diving into them as soon as he got home before falling on the couch. The door opened; Jensen wasn't sure how much time had passed before Steve had gotten home. He didn't want to pick his head up and check.

Steve didn't say anything because Steve recognized those pajamas. Instead, he nudged Jensen until he could slide in behind him, his arm resting over Jensen's stomach. There were additional footsteps in the kitchen and Jensen curled in on himself.

"Tell him to go away."

"I'm not going to do that." Steve's voice tickled his shoulder and Jensen sighed. He really didn't want Christian there. "I'll get you fifteen minutes, though. Chris! Pick up a couple of pizzas!"

The footsteps stopped, and they weren't in the living room yet.

"What, right now?"

"Yup. I'm a high-maintenance boyfriend."

Christian swore but he did walk out. Jensen almost smiled.

"I'll bet he doesn't come back."

Steve pinched him.

"I bet he does."

Steve was right because Steve was a know-it-all. Christian got a Hawaiian-style pie and Jensen had two slices. He took them into his room and crawled into bed; that was when he saw that he had new mail. He didn't recognize the address, but the subject line said "Sorry." Jensen clicked on it.

*Jensen,*

*So, I don't know what Jared's problem was, but I think you're right. He was definitely mistaken. Look, I think you two are really great for each other; Jared just made a mistake or something. I don't know—he won't tell me.*

*<3 Meg*

Jensen took another bite of his pizza and shut his laptop. He could hear Steve and Christian talking in the next room and he didn't want to put in the effort to see if they were talking about him.

He pulled the covers up and shut out the rest of the world.



The thing about any kind of progress was that if it was worthwhile, it came with a price. For example, the use of a memory recollecting drug ran the risk of weakening the body's natural ability to properly store events, making the medication mandatory, forcing the body build up a resistance so that the drug became an addiction.

Or...the use of a memory-cancelling drug could help Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder victims, but the simple repression of a memory may not be enough in some cases.

Everyone at work seemed to know to leave Jensen alone. Even Mike kept it down; Jensen reminded himself to buy him some booze on Christmas.

Jensen scribbled in his notebook. He could barely get through simple equations; he hated it. He didn't understand how a first date could go so horribly.

When Jensen's phone chimed, Mike fell off his chair.

"Fuck!" Mike scrambled back up. "Holy shit, that was loud."

Jensen opened his mouth and then shut it, his teeth clicking together. His phone was at its normal volume, but the lab was so quiet that it must have sounded like a bomb.

"Sorry." Jensen reached for his phone. "I'll, uh, put it on vibrate."

Jensen turned off the phone's volume and saw that the new text message was from Jared.

The name wasn't a welcome distraction anymore. It was an odd, stark presence. It made Jensen long for his pajamas. He opened the text and frowned.



Jensen wasn't sure when Vicki's tea house had become a Wild West saloon, but it sure felt like it when he pushed the door open. The sign said that the house was closed—and it was, except for four people.

Vicki had her arms crossed over her chest, and Jensen was pretty sure it was the first time he'd ever seen her truly angry.

"Five minutes. And I can kick you out whenever I want." She glared at Jared and—Nurse Hotpants. "Got it?"

Jared nodded and Nurse Hotpants smiled breezily at Vicki.

"Thank you, Vicki. This won't take long, I promise."

Nurse Hotpants stepped forward, jingling. Jensen frowned and the man smiled and lifted up his pants to reveal two silver chains around his ankles, little bells twinkling with every step.

"The kids like 'em." He held out both of his hands, soothingly calm while Jared remained silent. "I'm Misha."

"Jensen." Jensen crossed his arms, leaving Misha's hands hanging. "What do you want?"

Misha smiled again, not taking his hands away.

"I just want to help." Jensen looked at Jared before glaring back at Misha, who seemed to be made out of peace and goodwill. Jensen let Misha take both of his hands into his grasp. "Take a deep breath—"

"Look, I've seen *Meet the Parents*."

Misha kept on smiling, his thumbs rubbing circles into the inside of Jensen's wrists.

"It's not about your pulse." Misha took a very drawn out and gradual inhale. "Have you ever met Jared before?"

"Yes. Yesterday was the first time." Jensen met Jared's eyes but had to look away; Jared kept *glaring* at him like he'd done something wrong. "I don't know what your problem is, I'm going home—"

"Do you watch *Top Chef*?"

It was the first time Jared had spoken, the seemingly ridiculous question delivered gravely, like *Top Chef* was a surefire way to judge a person's character. Jensen let Misha keep a hold of his hands as he glared back at Jared.

"I do. Why?"

Jared smiled, and it was dark, sad, making him look weirdly like he was about to be sick.

"Did you see the second to last episode in the 2009 season, the one that—"

"Steve Carlson won." Jensen ground his teeth. "Yeah, I saw the finale. Steve is my roommate."

Jensen didn't call Jared an asshole, but if he didn't hear it anyway, he was an idiot. Jared straightened his posture, like he was about to prove a point that no one could understand.

"Did you see the episode before the finale? Can you tell me what happened?"

"Yeah—" Then Jensen stopped. His eyes pulled away from Jared as he struggled to recall that particular episode. He remembered Steve winning, he remembered watching it at Steve's mom's house—but the week before—what happened the week before? "He won. I know he won. I..." Jensen pulled his hands out of Misha's, rubbing his temples because he could feel a migraine brewing. "I can't remember the second to last episode." The harder he tried to remember, the worse his headache got until his head was spinning out of control and he felt like he was going to throw up his intestines. "I need..."

Jensen struggled to the doors and stumbled out onto the gritty sidewalk. His legs felt like lukewarm gelatin, but he managed to make it to the street. He sat down, his back cracking as his ass hit the curb. He breathed in deeply, praying he wouldn't vomit.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there with his head between his knees. One moment he was fighting vertigo and nausea, and the next he was being tapped on the shoulder. With

that touch, it was like all the pain and overwhelming desire to throw up was muted. Jensen looked up, squinting against the flickering street lamp.

Jared held a cup in his hand.

"Vicki said this would make you feel better."

Jensen took the cup and his fingers brushed against Jared's for a split second. Jared quickly pulled his hand back and Jensen sipped his tea, too worn out to care. The tea did help, its ginger spice grounding him. Jensen got up on shaking legs.

"I should tell her 'thanks'..."

Jared shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't." His shoulders rose. "She and Misha are having a moment."

"Oh." Jensen raised his eyebrows, taking another sip. "About time."

Jared laughed, then stopped abruptly as if he hadn't meant to let it out.

"Yeah."

The streetlight kept flickering and a fierce wind howled down the street, making them both shiver. Jared dug his hands into his pockets and walked away. He didn't say goodbye or "later." He just walked into the dark, leaving Jensen alone with Vicki's tea.



There were days when it felt like Jensen was drowning, one drop of water in his lungs at a time.

"Good work." JJ's glasses slid down his nose and Jensen jumped, yanked out of the fog by the genius's voice. "We'll begin testing these right away."

Jensen should have felt elated; he should have been sailing through the stratosphere. Instead, he felt hollow. He smiled.



"Fantastic." He gathered up his papers, and he'd almost shut the door when he turned back. "Do you want to see the memory loss data—?"

"No." JJ's voice bit off the end of Jensen's question. JJ sipped a diet Coke, his eyes bouncing over his iPad as he brought up chemical equations on the screen. "Let's just keep focused on the current project, Jensen."

Jensen hiccupped in an inhale.

"Yes, sir."

He closed the door before JJ could shout back, "Call me JJ!"

When he got back to his lab, he stared at their latest antidepressant line up. Mike was babbling about something, talking to talk while he whizzed through his own equations. Jensen just watched him, watched him manage to charm and entertain and yet still be unafraid to show his true brilliance. Jensen swallowed hard and closed out of the antidepressant window on his computer—that was when his phone beeped.

*How are you feeling?*

It was from Jared. Mike kept laughing at a pun he'd made. Jensen's fingers were numb as he hit Reply.

*Better.*

Steve was checking in on Jensen more; he'd make him too much food, just like his mother used to when she was worried. Jensen blinked and it was like he'd been transported home. He stared into a spiral of spaghetti. It was like he'd hit time's fast-forward button.

He swirled the pasta around his fork, slipping it into his mouth. It was perfect. Everything Steve made tasted like a dream. Christian and Steve were eating with him, and Jensen remembered the conversation being about *American Idol* or some reality show he didn't keep up with.

His phone chirped at three in the goddamn morning and woke him up from the first dreamless sleep he'd had in months.

"It's getting worse." Jensen frowned; he realized that Steve and Christian were still awake and in the living room. Jensen heard Steve's voice, soft and honest. "But...I know him; if something happened, he would have told me."

Jensen rubbed his eyes and reached for his phone as Christian cleared his throat.

"Maybe...maybe it's just a phase or funk he's in."

Even Jensen could tell that Christian didn't believe what he was saying. Neither did Steve, because Steve never bought bullshit. The bright light from Jensen's cell phone stung his eyes, but he was just able to make out Jared's very belated reply.

*Good.*



Jensen couldn't sleep in his apartment, so he went to Central Park at six in the morning. It was Saturday, so he didn't have to be anywhere, and he left a note for Steve on the refrigerator.

At that hour, the only things awake in the park were the ducks, fish, crazy joggers, and dog walkers...and Jensen. He picked a bench tucked away from the path and let his head roll back and his eyes close.

Jared was texting him again. Not like he used to; no pictures of weird or beautiful things, no funny observations. Only short questions that required one-word answers. Nothing personal. Jensen breathed in deep, the morning mist refreshing his lungs.

The thing was, Jensen remembered that he used to be fun. Whenever he thought back to those times, years ago, it always struck him as strange, like watching a film. He remembered going out, partying; he remembered going to bars and having a good time.

Now the most he could have was one beer before he got sick.

Something cold and wet nudged Jensen's knee and he jerked back to the present, his eyes flying open.

Big, brown eyes stared back at him. A dog. It was just a dog.

It had a collar that said “Sadie” on it. Jensen smiled a little, letting the dog sniff his fingers and cautiously petting its head once he deemed it to be friendly. The creature huffed, licking Jensen’s wrist merrily, making him laugh—

“Sadie!” Jensen’s brief, bright moment ended when Jared rounded the corner, sweating and a little winded. “There you are—”

Once he saw Jensen, he stopped short. Jensen hated that Jared could be so attractive and at the same time do...strange things that didn’t make sense in any universe. Jensen crossed his arms.

