Till Death Do Us Part

by romachebella

Summary

Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, both younger sons to influential, competing mob families dominating the city, seem to have their lives laid out before them: learn something useful, and become a part of the family business. Both of them rebel against their parents’ ideas and demands, though, in different ways. Jensen has left his family and home, after a seemingly final fight with his father Alan, head of the Irish Mob. After having lived for years in the deepest South American jungle, rarely ever getting in contact with civilization, he comes back to the north when his older brother Josh is killed in a car accident, just like his mother many years prior. Jared is attending college, studying law like his parents expect him to; but he’s dreaming of becoming an artist, not wanting to join the unsavory business his Polish mob family is involved in. Unknowingly of their respective “heritage”, they stumble into a relationship that’s as desperate and passionate as it is complicated by their families’ policies.

Imagine "Romeo and Juliet" mixed with The Song of the Nibelungs, and you’ll know that this is not a story with a happy ending.

„The last word of love is ... good bye“ (C. Bryant)

Notes
A big thank you to Wendy for organizing the BBs (what a gift for writers, artists and readers alike!)
Thanks mangacat for finding the time to do art for the story, despite your super busy schedule!
Here is the link to her art:

http://mangacat201.livejournal.com/99381.html

All the characters are pure fiction. I only borrowed their names together with their handsome faces. I apologize for turning the Js families into power-hungry mob bosses - I´m sure they are delightful, warm people in real life!
As far as the city goes, I made it all up using maps and pictures of different cities.
Jensen´s illness does exist. I´m not a doctor, so my knowledge about it is limited to what I found online and what my (slightly bewildered) family doctor could tell me about heart diseases. I apologize if I got it all wrong!

PS: You might find out while reading that I really like snow.
The car was half turned on its roof, heavily leaning on the left side, trapping whoever was in the driver´s seat inside; steam crawled through the folds and creases the car´s hood had been formed into in the crash. The right front wheel was still spinning, reminding of a helplessly turned over bug´s scrambling legs, until it finally slowed down and stopped. Another car´s tail lights vanished in the darkness, already far away.

„Hello? Sir? Can you hear me?“

Jensen knelt on the frozen ground, head almost touching the thin crispy layer of snow covering the grass, and peered through the shattered window. A dark form was crumpled against the deformed door, rather tall, but he couldn´t see the man´s face; he reached through the window´s frame gingerly, avoiding the shards, and touched the man´s side.

„Hello? Sir? My name is Jensen...I´m here to help. I saw your car topple over...“

No response. He pressed his hand against the body, and felt the ribs´ faint movement under the smooth jacket (too thin, Jensen thought, why would anyone drive around in summer clothes in this weather...he could practically hear his Grandma´s voice, „You ain´t gonna leave the house without your hat and scarf, mister! I don´t wanna sit at your bedside hearing you cough your lungs outta your chest for another night in my life!“).

He couldn´t help the smile tugging at his lips remembering the glaring contests his granny used to have with him and his siblings ... her always being the winning team, so to speak.

A faint moan from the driver wiped the smile and the memories away.

„Sir? Hello? Can you hear me?“
Another moan, and the driver stirred a little, obviously trying to free his trapped arm; a gasp and the abrupt stop to the movement told Jensen the man was hurt, and injured for sure.

„Don´t move“, he said, keeping his hand on the back in front of him, trying to calm the trapped man as good as he could. „I´ll call an ambulance. Don´t move!“ he repeated, when the man started to shift again. A suppressed sob came from the hidden face somewhere inside, and Jensen felt a violent shiver run through the body. His stomach constricted. Oh God, what if the man needed immediate help...it would take the ambulance at least half an hour to get out here, and sure, he had done all the first aid courses when he got his driver´s licence, but.... and then temperatures were still falling, what if...

Ambulance. Focus, man. He scrambled to his feet, and fished his cellphone out of the back pocket of his jeans. No reception... great. He tried 911, cause shouldn´t this number work like – everywhere? But all he got was exactly nothing. He went to his truck and back to the crashed sportscar in a circle, holding his phone up like they did in a freaking comedy – still nothing.

„Shit“, he mumbled. „Shit, shit, shit!“

Another moan from inside the car brought him back on his already soaked and frozen knees again.