“I couldn’t sleep. I’m not following you or whatever, so if you’re going to freak out, just save it; it’s too fucking early.”

Maybe if Jensen had been better rested, he would have been more horrified at the words that spilled out of his mouth. Though rude, Jensen wouldn’t deny that they had an honest ring to them. Another dog tugged on its leash to lick Jensen’s fingers and that seemed to shock Jared out of his silence.

“I’m not going to freak out.” In the early hours of the morning, the two men shared a heavy, awkward silence. The other dog—Jensen got a glimpse of the name “Harley” on its tag—barked as if to break up the hush. “So you’re still not sleeping?”

“Not for the past couple years, no.” Jensen got up, giving Harley and Sadie each one more gentle pet on the head. “I’m starting to get used to it.”

Jensen wasn’t sure why it hurt so much. It wasn’t as if he’d been looking forward to dating; hell, he hadn’t even made his own profile. Technically, Jensen had gotten what he wanted at the start of the whole mess. He was still alone. So what if Jared was funny in texts and emails? So what if the idea of that first date had made Jensen more excited than he had been in a long time? Jared had some definite issues, or maybe he was just another lunatic in this godforsaken city.

A small part of him played devil’s advocate. Jared couldn’t be crazy; he was a physical therapist and he worked with children. If he was a psycho, he would have been fired ages ago. Jared was probably a super cool guy with great friends and family.

Maybe Jensen really was just a freak.

It took him a few minutes to realize that Jared had asked him a question.

"What?"

Jared cleared his throat.

"I asked if you wanted to get coffee." When Jensen didn't answer right away, Jared motioned with his head to the path, his hands full with Harley and Sadie's leashes. "It's right on the way out."

Jared wasn't flirting. He wasn't even smiling. If anything, he looked exhausted, and not from jogging. Jensen was sure that if he could handle looking at himself in the mirror long enough to actually see anything, he'd look tired too. He shrugged.

"Sure."

Jensen offered to walk one of the dogs, but Jared said that he could handle them; after that, they just breathed and walked, nothing complicated. Jared had been telling the truth; there was a small coffee vendor just outside of the park. They ordered and paid separately. It didn't take long to finish and soon they parted ways without a word.

Jensen tried to figure out when his life had become so screwed up and weird.

He found that he couldn't remember.



There were days when Jensen couldn't move.

Okay, "couldn't" was the wrong word; Jensen was well aware that his body was fully capable of rolling out of bed and walking around the apartment. Still...there were days that even that small expense of energy seemed colossal. So Jensen stayed in bed; he had plenty of sick days to spend.

Jared was talking to him again, and he never brought up their disastrous first date. It was like it had never happened, like it was all just a bad dream. Jensen knew it wasn't a dream

because Jared didn't joke with him anymore, and if he did laugh, he acted like it was an accident.

That, and Jensen never remembered his dreams. Well, nightmares.

Jensen's phone chimed from the bedside table.

He ignored it in favor of remaining absolutely still, paying attention to his breathing and how his heartbeat seemed as lazy as Jensen was. Then again, Jensen had a tendency towards the dramatic, according to Steve.

When his phone chimed again, he grunted and slapped at the side table. His phone bounced onto his mattress and Jensen squinted against the electric light. He had two new texts.

*I tried to make your snicker doodle recipe for my friend Chad. They turned out terrible.*

*Can't tell if it's the recipe or me.*

Jensen might have been reading too much into it, but the second text felt like a dig at Jensen. He sat up, frowning as his thumbs flew over the keys.

*Aren't you at work?*

The reply only took seconds.

*Yeah, but they let me use the kitchen. Now I've got a bunch of failed cookies.*

Jensen could bond elements and recite poisons and antidotes in his sleep, but his everyday logic sometimes took a vacation. He could have just texted Jared that maybe if wasn't such a lousy cook, he wouldn't be so confounded by a simple recipe. Or, if he wanted to go for the "nice" approach, than he could have simply replied with a frowning emoticon.

Instead, Jensen got dressed, brushed his teeth, and went to the farmer's market. He bought all the snicker doodle ingredients and it was as though as soon as he paid for the hand-churned butter, the glass doors of the hospital were sliding open and he was stepping inside.

Jensen froze as the insanity of what he was doing caught up with him like a runaway train. He began to turn around when he heard softly twinkling bells, and then a hand closed over

his shoulder. Jensen sucked in a breath and he whirled around, irrational panic overwhelming his body.

Misha held up his hands, a charming smile on his face.

"Whoa. Just saying hello." Misha bowed. "Hello."

The bags in his hands were too heavy and his heart was beating too fast for Jensen to get a grip on what was going on. That, and a male nurse had just bowed to him like that was completely normal.

"Hi." Jensen looked at the closing glass doors. "I, uh, shouldn't—"

"What's in the bag?" Misha peered in without waiting for permission and lit up at the contents. "Oh, did Jared tell you to come in for another shot at the cookies? I've been seriously craving some. Come on, I'll show you our floor."

Jensen found himself being led into an elevator; Misha tapped his foot, each beat sprinkled with a merry jingle. When the doors opened again, Jensen was overwhelmed by the smell of rubbing alcohol and the painfully bright fluorescent lights. Misha waved at people Jensen didn't know, other nurses and doctors, and then Jared was coming out of a room.

In his jeans and white coat, he was like a pin-up. Jared turned, Misha's name on his lips, when he saw Jensen. The carefree smile that Jensen had imagined before their first date vanished, replaced by a worried crease between his eyebrows.

"Jensen?" It was times like those that reminded Jensen why he didn't go out and try to meet people anymore. "What are you doing here?"

Misha must have figured out that Jensen was a freak because he didn't say anything; he just rocked back on his heels so his silver bells chimed. Jensen's arms ached from holding the bags and he should have excused himself, said he was sorry, but his brain betrayed him.

"There's nothing wrong with the recipe." Jensen lifted the bags a little. "I'll show you."

Jared's frown deepened, and Jensen wished he'd never found the energy to get out of bed. His face itched, he hadn't shaved, and he knew that his eyes were red and had dark circles under them. He probably looked awful. Misha cleared his throat, a bright smile illuminating his stupidly handsome face.

"The kitchen is free, right?" When Jared directed his frown at Misha, the Bohemian snorted. "What? I'm hungry."

Jared put his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, okay." Those hazel-green eyes shifted back to Jensen and his bags. "But I'm leaving Chad with you because he seems to think that he's my only patient."

Jensen nodded. What Jared had said was perfectly reasonable.



Chad Michael Murray, better known as "The CMM," was a professional blogger who claimed to be a voice for all underground artists. He found Adele before anyone else and he'd had a huge following ever since.

He'd also broken his ankle. Jared said that Chad had helped his grandmother move a bookshelf but it toppled and Chad had managed to get her out of the way before it crashed down on his ankle. Chad said he broke his ankle while trying an expert Kama Sutra position with "a hot chick with the biggest tits you've ever seen." Jared said that Chad was lying, and Jensen wondered: What kind of douchebag lies about saving his grandmother's life?

"Do you think a girl's tits affect her singing?" Chad scratched at the golden stubble on his face, squinting at his iPod as Jensen closed his eyes and focused on measuring the flour by feeling the weight of it in his hands. "I mean, what if they inhibit her ability to breathe deep, to, you know, belt it? Maybe she could if all that tit wasn't getting in the way."

Jensen grabbed a serving spoon that would have to cut it as a mixing utensil and poured in the eggs. He didn't mind the ache in his arms if it was for cooking.

"I mean, it's not like guys with big dicks can't sing. Usher is a great example, that man's cock is a masterpiece." Jensen sampled the cookie dough. It was delicious. "If Beyoncé had a dick, it would be massive."

The next step was shaping the cookies and quickly mixing the glaze that he'd drizzle on later. Jensen liked cooking because it was exactly like chemistry; everything had an order,

an equation where the end result was, when Jensen was the one solving it, delectable. He liked that he could follow a set of directions and have a successful result.

With all the things that Jensen constantly did wrong, the few things that he could do right were something to be savored. Some people practiced deep meditation; Jensen cooked.

Chad's grating voice faded into silence, and Jensen lost himself in the best batch of snicker doodle cookies to ever grace the stark and neglected hospital kitchen. He felt like a conductor directing the heat, the flour, the sugar, all of it working together to make something beautiful.

He was finally in control of something.

The timer let out a merry ding and Jensen bent his knees, his hoodie wrapped around his hands in order to protect them as he pulled out the cookie sheets. He slipped them on the counter and heard the strangest thing.

Applause.

Jensen turned, confused, to see Chad, Misha, Jared, and a crowd of kids all clapping. Chad crossed his arms, his good foot bouncing on the ground.

"That was grade-fuckin'-A shit right there."

Jared rolled his eyes.

"Chad, *language!*"

The blogger's mature response was to flip Jared off, making the kids giggle. Jensen knew his cheeks were bright red, his neck and ears all pink and splotchy. When he spoke, his voice was high and cracked all over the place.

"I didn't know you were watching."

Misha wagged his eyebrows, his ankles ringing.

"We weren't at first, but then..."

He winked and Jensen kind of wanted to die. He looked to Jared for help, and Jared had a strange, sheepish expression.



"You're, um..." He scratched the back of his head. "You're really good." Jared cleared his throat. "You didn't even use measuring cups."

"I don't need them," Jensen said quickly. "I know how the right amounts feel."

Jared's mouth was doing some weird thing like it really, really wanted to smile. Before Jared could respond, a little girl with her arm in a cast tugged on his jacket.

"Can we have cookies now?"

Whatever expression Jared had been contemplating allowing his face to make was gone when he looked down at his patients.

"You betcha."

Children surrounded Jensen, and he felt like a king or a deity who they all revered. Jensen wrapped the cookies in paper napkins, handing one out to each child so he could do a quick estimation of whether there were enough for seconds. He met Colin, a boy who'd broken his leg and needed to get used to being able to walk with it again. Then there was Anna, who'd lost an eye and had to adjust to her new depth perception. Jensen felt like an asshole, giving the kids cookies when they deserved a whole lot more.

Chad reached for another cookie and Jensen slapped his hand away. He didn't feel that bad for Chad.

After all the cookies were gone and the crumbs were cleaned up, Jensen allowed himself to take Chad's seat. Chad kicked at Jensen with his uninjured foot.

"Asshole, get out of my seat."

Jensen watched Jared's hand shoot down and pinch Chad's side, making the blonde shriek.

"You need to be on your feet anyway."

Chad sneered but did head off, his crutches clicking against the tiles; Jensen listened to him mutter as he hobbled away.

It took Jensen a few seconds to realize that he was alone in the kitchen with Jared. Jared watched Chad go with a tired smile, and then he turned to Jensen. It was like all the air had

been sucked out of the room; suddenly, it was impossible to breathe as Jensen jumped up from his chair to get to the sink.

"I'll, um, start cleaning up."

Hot water sloshed into the metal mixing bowl and Jensen couldn't find a sponge. He reached for the soap, but it was gone, where did it go...?

"Here," Jared had the soap and a wadded-up paper towel in his hands, "let me help."

Jared rolled up his sleeves, white suds gathering between his fingers, and helped clean. Jensen hated that his heart stuttered every time Jared's shoulder brushed against his. He hated that Jared's arms looked fantastic, subtle muscles under tan skin, and he hated that he wanted Jared to like him.

With the two of them, it took no time to clean up at all.

"Don't you work today?"

Jensen jumped a little at Jared's voice.

"I called in sick."

"You're sick?"

"No." Jensen didn't want Jared to think that he'd been feeding the kids germ-infested treats.

"No, I just didn't really feel like going in."

Jared had been drying his hands, and when he looked at Jensen, his lips were curled into a crooked smile. It wasn't easygoing; in fact, it made Jared look tense, but like he was truly trying. Jensen's stomach clenched at the sight of it.

"Well...thanks for coming to make cookies."

Jensen shrugged, wiping his hands off on his jeans.

"Anytime." Jensen grabbed his bags. "How does your weekend look?"

Jared walked him to the elevator, and Jensen wondered if he was doing it because he wanted to, or because he had to. Jared pushed the down button for him, rocking back on his heels.

"Probably just microwaving a few mini pizzas and watching the game." Jensen's breath tripped because—well, because microwaving anything for nutritional sustenance was blasphemy in his and Steve's apartment. "What?"

"Nothing." Jared raised his eyebrow and Jensen sighed. "That's just gross."

Jared laughed.

"Yeah, well, I can't cook."

The elevator opened and Jensen stepped inside. He hit the button for the lobby. Jared raised his hand, not really a wave but more than Jensen had hoped for. He returned the gesture just as the doors closed, the taste of snicker doodles still on his tongue.



Revolution Pharmaceuticals was an independent company that was in no way affiliated with any government. Their goal was to heal and relieve pain for all those who were ill. That was on the website and was on every pamphlet.

What the general public wasn't aware of was that tucked away in a cabinet in an underground lab, there were medications that would easily have fit into a dystopian novel. In order to understand how to cure the chaos of deterioration, the knowledge of how to harness it was necessary. Jensen was the mastermind behind most of the formulae, little bottles full of death and pain. His personal collection of homemade poisons.

Jensen stood before the white vault in his lab. Only his personal ID card would open it up. In there, in that cabinet of doom, was a path to some of the greatest discoveries in modern science. For every pill that induced seizures there was a pill to prevent it. For every dose of joint deterioration, there was relief for arthritis.

Green eyes swept over the collection to find that one was missing.

A drug that induced retrograde amnesia should have been there, right on the end next to the orange pills that dissolved bone marrow.

It was gone.

Jensen hadn't opened the vault in years; he never had the need to. He'd finished developing the symptom for the memory loss cure three years ago. He didn't have a new project yet—but his first step was *gone*.

He was out of the labs and into Kripke's office in a matter of minutes. He hadn't made an appointment, as the secretary kept shouting at him, but Jensen didn't have time for appointments. He closed the door, and Kripke looking up from the call he was on. He took in Jensen's shortness of breath, light perspiration, and flushed cheeks and turned back to his phone.

"I'm going to have to put you on hold." Kripke pushed a button and hung up on whoever he was on call with, immediately giving Jensen his undivided attention. "What's up?"

"One of my poison samples is gone." Jensen wrung his hands, panic growing in his chest. "I know you know what I'm talking about because you know everything. The retrograde amnesia pills are *gone*."

Eric frowned and immediately began typing away on his computer.

"When was the last time you checked them?"

"I don't know." Jensen ran his fingers through his hair. "A long time ago, it took a while to get past the memory deterioration and to find a way to measure it. But only I have the access to the vault, why would I give it away—?"

"Ah, according to the records, before today, you accessed the vault just over three years ago. In your report, you said that you were getting outside analysis. The personal code belongs to..." Kripke's fingers flew across the keyboard, each click making Jensen's shoulders tighten a little more. "Christian Kane."

Jensen's vision was overcome with the color red and he was already out the door when Kripke called after him.

Corporate and research never mixed. There was no need to, but that didn't mean that Jensen didn't know where Christian's office was. He stormed past another flustered

secretary and slammed the door behind him. Christian was putting down his phone, and his eyes widened once he saw Jensen. He opened his mouth but Jensen spoke first, not interested in hearing any of Christian's bullshit.

"Where's my sample, asshole? Whatever 'research' you've been doing for the past three years is over."

Christian's mouth was slack; he fumbled on his bookshelf, removing a binder and reaching into the empty space. He took out a pill bottle and Jensen snatched it out of his hand. He inspected every detail; it looked like it hadn't been touched in a long time, a thick layer of dust coming away on his fingers. Christian stood up, looking like he wished he was closer to Jensen's height.

"Look, Jensen—"

"Shut up." Jensen made a small sigh of relief as he pocketed the pills. "Just...shut up." Jensen glared at Christian. "I don't know how you got into my lab, I don't know how you got into the vault; but if you ever do it again I swear it will be the last thing you do here at Revolution." Razor-sharp silence impaled Christian Kane's office. Jensen slowly caught his breath, not once looking away from the lawyer's gruff face. "Are we clear?"

Christian nodded.

"Yes."

"Good."

Jensen was so angry that he could barely speak, let alone string an eloquent sentence together. Jensen stalked out of Christian's office, his head throbbing and his fingers itching for Excedrin. He was still shaking when he got back to the lab, and Mike was talking to him, asking him what was wrong, but his voice sounded too soft, like he was underwater. Everything was muted and the world was numb as Jensen put the pills back in their rightful place, next to all the other nightmarish concoctions that needed to be locked away.

As soon as the vault's door closed, sound and feeling came back into the world and Mike was shaking him by the shoulders.

"Fuck, Jensen, are you okay?" Mike's hot breath washed over Jensen's face and his automatic response was to recoil. "Dude?"

"I'm fine." Jensen gently but firmly pushed Mike away. "Took care of it."

Mike didn't believe him, Jensen could tell. But Jensen's phone chimed, and he didn't have time to back up his claim as he checked the message.

*So my microwave broke. Looks like I'm having PB&J for dinner.*

Jensen was still trembling and a weird rush of impulsiveness overtook him, as if all that released rage had given him a weird emotional high. He typed back quickly.

*Or I could come over and make you a pizza.*

If the pills hadn't been missing and if Jensen hadn't almost dissolved into a panic attack, he never would have sent such a forward and possibly flirtatious text. But he was coming down off all that stress, and he didn't give a shit about anything that wasn't in his lab. For example, Jared's weird former-hatred-turned-hesitant friendship with him. His phone chimed in his hand.

*How does 7 sound?*

Jensen thought it sounded great. It only took a few moments for Jared to text him his address.



An anger high couldn't last forever, and by the time Jensen knocked on Jared's apartment door, it was completely gone. He swallowed nervous bile and wondered what he'd been thinking when he'd offered to make Jared dinner. Then the door opened.

Jared was in sweats and a t-shirt, instantly making Jensen feel overdressed in his dark jeans and button-down shirt. Jared coughed awkwardly, moving to the side.

"Come on in."

Jensen stepped forward, trying not to panic when Jared closed the door behind him. Jared's apartment was...nice. Not that Jensen had thought it would be bad, but it was...discreetly upscale. The furniture was modern; each room looked like it was about to be

photographed for a catalogue. For someone who didn't cook, the kitchen had a lot of expensive tools that were almost as good as Steve's.

It was very bizarre and Jensen wished he could ask where Jared had found the money to buy all of it. Instead, he set his bags down on the black marble countertop and turned back to Jared.

"Do you want to know how to do this?"

Jared sat down on a barstool, his elbows resting on the table.

"You can tell me, but I'm a lost cause when it comes to cooking, so don't expect me to be able to recreate any of it."

"Okay."

Jensen took out the pre-made dough and began to roll it out. He felt Jared watching him, an itching prickle on the back of his neck, but Jensen found that if he just kept thinking about the pizza, he didn't notice it as much. So he lathered on the oil and diced up the mozzarella and tomato. He sprinkled on bits of sausage and feta with green peppers and slid it into the oven, feeling confident in his creation. He closed his eyes, picturing the heat bringing all of the ingredients together—

Cold water washed over Jensen's hands and Jared wasn't sitting down anymore; he was right next to him at the sink. This time was slightly less awkward than it had been with the cookies. Jared washed and Jensen dried, and by the time everything was put back in the cupboards and refrigerator, the pizza was done.

Jensen had just checked up on his masterpiece when the front door opened.

"Hey, Jared, I'm home—oh God, are you *cooking*?" Megan wheeled into the kitchen and Jensen almost smacked himself in the forehead when he realized why Jared's apartment seemed so big. The doorways were wider than usual, giving plenty of room for a wheelchair to pass through. Megan stopped once she saw Jensen. "Hi, Jensen."

"Good evening, Megan." Jensen opened up the oven, his hands protected by potholders as he slid out the rack that the pizza was on. "Don't worry, I'm doing the cooking."

Megan inched forward and her eyes widened. She grinned.

"Oh, Jared, you've got to keep him."

Jensen felt his cheeks get warm and Jared pinched his little sister's side.

"Keep running your mouth off and you won't get a slice."

"Aw, come on! Since when is that fair?" Jared couldn't keep a straight face, and a beautiful, genuine grin cracked out across his lips. "Asshole." Megan smiled and quickly wheeled back out into the hall. "Hurry up, *Parks and Rec* is on!"

Jensen swiftly cut up the pizza and put some slices on the two plates Jared was holding. He wanted to ask if he should leave, and Jared's mouth twisted into an awkward shape like he was thinking the same thing. There were only two plates out and it wasn't like this was a *date*, or that they were even real *friends*. Jensen opened his mouth to ask when he was cut off by a cheery shout from the living room.

"I saved you a seat, Jensen!"

Carbon dioxide whooshed out of Jensen's lungs. The decision had been made. Jared nodded toward the cupboard.

"Plates are up there."

Jared left, his bare feet quiet against the wood floor. Jensen got a plate, slid two slices onto it, and followed the soft footsteps and the sound of the television.

Megan was eating her pizza. She hadn't lied; there was a spot on the couch for him. Megan was still in her wheelchair and Jared was right on the edge of the couch, closest to his sister. Jensen sat down and Megan smacked her lips, her tongue darting out to catch a small piece of feta at the corner of her mouth.

"Wow—Jensen, this is really good!" Megan grinned. "I don't think I've had pizza this good in my life. Isn't it good, Jared?"

Jared nodded, mumbling around a slice.

"S'good."

Jensen smiled a little.



"Thanks."

The show started, and Jensen took a bite of his pizza as Amy Poehler ran away from a possum. They were right; it tasted delicious.



Steve was stirring a creamy squash soup when he decided to instigate an intricate plan designed to ruin Jensen's life. Jensen was helping with the bullion cubes when Steve bumped his hip against Jensen's.

"So...who's the new boyfriend?"

Jensen dropped the cubes into the mixture.

"I don't have a boyfriend. Do you want Cheddar or Havarti?"

"Havarti, Jensen, come on." Steve laughed and Jensen cut up cubes of the cheese. Steve kept stirring, sprinkling parsley into the pot as he peeked out from under his wild blonde hair. "Come on, you can tell me. You stay out late, you're texting all the time—"

Jensen rolled his eyes and dropped the cubes into the pot.

"I don't—"

"You do." Steve was right; Steve noticed these things. "So, who is he?"

Steve brought up the wooden spoon, and Jensen gave it a taste. Creamy without being too rich; it really was a perfect soup. As Jensen let the taste settle on his tongue, he tried to think of a way to avoid the issue of talking about Jared. Because he did go out late, in order to make Jared and Megan dinner, and sometimes after watching the newest *Parks and Rec* or *Modern Family* episode... Sometimes he'd fall asleep. Megan used to be the one to wake him up by throwing a pillow at him if Harley or Sadie didn't start licking his face.

Lately, though, Jared was the one to gently rouse him around eleven or eleven thirty. It was disconcerting for several reasons. One, whenever Jensen fell asleep at the Padalecki house, he never dreamed. It was the deepest sleep he'd gotten in years, and he could always feel a

protest on his tongue when Jared shook his shoulder to wake him. Two, and the most conflicting reason, was...just the atmosphere. Megan really liked him, and Jared... Well, Jensen wasn't sure.

When Jared woke him up, he'd slide his fingers over his shoulder, pull back, and say, "Jensen, wake up," tired but only slightly hoarse. In the dark and on a soft couch, it was strangely intimate, and Jensen wished, for once, that his life could be like a movie and he could just lean in and put the stupid, probably one-sided sexual tension to rest.

Alas, Jensen was a pussy who let the cycle keep going and going.

"I'm not really—he's not my boyfriend."

Steve snorted.

"Right." Steve ladled soup out into three bowls. "Well, let your not-boyfriend know that he's invited to the big potluck this weekend."

Jensen's spoon slid off the rim of his bowl and sank into the soup with an uninteresting "plop."

"What—since when are we having a potluck?"

"Since it's been too long since we last had one." Steve took the other two bowls out to the main table. "And...I want Chris to come."

As if waiting for the cue, a key slid into the door. The door opened and Christian strode right inside. Jensen had to give Christian credit; he didn't react when he saw Jensen. He just walked up to Steve and kissed him, a sweet greeting, but Jensen saw that Christian kept his eyes open. Steve pulled back, a lovesick smile on his face that made Jensen avert his eyes.

"You're just in time."

When Christian smiled, Jensen wanted to roll his eyes, but he distracted himself by fishing his spoon out of his soup. They all sat down. Christian occasionally shot Jensen cautious glances, but he didn't say anything as they ate amicably together.

Steve reached for Christian's hand under the table.

"Jensen and I are having a big potluck party this weekend. You can come as long as you make somethin'" Steve winked. "Jensen's going to bring his boyfriend." Jensen opened his mouth to protest, but Steve beat him to it. "Excuse me, not-boyfriend."

Christian's eyebrows shot up.

"Sounds interesting."

Jensen ate more soup; it was either that or tell Christian to go fuck himself, and then he realized that he'd have to let Jared to know...even though Jared probably had no interest in going.



Jensen, of course, waited until the last minute to extend the invitation. He ran through all the possible outcomes over and over until he finally had to go ahead and get it over with so his headaches would lessen.

He knocked on Jared's door, his bags weighed down with flour and milk.

"Who is it?" Megan's voice carried through the door.

"Uh, it's Jensen."

The door opened and Megan wheeled back.

"Jared's got a late shift." Jensen closed the door behind him and followed Megan into the kitchen. "He said to eat without him." Harley and Sadie ran around Jensen and he smiled, letting them lick his fingers as he put the bags on the counter. Megan's usual crooked smile was missing that day and she wasn't insisting on a Modern Family marathon. She took a Coke out of the refrigerator and snapped it open as Jensen reached past her into the cold shelves and began unloading the leftovers. She took a long sip, licking her lips when she was done. "I'm starving."

Her slight smile didn't reach her eyes. Jensen slid the leftovers right into the oven and cleared his throat.

"Want to help me with dessert?"

Five minutes later, Megan was using an electric mixer to make whipped cream while Jensen stirred the batter. Harley and Sadie ate out of their bowls. Normally, Megan played some music while she helped him and it was a challenge to see who could keep the better beat, even though they both knew that Megan always won. She didn't play any music that night.

"I didn't even know you could make whipped cream." She rotated the mixer, frowning when it hit the side of the bowl. "We usually just buy it, you know, in a can."

"After this, you'll never go back." He poured the batter into a pan and took dinner out of the oven. The cake replaced it and he set their dinner out to cool. "How was your day?"

The whipped cream was coming out nicely, but it still wasn't done.

"It was okay, I guess."

Megan shrugged, focused on her task. "Prom bids went on sale today." Jensen's eyes widened slightly. He wasn't sure what to say; his prom had been fairly standard. There had been dancing, laughter, and loud, boisterous declarations of friendship. It was nothing special because to him, it seemed ordinary. His eyes dragged over to Megan's wheelchair. He couldn't picture having the same kind of prom that he had in a wheelchair. He felt nauseous, disgusted, because if anyone knew how to have a great time, it was Megan—

"I have a date, Jensen."

When Jensen glanced up, he saw Megan staring at him. His stomach clenched.

"Oh, um, that's good, right?"

Megan's lips curled.

"Yeah." She huffed. "I think it's just because he doesn't want to dance." Her lips curled crookedly at the statement, like she wanted to try and make something that wasn't funny work. She pulled the mixer up; sure enough, the whipped cream was done. "But he's cool. He's in all the musicals."

Jensen put saran wrap over the whipped cream and slid it into the refrigerator. They ate at the counter, leftover penne with Steve's special vodka sauce. Megan smacked her lips together, stabbing the pasta with her fork.

"I never did musicals in high school." Jensen wiped his mouth with napkin. "I didn't like the idea of trying out in front of people."

Megan perked up, a refreshed smile on her face.

"You can sing?"

Jensen never had a chance to back out of it; his pink cheeks and terrified expression gave him away. That was how they ended up in the living room so that Megan could grab drumsticks and toss Jensen a phony microphone. Jensen's hands were already sweating and his throat was dry. She booted up the Xbox 360 and Jensen cleared his throat.

"Wait a second—"

Megan rolled up to a set of what Jensen figured were supposed to be the game's version of drums. She fiddled with a controller as Paul McCartney's and John Lennon's voices filled the living room.

"Come on, man. Everyone knows The Beatles." She twirled the drumsticks in her hands like batons. "I'll let you pick all the songs." Jensen tried to speak but all that came out was a feeble wheeze. Megan's smile fell. "You don't have to." Her eyes dropped away from Jensen. "Jared barely has time anymore...and neither of us is any good at singing."

Even an idiot couldn't have believed that the perfect and practiced pout that graced Megan's lips was genuine. Jensen sighed and gripped the microphone tightly.

"A Hard Day's Night." When Megan didn't respond, her mouth agape, Jensen shifted awkwardly. "You said I could pick any—"

After a few quick hits on the fake drum set, the song began and Jensen took a deep breath.

The first two songs were shaky, but as Jensen kept going, his breath wasn't as hard to catch and suddenly the tunes weren't hard to carry at all as his confidence came back to him. He found himself swaying to the beat and smiling as he sang, and the only time he stopped was to take the cake out of the oven.

He ended up closer to Megan so that they could share the microphone. They were both belting out "Hello Goodbye" when Jared came home; neither of them heard the key slide into the door or his bag gently thump to the floor.

Right when Jensen let out a “woo-hoo,” Jared cleared his throat and started clapping.

The microphone in Jensen’s hand dropped to the floor and rolled away. He turned to find Jared smiling, wider and brighter than he’d ever seen before. Jensen’s face was hot and his throat was tight; thankfully, Megan saved him.

“We made cake!”



Jensen watched Jared enjoy the cake as Megan complimented him, and it just fell out of his mouth.

“Steve, he’s my roommate, is throwing this big potluck dinner this weekend.” Both Jared and Megan looked up from their desserts and Jensen’s mouth became bone-dry. “We do a few every year, and—well, a bunch of us and our friends all get together and make something.” Jensen pushed a dollop of whipped cream around on his plate. “You two, uh, you’re welcome to join us this Saturday.”

Megan cheered, “We’d love to,” right as Jared murmured, “I don’t cook.” They looked at each other and Megan slapped Jared’s arm.

“God, Jared, we can *buy* something.” She shot Jensen a quick glance. “That would be okay, right? If we just got something from the store?”

Jensen almost laughed at how concerned Megan was.

“That’s fine. You don’t even have to bring anything if you want.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Megan waved her hand, taking another slice of cake. “We’ll find something.” She smiled, so bright and youthful that she made Jensen feel old. “Who’s your roommate?”

Jensen’s lips twitched.

“He’s a master chef, his name is Steve Carlson.”

Megan shrieked and Jared smiled a little.

*"Steve Carlson? Your roommate is Steve Carlson?"* When Jensen nodded, Megan's mouth dropped open. *"Oh my God!"*

Jensen wrote down his address and the time. Megan was hyped up, and Jared's hand squeezed Jensen's shoulder. Jensen said that he looked forward to seeing them both there; Megan was enthralled, and Jensen was pulled down into a hug. When he pulled away, he caught Jared's eyes—and Jared smiled. Not a whole one, no, not even close, but Jared's lips quirked up ever so slightly at the sides. It was ghostly, almost a mirage.

Jensen smiled back all the same.



*August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009*

Blurred ceiling tiles gradually came into focus. For a short moment, a horrible flicker of a moment, Jared believed that all that had happened, all that glass and *screaming*—it was too horrible to be real. But as the world faded back into view, Jared felt dull pain; he looked down.

His legs were in casts and a small plastic tube tickled his nose, an uncomfortable, itchy flow of oxygen filling his lungs. The more awake Jared became, the more he hurt; he panicked when he realized he was alone in the room.

*"Megan!"* Jared jerked his wrists free of the wires that clung to him, making the monitors by his bedside shriek. *"MEGAN!"* A nurse rushed in, trying and failing to reconnect all the wires and tubes that had been attached to Jared. He grabbed her wrist. *"Where's my sister?"*

The nurse's eyes were wide; she looked like a frightened animal. She turned toward the door.

*"Doctor!"*

Jared let her go right as the doctor came in, an older fellow with deep wrinkles in his face.

"Mr. Padalecki, I need you to calm down."

"Please," Jared sucked in a breath, "just tell me where my sister is."

The doctor had a grave smile on his face.

"Your sister is in the ICU, Jared."

Jared hiccupped, his eyes burning.

"She's alive?" The doctor nodded and Jared relaxed back down against the pillows, hot tears rolling down his cheeks. "Thank God... Just—thank you." Jared blinked past his tears in time to see the doctor's smile twitch. "What? What is it?" Jared swallowed past the hot stone in his throat. "Tell me."

The doctor told him in that detached, sympathetic voice that Megan had barely pulled through and that her spine had been badly damaged. The long and short of it was that Megan would never walk again. As soon as that sunk in, Jared's head flopped to the side as he shut out the rest of the world, remembering the face of the man who'd ruined his sister's life.

He wasn't sure how long he was there; he felt like he was in Purgatory. Jared couldn't be sure when he received his first visitor; all he knew was that the man stepped out of the shadows. The only reason Jared turned to look at him was the strange, expensive-smelling cologne he wore. He had dark hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and he kept rubbing a scrubby beard that spoke of stress and negligence. He had a suitcase and cufflinks that glimmered in the moonlight. Jared's lips were cracked and when he spoke, he sounded like a corpse.

"Are you my lawyer?"

"No." The man's gravelly, country voice fit him well. "I'm not your lawyer, I represent the man who—"

Jared's fists clenched.

"Get the fuck out," Jared snarled. "He ruined our *lives*. My sister will never walk again!"



The lawyer flinched, a barely visible twitch in his shoulders. Jared felt a dull throb of surprise. The lawyer took his time to gather himself and pulled a file folder from inside his suit jacket.

"We'd like to settle this out of court." Jared opened his mouth to speak; no amount of money could ever equate—"Your student loans, Megan's education, it will all be taken care of. Living arrangements and all medical care will also be provided for the duration of both your lives."

The violent rage that ignited in Jared's body settled into a vicious simmer. He licked his lips, gripping the hospital sheets tightly.

"Is he some millionaire?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"No, but he is very important to the company he works for."

Jared watched the man fall silent, waiting. The electric monitors blipped and whirred. He felt the bruises and cuts on his face, and he could already tell he'd have to go through years of physical therapy. It would be hell; it would hurt and it would cost so much money, and Megan—she deserved all best and more. Jared promised her the best.

"If I say yes, she's going to get the best doctors."

"You both will." The lawyer approached the side of the bed. "It will all be taken care of." He laid out the papers out on Jared's lap, and the pen he provided was heavy. "Any questions?"

Jared sighed; sure enough, everything the lawyer said was present, right on the still-warm contract. The face of the driver was still fresh in his mind, and he swore he'd never forget *that face*. He looked up at the lawyer as he handed him the signed contract.

"What if there's a problem?"

"There won't be. But, just in case there is," the lawyer produced a business card, "here's my card."

Jared's fingers ran over the raised lettering. When he lifted his eyes back up, the man was gone. Jared looked back down at the card; even in the dark, he could clearly read the name.

*Christian Kane.*



2012

The people at the farmer's market were starting to treat Jensen like a prince, he had given them so much business. So when he showed up on Saturday morning with Christian and Steve to help carry the bags, they practically held a festival of customer service as the three of them took away pounds upon pounds of food.

Even though Christian was there, Jensen couldn't help but be excited about the potluck. Sure, he wasn't usually a fan of all of Steve's friends cramming into the apartment until two or three in the morning...but this time it was different; *Jared and Megan were coming.*

Jensen was making tortellini for Megan and pastrami melts for Jared. As Steve watched him slave away over every spice and addition, he smirked like the smug asshole he could be.

"Right. He's *totally* not your boyfriend."

Jensen ignored Steve and kept working. He hated crowds and could usually only deal with Steve's potlucks for about an hour and a half before he shut himself up in his room. The funny (not so funny, actually) thing was that Jensen used to be a pretty rockin' host; there were videos of Steve and Jensen laughing, smiling, and being *funny*, charming the whole room.

Steve was the only funny and charming one now; he had been for the last few years while Jensen had become a shut-in.

Officially, the potluck started at seven-thirty but it was really an all-day affair. Steve and Jensen cooked and cleaned up the apartment all afternoon. Christian helped, not that Jensen cared. He was more concerned with the perfection of the pastrami.

By a quarter to eight, the apartment was packed. Loud laughter and drinks sloshing in glasses bombarded Jensen, and Jared wasn't there yet. Jensen kept checking his phone

even though he knew Jared hadn't texted him. Maybe Jared forgot. Maybe he decided not to come. Maybe extremists who only targeted physical therapists were holding him hostage for cheaper medical care. Or maybe Jensen needed to relax and take a breath—

The doorbell rang.

Mike jumped up from the couch, spilling his neon green cocktail on Vicki's toes, but Misha distracted her with a kiss. Mike whooped.

"Yes! More parties!"

Steve nudged Jensen. It was completely obvious how anxious Jensen was.

"Holy shit." Steve's voice was a little slurred from Mike's freaky concoctions. "This better be him."

The drunken Californian shoved Jensen toward the door. Jensen's heart thudded hard in his chest and he bit his lip as he turned the cold knob and pulled the door open.

Megan threw her arms up.

"Hi, Jensen!" Jensen bent down automatically to accept her hug, and she laid a big kiss on his cheek. He laughed, startled, and Megan bumped Jensen's toes with her wheels. "Get out of my way, I've been fasting to make room for tonight!"

Jensen obliged the young woman and watched her zoom past him, Mike welcoming her into the party. Jensen looked back up at Jared, who seemed a little baffled at his sister's zest. He had a package of pigs in a blanket.

"Um, are these okay?"

He looked nervous. Jensen nodded quickly.

"Yeah. They're great. Do you mind if I spice them up?"

The truth was that Steve would tease Jared if they weren't at least a little dolled up. Jared's lips twitched.

"Whatever you have to do, man."

Jensen waved Jared inside.

"Come in. You can come with me in the kitchen or hang out with you—"

Jensen turned, to make sure Jared was still there, that he wasn't a hallucination. Jared was still behind him, but he'd stopped. He had a strange, almost nauseated expression, and Jensen was reminded of their failed first date. The smoldering anger was back and Jensen began to panic. He quickly followed Jared's gaze in time to see Christian turn away, coughing around the finger food Steve had made.

Christian looked up at the two of them in the middle of his coughing fit and Jensen was bombarded by the notion that Christian was going to somehow sabotage this entire night and scare Jared away. Jensen grabbed Jared's wrist.

"Jared? Is something wrong?"

Jared tore his eyes away from Christian.

"No." His voice was ragged and he smiled, too wide to be real. "Show me the kitchen."

Jensen was glad he could get Jared away from Christian, and he took him into the kitchen.

Stainless steel pots and pans hung from racks on the wall and spices tied up in bunches swayed down from the ceiling. Jensen took a deep breath, letting the aromas of basil and mint leaves calm him slightly. Jensen opened the package of little hot dog treats and spread them out on a platter. He took Steve's homemade olive oil down from the counter and drizzled it on top.

Jensen placed the olive oil down on the counter and reached up, not needing to look as he grabbed the dried basil leaves. He crushed them in his fist, sprinkling them over the snacks. With a small laugh, Jensen blew the remaining bits of basil from his palm and watched them swirl out in the air like sand in the wind.

"See?" Jensen was smiling as he began to turn around. "It's not that hard if you—"

Then Jensen was unable to speak because Jared had snuck up on him and *kissed* him. Jensen's eyes were wide, and he couldn't help thinking about the bits of basil still on his one hand and spots of olive oil on the other.

Then Jared brushed his thumb against Jensen's cheek and ran his tongue across his lower lip, and Jensen didn't care what was on his hands anymore as he closed his eyes and leaned up into it.

Jared mumbled something onto Jensen's mouth and backed him up against the counter, his arms framing Jensen as he kept on kissing him like he just had to get it out there. Jensen had just started to believe that Jared kissing him was actually happening when Jared's teeth caught Jensen's lips between them and he *sucked*.

Jensen didn't bother trying to smother the whimper that hummed past his lips. His fingers tangled in Jared's long sleeves to pull him closer so that Jensen could suck on his tongue—

Wolf whistles made everything come rushing into focus as Jared pulled back. Mike was in the doorway with Megan, his fingers drumming on the back of her chair. Megan was giggling and there was glitter in her hair, and judging from the sparkles crammed under Mike's fingernails, it was his fault.

"You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves." Mike spoke in an airy southern falsetto, batting his eyelashes and fanning himself. "Children are present!"

Megan snickered and gave Mike a high five as he wheeled her away, back out into a party, but not before she twisted around to wink at Jensen.

"Keep on having fun!"

The kitchen became quiet after that. Jensen's lips still buzzed and his head was spinning when he opened his mouth.

"Took you long enough."

Jared made that weird laugh like he'd been tricked into giggling. He shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets.

"You seemed really happy."

Jensen was surprised to find that Jared was right. He was happy. Jensen smiled, and he lifted himself onto his toes to give Jared a quick kiss before taking the platter of fixed-up pigs in a blanket out to the party.

Loud music and conversation made the walls pulse and people grabbed at Jensen to say hi. He still had a smile on his face; over the crowd, he saw Jared take a piece of the pastrami. Jensen made his way over to Jared and Megan just in time for her to stutter out a flustered hello to a humbled Steve. Steve shook hands with Jared and kissed Megan's bright red cheek. Christian's tense smile dissolved and turned real when Mike turned on Daft Punk.

Then the party really got started.



"I hate you so much." Mike's forehead rested on the white lab table. "Scratch that, my liver hates you."

Jensen looked up from his notes from JJ and raised his eyebrows.

"No one told you that you needed to drink four and a half bottles of wine."

Mike whined, clutching his head.

"But it was *there*." Grey-blue eyes peeked out from behind pale fingers. "Did you get lucky? Sure looked like it in the kitchen."

Jensen snorted and rolled his eyes.

He had woken up on Sunday morning with a text from Jared that it had been a great party. He remembered Mike flinging fistfuls of glitter and Misha and Vicki showing everyone how to do the rumba. He remembered kissing Jared a lot. He also remembered passing out in his room from complete exhaustion at around four in the morning.

Steve had been knocked out on the sofa and Christian had been half on the floor and half on a chair. Jensen had taken the day to recover. Apparently, that hadn't been long enough for Mike, who had been sleeping in their tub.

"That's none of your business."

Mike clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Prude." Mike stretched his arms but still didn't pick his head up from the table. "I'll bet he's a monster in bed." He paused, giving Jensen time to write a few equations in the margins of JJ's notes. "I'll bet he could fuck this hangover away."

Jensen dutifully repelled all thoughts involving Jared fucking Mike. Eventually the end of the day came to them both. Jensen's routine had mutated and adapted so that he took a different subway on Monday evenings, the one that rode to Jared's apartment. The door was always unlocked, and Jensen let himself in.

That particular Monday, the television was on, a movie with Drew Barrymore and Adam Sandler playing on mute. Jensen dropped his laptop bag onto a chair, not paying much attention to the program.

"Jared?"

"In the kitchen." Jensen turned away from the Hawaiian rom-com and, sure enough, Jared was on one of his barstools, doing the crossword with a bowl of grapes keeping him company. He looked up, some spots of pen ink on his fingers. "Hey."

Jensen smiled a little.

"Hey."

They hadn't really talked about the potluck. Sure, there had been more than one kiss, but Jensen was too afraid to ask what it meant. Were they in an open relationship or was it exclusive? Hell, did Jared even *want* a relationship, or had he made out with Jensen out of boredom? Questions buzzed loudly in Jensen's mind, a hysterical hum that he was barely able to push deep down into himself. Jared was tapping his pen on thirty-two across.

"Is Steve a lightweight?"

"No." Jensen stole a few grapes, and Jared pushed the bowl to him. "He loves wine so he's got a strong tolerance. Why?"

Another grape rolled onto Jared's tongue.

"He was very drunk when he talked to me at the party." Whatever thirty-two across was, Jared seemed to have figured it out. "A lot of our conversation was about you."

Warm, itchy dread pooled in the bottom of Jensen's stomach. He immediately thought of every single embarrassing story that Steve loved to pull out whenever possible. Jensen did his best not to let his worry show as he took in a stabilizing breath.

"What's the damage?"

Jared filled in eighteen down, chuckling.

"Nothing too bad." Jensen took another grape. Jared still had a few more clues left, and Adam Sandler was playing a ukulele. Jared put his pen down, a faint smile on his lips. "He said that ever since we started dating, you've been getting better from a slump you've been in." Jensen's throat was too tight to deny it. Jared didn't look away; he didn't clam up. "He's really worried about you."

"He shouldn't." Jensen's voice was absolutely wrecked. He sniffed and tried to discreetly blink the burn out of his eyes. "I'm not—I'm *fine*—I'm just *fine*."

Jensen *knew* Steve worried. He saw it every day, in every lunch he made for him and every time he asked if Jensen needed anything at the store when Steve was going. He was—he was the best and greatest friend a person could ask for. And Jensen could see him waiting for Jensen to tell him something, to ask for help. But Jensen never did because for the life of him, he didn't know what was wrong.

Steve had been waiting for years. He was still waiting.

Jensen reached for more grapes, but the bowl was gone. Instead, his hand bumped into Jared's outstretched fingers. Before Jensen could snatch his hand back, Jared grabbed it and gently directed him away from the bar stools. Jared's thumb brushed over Jensen's fluttering pulse.

The marble countertop was cold against Jensen's lower back as Jared kissed him, his fingers tugging on Jensen's shirt. Jared's tongue pulled soft whimpers from Jensen's throat and when Jared pulled back Jensen was dizzy.

Jared's dark eyes held Jensen's and he smiled.

"Do you want to...?" Jared kissed Jensen again, and it was the calmest, most easy-going kiss yet. It still made Jensen's breath catch but at the same time it wasn't pressuring. It made Jensen's shoulders relax until he was melted against the counter. Jared pulled back a few



centimeters. "It's up to you. I'm fine with just... making out for the rest of the night but we could... uh..."

Jared nodded to the stairs, the ones Jensen had never been up, and blushed bright red. Jensen nodded, his heart stuck in his back of his throat.

"Yes." Jensen squeezed Jared's hand. *"Please."*

Jensen followed Jared, squeezing his hand tightly as he ascended the stairs. They arrived on a big open second floor; Jared pulled Jensen toward an archway. There wasn't a door, but the angle of the arch gave the room privacy. Mystery.

Inside, to the left, was the biggest bed Jensen had ever seen. Black sheets were spread over it, and Jensen swallowed the nerves making him shake. The lights were dim and Jensen needed some reassurance that Jared meant what Jensen thought he meant; Jensen turned to try to kiss him, but he missed and kissed the corner of his mouth instead. Jared let out a breathy huff and captured Jensen's lips properly.

Each hint of teeth, every swipe of Jared's tongue made everything delightfully blurry. Jensen wasn't sure how long they had been kissing; he didn't care. He really liked kissing Jared. Then Jared's hand slid between them and squeezed Jensen's erection through his jeans.

Jensen bucked up into the pressure, a startled moan escaping him. Jared's hand flinched. Jensen panted against his lips.

"Sorry." Jensen was still tingling. "It's been...awhile."

Jared's hot breath mixed with Jensen's.

"Really?" Jensen nodded, not trusting his voice to speak. "Me too. It's been...a few years."

Jensen couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Me too."

In the movies, clothes seemed to fall off the actors like petals off a flower. It was elegant and graceful, and everyone always hit his or her mark. Real life, as Jensen knew, was never like the movies. Jensen undressed himself, peeling off his shirt to toss aside. His pants got caught around his ankles and he fumbled, struggling not to trip as he toed off his socks.

When he got up the courage to look over, he saw Jared stepping out of his pants. The first thing he noticed were spider-like scars on Jared's back and right shoulder. They were pale white, thick at their centers and spreading out across his tanned skin to hair-thin taper points. They were deep, and Jensen didn't have to be a doctor to know that whatever had happened to Jared had been *bad*.

Jared turned, looking like a model. Jensen didn't move his eyes away fast enough, and Jared's mouth did something weird. Jensen opened his mouth to ask if Jared was okay, to ask if it hurt, but he didn't have the chance before he was being kissed and pushed down on the silky bed.

These kisses were different. These kisses hurt. Jensen's lips burned but he gave back as good as he got. Every bite, every push, Jensen was determined not to fall behind.

Fingernails dug into Jensen's hips and he was pulled up until they were grinding against each other. Jensen had to tear his mouth away, crying out because it felt so good, so savagely good, and Jared's lips landed on Jensen's neck. Jensen arched his back, one hand scratching down Jared's back as the other scrambled to get a grip on the freakishly soft sheets.

A few deep breaths later, Jared pulled back, his arms on either side of Jensen's shoulders.

"You, uh, want to, um—"

Jensen's chest heaved as he struggled to vocalize his semi-coherent thoughts.

"How do you usually do it?"

Jared laughed, but then he sat up, his nails scratching Jensen's skin a little too hard to be playful.

"I'm—I top."

So did Jensen, but he was so hard that he didn't care. He'd bottomed a few times before.

"Cool." Jensen sat up too. "That's fine. Let's do this."

Jared was already reaching for the bedside table. He tossed a condom to Jensen and snapped open the lube, slicking up his fingers. Jensen couldn't tear open the condom; his hands were shaking too much. Jared smiled and took it out of Jensen's fumbling fingers.

"Relax." Jared's hand closed around his erection while the other hand crept up his thigh. "Just...relax."

Deep breaths and a calm mind were the key to relaxation. At that moment, Jensen couldn't hope to meet either of those requirements. He only nodded as Jared swiped his thumb over the tip of Jensen's cock just as he pushed his index finger inside.

It didn't hurt as much as it had the first time Jensen had tried bottoming, but there was still a level of discomfort present. Jensen's erection twitched and started to flag, but Jared noticed and didn't let him, twisting and stroking until Jensen was pink all over, flushed and trembling. One finger became two, and the process repeated.

Jared's mouth brushed against Jensen's lower stomach, making him jump and Jared chuckle. The third finger pushed in and Jensen clenched down, his voice thick and sticky in the back of his throat.

"Oh God."

"Almost there." Jared's smile was part sheepish and part something else. A mixture of sadness and bitter anger. "Don't want you to get hurt."

Jensen managed a shaky smile.

"I know." He swallowed sharply, sweat beading on his forehead. "Thanks."

As if in retaliation, Jared's fingers crooked up—and the uncomfortable not-pain was gone, replaced by *oh my God what was that do it again please*. Jensen's back arched, his body twisting to get away and at the same time push closer to the electric sensation. Jared's eyebrows shot up and his lips curled like he couldn't help but be proud. Bastard.

"What, no one's ever found your prostate before?"

Jared's fingers dragged over it again and the noise that came out of Jensen's mouth was a high, pleading keen that he'd later deny ever having made.

"No." Jensen sucked in a breath. "No, I guess not."

Jared pulled his fingers out and Jensen sighed, a little disappointed at how empty he felt. He propped himself up on trembling elbows to see Jared tearing open the condom packet without a problem, rolling it over his cock. Jared slicked himself up and his eyes met Jensen's, his hands on Jensen's hips, but he didn't move. Jensen nodded; of the question, he couldn't be sure, but it was the right answer.

Jensen had to close his eyes at first; it was such a bigger pressure, much more than three fingers. It made Jensen's throat tighten and he couldn't quite catch his breath. Jared kept pushing forward, and even his arms were shaking. When he was completely inside, Jensen let out a wobbly exhale.

Then Jared began to move, slowly at first, then fast, brutal, but so, so *good*. It burned, and then the pain faded away into a rhythm that was savage but also satisfying. Jared pulled Jensen up so his back was against the cool headboard, the angle sending fiery sparks down Jensen's spine as his nails scrambled to hold onto Jared's gorgeous back.

Hot, sticky fingers closed around Jensen and tugged him in time with each thrust—and then it was over. Jensen barely got out Jared's name before he was coming, warmth splashing up on their stomachs. And still, Jared didn't stop, even as Jensen floated higher and higher with each thrust, his entire body hyper sensitive.

It was bizarre, like a dream—or so he suspected, if Jensen could remember what dreams were like. He felt wonderfully detached, pulling at Jared's back to push him deeper inside. Jared's grunts became heavy and guttural, and in the end they almost sounded like sobs. When Jared came, he went absolutely still before gently pulling out. Jensen couldn't move, watching as Jared tied up the used condom and tossed it in the trash. Jensen's brain was still dialing back to the rest of his body; in his head, he was saying, "I really like you. I mean, like-like you," and "maybe I could even love you." When he opened his mouth, though, a whispered question came instead.

"Can I stay?"

Jared must have gotten a towel at some point because he dragged it over Jensen's stomach.

"Yeah." Jared helped Jensen lie down, moving him out of the wet spot. "Yeah, you can stay."

Jared turned over, his back to Jensen. All those scars, those spidery scars twisting across his skin burned themselves into Jensen's retinas. Before he fell asleep, Jensen touched them, his fingers dragging over the skin.

Jared flinched.



Sometimes Jensen liked to surprise Jared by bringing him lunch. He supposed it was an acceptable thing to do for the person you hung out and had sex with on a regular basis. He didn't bring flowers, just sandwiches, and it wasn't long before Jensen's bags had gotten pretty heavy because the food was never just for Jared.

Misha liked caramelized banana, and the kids had different cookies that were their favorites. If Jensen weren't spending the night at Jared's house, he'd stay up all night cooking. It was for his new friends, and besides, it was better than waking up from a nightmare.

He had a lot of bags that day, and the little boy who liked oatmeal raisin cookies, Ryan, shrieked.

"Jensen's here!"

Children came out of their hospital rooms on crutches, in slings, and in wheelchairs. Jensen's arms were just big enough for all the hugs he was giving. He asked them how they were doing, and when he smiled, it didn't hurt and he actually meant it.

Oatmeal raisin, snicker doodle, white chocolate chip, peanut butter, and pumpkin cookies were all taken out of Jensen's bags and he handed them out to the smiling children. It felt good, and he didn't mind that his knees popped and ached when he stood up, immediately greeted by a grinning Misha.

"Hey, Jensen." He pulled him into a tight hug, making Jensen trip, his feet tangled with all his bags. "It's so good to see you."

Jensen smirked.

"Yeah, yeah, I didn't forget about you." Jensen fished out a white container. "I got four bananas done up for you."

Misha's completely rational response was to plant a big sloppy kiss on Jensen's cheek. Jensen jumped back, wiping at his face as Misha bounded away, bells accenting every step.

People knew him at the hospital and it felt good. Jensen's hand was on the doorknob to Jared's office when he heard a voice that made teeth grind.

"He's not here today." Jensen turned around to find Chad, sans crutches, typing away on his phone, a purple scarf draped around his neck. "Already checked."

Chad didn't look up at Jensen, his fingers flying over his fancy phone. Jensen wished that his bags didn't feel so heavy and awkward, now that the sandwiches had nowhere to go.

"Oh." Jensen shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah." Chad's phone chirped and the typing continued. "It's his special day with Megan. He'll be back tomorrow."

Jensen knew that it wasn't any of his business, that Chad was more focused on his stupid phone than the person he was talking to. Still, the curiosity gnawed away at Jensen like a disease.

"Special day?"

Chad exhaled like Jensen was so annoying for not knowing.

"The anniversary of the accident." Before Jensen could ask, Chad was telling it all. "It was totally fucked up. Megan had a big soccer tournament, so Jared was driving her to school since that shit is far away. And some fucker hits them head on. Bam! Settled out of court, left Megan in a wheelchair." Chad clicked his tongue as Jensen's eyes widened. "I hope that piece of shit, whoever it was, got what they deserved."

For a moment, the entire universe was silent. And then...everything came back. All the nightmares, all the memories that had been erased—it all came back.



*August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009*

Everyone had gone upstate to Steve's mom's house. Jensen had loaded up the car with all the food he made and headed out. It was the second to last episode of *Top Chef* and Steve

had made it that far. Mike, all of the cool chefs in New York City, everyone was huddled around Steve's mom's television, holding their breath.

When the host said Steve's name, everyone cheered and Jensen might have cheered the loudest. Mike passed out neon pink cocktails and Jensen encouraged people to dig into the food. They ate, they drank, and Steve was on the phone from California with his crying mom.

It was a beautiful night full of great food and even greater company. The air tasted sweet and when Jensen slid his keys into his car, his stomach was beyond full and he had a smile on his face. He was so happy for Steve, and he couldn't wait for the big finale next week.

The radio was on. He had both hands on the wheel at ten and two. He remembered yawning; he blinked. He was almost home—

All it took was three seconds of dozing behind the wheel to turn a great night into a nightmare. Jensen blinked—and then his eyes stayed shut—and then his seatbelt was digging into his shoulder and Jensen was thrown back into the world as his head hit the steering wheel.

The radio clicked in and out, a warbled version of a Frank Sinatra song melting out of the speakers. Jensen blinked slowly as he unbuckled his seatbelt. His eyes stung a little and when he blinked, spots of red grew in his vision. Jensen raised his hand, dragging his fingers so that he flicked the blood away from his eyes. His legs hurt a little and he had to push hard to open his car door. A cheery tune was playing and Jensen realized his phone was ringing; he answered, pressing it to his ear.

"Hello?"

His own voice seemed so far away, like he was speaking into a pipe.

"Jensen?" It was Kripke. He seemed more high strung than usual. *"Are you okay? Your Onstar says you crashed your car."* Jensen breathed out; sure enough, his car was a wreck. He was about to confirm it with Kripke when he saw what he'd hit. A green car. Two people inside. *"Jensen! Jensen!"*

One was a girl, and Jensen could barely see her in the blood, all the blood. The driver, a man—he was unconscious, Jensen's heart was hammering as vomit bubbled up in his throat, and Jensen wretched. Wet half-digested food splattered against the pavement. He heaved

and heaved, and he didn't know what to do and Kripke was screaming through the phone  
—

No. Kripke wasn't screaming. It was the man inside the car, he was awake—and he was *screaming*.

"Megan! *MEGAN!*"

Ambulances came. Jensen hadn't called them but they came anyway, and they had to cut into the car to get the girl out while the man kept screaming and screaming her name. Jensen kept praying that he'd wake up, but he never did. A hand fell on his shoulder and a very tired man was at his side. He had long dark hair, frizzy and all over the place. His suit was wrinkled. It looked like he had just woken up.

"Dr. Ackles?" Jensen nodded. "I'm Christian Kane. I represent Revolution Pharmaceuticals." The girl had been taken away, and the man fell silent. The paramedics had him on a gurney, and his head turned to the side and he stared *right at Jensen*. His hazel eyes pieced through him and no one, *no one* had ever looked at Jensen with so much loathing and contempt before in his life. "Dr. Ackles? Jensen?"

Hot tears spilled over Jensen's cheeks and he couldn't catch his breath. Christian had to help him into a sleek black car. Once he was inside, Christian said not to worry, that Revolution was going to get them to settle out of court. He said that Jensen was valuable. He said that it was okay, that he needed to keep breathing. He said that the best doctors were going to take care of the girl. That the man, he'd be just fine.

"I'm not." Jensen's voice was broken. "I can't—I can't do it, I can't—How could I—?"

Jensen covered his mouth to keep from throwing up all over Christian's car, even though he was sure nothing was left. How could he live with himself, knowing what he'd done to those people?

When Jensen caught Christian's eyes he saw they were bright, that he wasn't just a suit. Christian had a heart; he knew what Jensen had done was unforgivable. Jensen wasn't hurt badly, just cuts across his head and a bruised ankle, but who knew how those two would end up.

And then it hit him.

"Go to Revolution."



Christian frowned.

"What?"

Jensen knew what he had to do.

"Go to Revolution. If you want me to stay alive, you'll take me to Revolution!"

So they went. Christian smiled his way past the guard, and Jensen had his photo ID on him at all times; that night was no different. Christian's shoes were soft against the white tiles as they went into the labs, and Jensen swiped his way inside until he was standing before the vault.

All of his creations were there. His poisons, his dark shadows that helped guide him to cures. Rows upon rows of bottles filled it, and Jensen reached for the newest addition that had just finished testing. He closed the vault, entered Christian's ID number, and left.

"What's in there?" Christian kept eyeing the bottle as he drove Jensen back to his apartment. "What does it do?"

They were pale green capsules. Jensen led Christian into his kitchen.

"If I remember what I've done..." Jensen wiped his eyes. "I'll never be able to live with myself, I'll—I won't be able to." Christian kept staring at the bottle. "This is a poison I developed. One of these erases the most recent twenty four hours of memory."

Christian didn't shout at him not to do it; he didn't even get out his phone to call Kripke. Instead, he lifted his eyes to meet Jensen's.

"Are you sure it's going to work, Dr. Ackles?"

Jensen nodded.

"Call me Jensen. And yes. It will work. The only thing I'm not sure about is what will happen to me. In theory, I'll just forget. No side effects."

The marble counter was cold. Christian poured water into a glass.

"I guess you can call me Chris—but you won't remember me." Jensen laughed, hollow and sick. Chris smiled, a five o'clock shadow darkening on his face. "Before you take that, you need to think of how to cover your tracks."

Jensen liked Chris. He was smart. Jensen sniffed and reached for a pad of paper and Chris gave him a pen.

"The people I—" Jensen broke off, but Chris understood. "They—they shouldn't ever be without a home or medical care. Education—they should get it all. Whatever they want." Jensen jotted down Steve's phone number. "This is Steve's number. He's my roommate. Tell him I was working too hard at the labs, I collapsed, and I have a few minor cuts, no big deal. You call him; tell him he doesn't have to come down, that you worked out all the insurance and stuff with Revolution. Keep in touch with him, he'll want you to." Jensen smiled, his eyes hot and his heart heavy. "He's a good friend."

Christian nodded, discreetly wiping at his eyes as he put the paper in the pocket.

"Got it." His shoulders were square, like a bodyguard. "Anything else?"

Jensen was shaking as he opened the bottle, one pill rolling out into his palm. He slid the bottle over to Christian.

"If I see them, I might...remember." Jensen sniffed, tears streaming out of his eyes. "I signed them out, said you were using them for research. I shouldn't notice that they're gone for a while." Chris was just a blurry figure in Jensen's vision. He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed it with water. He found Chris's hand. "Thank you."

He never heard Chris's answer. He was already fading out, exhausted, hating himself, and hoping that when he woke up, he wouldn't remember any of it.



2012

Jensen clutched the toilet bowl and Chad stood behind him, whining like he didn't understand why Jensen was still there, still in existence. Jensen saw blood in the toilet bowl,

thanks to his thin stomach lining, a subconscious reminder of how terrible he was. Chad saw it too, the flecks of blood on the porcelain and on Jensen's cracked lips.

"Um...dude, that's not right. You should see a doctor."

He'd known. Jared had known when he first walked into Vicki's and seen him, he—he must have thought he was imagining things, he must have thought that Jensen was some sort of sadistic asshole when he didn't understand why Jared hated him so much on sight.

Jensen shoved past Chad, running down the hall.

Those scars. Jensen had put them there. Megan—he'd put her in that wheelchair. He'd ruined them; he'd slept with Jared and—

For what? For a chance at love?

How could anyone ever love Jensen after—?

Jensen rubbed his eyes, rubbing at all the tears and the blood in his mouth, and when he took his hands away he was at Revolution. His phone was ringing; it was Jared, and Jensen didn't answer. What would he say? "Sorry for hitting your car head on"? "Sorry for taking away Megan's ability to walk"? "Sorry for being selfish enough to induce my own memory loss"?

Sorry for being born.

Mike wasn't back from lunch. He always took two hours instead of one. Jensen overrode the lock so Mike wouldn't be able to come back inside. Jensen turned to look at the vault, and his phone kept ringing, ringing, ringing.

Jensen reached for the pills he'd created, the little green pills that had taken it all away. Or had they? Night terrors, insomnia, depression, unexplained self-loathing, vomiting and nausea—they'd plagued Jensen ever since the accident.

Deep down, his subconscious had known. Jensen was almost proud. And his phone kept ringing.

Twenty-four hours wasn't enough. They would come back, his symptoms; they would remain, they might get worse. Jensen toyed with a green pill. No...his poison wasn't good

enough. He'd have to rework the equation, make it more potent. This time, Jensen didn't want to remember anything.

Jensen kept spitting up blood, but he let it spot up on his sleeves. He began building something better, something new. This time, Jensen would get it right. His phone stopped ringing. There was a pounding at the door. Mike and Kripke were there, shouting at the glass. Their voices were muffled. Kripke kept trying to unlock the door but it wouldn't work.

Steve had known something was wrong, and he couldn't help. Chris—Chris, who'd understood and done everything that Jensen had asked—he'd only wanted to be a friend and Jensen hadn't allowed him—

With the new concoction, Jensen would poison his brain's ability to create and store memories. The pounding stopped, and his phone didn't ring. Instead, it chimed once.

A text. The little electronic ding that had started it all.

Jensen sniffed, wiping his eyes. He opened it.

*I'm here.*

Jensen immediately looked up and sure enough, Jared was at the door. He looked tired and gorgeous. He looked sad, miserable. Jensen's mouth fell open, but all that came out was a dry croak. Jared spoke, and even through the glass, his words were clear as a bell.

"Open the door, Jensen." Jared blinked, and a few tears spilled out of his eyes. "Please."

Questions of how, what, and why roared in Jensen's head. His hand shook on his notebook, and he couldn't—no, why would Jared even want to look at him—

There was a shy knock on the glass. Jared just watched him, and when Jensen didn't move, Jared knelt down, like he was trying to get something out of a pocket or a bag. Then he rose up, even taller, and he flicked open a lighter.

Revolution Pharmaceuticals valued their employees and safety. They had one of the best fire detection systems; there was one in every room and outside of every door. And Jensen, in all his genius, hadn't thought of that.

Water burst down from the sprinklers as the lights turned red; a shrill alarm went off, and all the doors opened. Jensen laughed.

"So smart." Jared, Kripke, and Mike ran in. Jared's hands were on Jensen's arms. "You really think on your toes."

Jared was saying something, and Jensen closed his eyes, blacking out.



When Jensen was seven, his dog Cody was hit by a car.

The driver never stopped and Jensen remembered crying, "How could they do that? Just hit him and drive away?"

How could they just run away when Cody had been all alone?

He remembered hugging Cody's body to him as his mother ran her fingers through Jensen's hair. She cried and she kissed Jensen's temple and she said, "Accidents happen."

Accidents happen. Don't cry, Jensen. Accidents happen.

Soft bells woke Jensen up. He cracked his eyes open just in time to see Misha's back disappear out the door. Jensen sniffed, and when he looked around, he saw that Jared was there. He was slumped over in a chair next to Jensen's bed, sleeping. Jensen began to sit up; maybe if he was quiet enough, if he could get to the door—

"Don't even think about it." Jared sat up, his eyes red around the rims. "You stay put."

Jensen immediately sank back down into the pillows. Jared didn't get out of the chair, and Jensen didn't get out of the bed. His fingers drummed against the sheets.

"Why are you here?"

"Because you threw up blood in the toilet and on Chad's shoes, and then you locked yourself in a goddamn lab." Jared massaged his temples. "Scared the crap outta me."

The coppery taste was still in Jensen's mouth.

"Yeah, but..." Jensen closed his eyes. "I hit you—I hit you that night and—"

Jensen couldn't finish. He desperately wanted to leave, to get as far away from Jared as he could.

"I wanted you dead for the longest time." Jensen opened his eyes and Jared was staring at him. "I never forgot your face, every inch of it. I'd think about you before I went to sleep; I hated you so much." Jared smiled a little. "And then—I got to know you. You...didn't sleep, you hated to laugh too loud, but you were so kind." Jared laughed. "I hated how much I liked you."

Jensen felt heavy and hollow.

"I'm sorry." He'd never meant those words more than he did at that moment. "Jared, I'm so sorry—"

"I know." Jared leaned his head against the bed. "Steve told me what you were like before."

Funny charismatic, *happy*. Not a freak.

Misha came in with milk because Jensen's stomach lining was a mess. Vicki brought flowers and muffins for when Jensen could eat them. Mike brought him the notebook and phone that Jensen had left in the lab. Eric and JJ brought him an order to take a three-month vacation. The kids had a small mountain of "Get Well" cards, many with the addition of "thank you for all the cookies."

Steve showed up right as Jensen finished the last of the kids' cards. He was out of breath, a harried Chris behind him, and he shook as he hugged Jensen. It hurt and Jensen hit Steve's back, but that just made Steve squeeze him harder.

"You scared me, you son of a bitch." Steve's voice cracked. "Chris told me everything; you pull anything like this shit again and I'll—I'll—"

He never finished. He didn't have to. Chris didn't meet Steve's eyes when he pulled back. Chris just shook Jensen's hand. He didn't say anything and neither did Jensen, but Chris smiled a little, tired but relieved, before he left with Steve.

Jared stayed the entire time.

Megan was the last to come in. She wasn't smiling brightly like she used to, and she rolled right up to the side of Jensen's bed. She didn't say she forgave him and she didn't tell him she hated him. Instead, she grabbed his hand.

"When do you check out?"

A few minutes later, Jensen walked out of the hospital. Megan was on one side of him, Jared on the other. Night had fallen over New York City. Jared bumped Jensen's hand with his fingers.

"Where are you headed?"

Chris and Steve were probably having makeup sex, and even if they were at Chris's place, Jensen didn't want to go home. He sighed as cabs passed them by.

"I don't know."

Megan looked up at him.

"Want to come over? We were right in the middle of an intense Scrabble game."

Jensen was shocked as he nodded dumbly.

"I'd love to."

Megan led the way and Jared's fingers slipped into Jensen's. Their steps fell in time with each other.

Megan's one wheel was squeaking a little and they were running low on fresh fruit. They had a few episodes of *Parks and Rec* and *Modern Family* saved. Jensen's pajamas were still in the hamper. Jared's lips brushed against Jensen's ear, whispering softly.

Jensen smiled.

The End