„Hello? You OK in there?“ Heavy breathing was all he got as a response. SHIT. It sounded like the guy was in pain, real pain. „Help....“, he heard a strangled voice, „...hurts...“, and his heart cringed, because it sounded ... young, too young, almost like a scared child.

„I uhm...I tried to call the ambulance, buddy, but – uhm – I´m sorry, I can´t get any reception out here. Guess you´re stuck with me...“

„Don´t ..leave...please...“

„I´m not gonna leave you, OK? I´ll get you to a hospital.“

Think. You can do this. You´ve seen the videos. Done the training – well. Once. On a rubber dummie.

„I´m gonna try to get you out through the passenger door“, he said, his palm against the man´s back. „OK? I´m here, just changing over to the other side of the car, OK?“

„OK... don´t leave...“

„Hey, I´m here. Not going anywhere, you hear me?“

He quickly pressed his palm against the man´s jacket, then hurried over to the other side of the car. Dammit. He was tall, but he wouldn´t be able to pull anyone out the door, much less a fully grown injured man.

Think, Jensen. You´re supposed to be the smart one in your family, so – think, for God´s sake!

He looked back at his own car, an older Ford pick up, slightly battered, but trustworthy in weather like this. Maybe.... he hopped into his driver´s seat and drove the truck side to side to the crashed sports car lying on its flank as if taking a nap.

He climbed out through the passenger door, and on to the back, bending over the other car´s passenger door from his elevated position. Perfect. There still remained the problem of getting the other man out of his mess of a car, but at least he could see him now, and assess the damage.
“Hello? You still with me? It’s me, Jensen...“

“M’here...“ the faint voice mumbled, and Jensen squinted into the dark. *Idiot. What do you keep an emergency kit with you for all the damn time!* He opened the metal box fixed to his truck’s floor, and fished out the flashlight. “You better work now”, he mumbled, and flipped the switch. He sighed. Thank God for small mercies.

He turned back to the other car’s window.

“Hello? I got a flashlight and I´m gonna have a look at you now..don´t freak out, OK?“

Yeah, tell that to yourself, he thought. Steeling himself for whatever he’d see, he aimed the beam of light down into the car.

He couldn´t hold back the sharp intake of air when he saw the driver’s face. The hair, longish and dark, was plastered to the side of the man’s face, blood dripping down the cheek and ear, soaking the guy’s shirt and jacket. His right arm was buried under his own body, shoulder twisted into a weird angle, and it looked exactly as painful as the man’s moans had sounded. Jensen let the light wander over the steering wheel – thank God, it didn’t seem to press against the stomach too hard, so maybe no internal bleedings – and looked for the guy’s legs.

“Dammit“, he murmured. No way he’d get the man out of the car with the legs twisted like they were, trapped between the car’s deformed side and the steering wheel’s column.

Or from above, not when he practically had to lift the man up in the air.

*Shit. Shit, shit.*

*Should have listened to Chris after all, and get drunk and maybe laid and return to the cabin tomorrow...*

*But then, what would have happened to the poor guy inside the car? What were the odds of any other car passing by in the middle of nowhere, and actually noticing the wreck? And, all of that, before it was too late, and the man inside had frozen to death or bled out or...*

**THINK.**

Yes. So – no rescue from above. Which left him with only one other option.

„Uhm – hello?“ He returned his flashlight´s beam to the driver´s face, but held his fingers over it to dim it down.

„Uhm – can you tell me your name? I don´t know what to call you..“

„Ja...hh ..h“ The man coughed, and it sounded sickeningly wet. Jensen´s inside churned.

*Fuck. Shit. Fuck.*

„Jay? Your name´s Jay?“

„Jared.“

„Oh. Jared.“ Jensen cleared his throat.

„Listen, Jared...I can’t get you out of this car from up here. You’re too...I mean, I just can’t, OK? So – I’ll try to get your car on its wheels again, all four of them, I mean. Do you understand?“
Jensen waited for more, but the man – Jared – seemed to have exhausted what was left of his energy for now. His eyes were closed, but he could see the way his lips were pressed together, jaw set.

„Jared? I’ll try to bring your car down as gently as possible, but .. Im afraid it might hurt like a bitch. And, I dunno, I – I know it could do even more damage to your body, it´s just – I don´t know what else to do. It´s freezing, and only getting colder by the minute, so – just try to stay alive, OK? No matter how inadequate my rescue methods? Jared?“

He waited for an answer, two, three seconds.

„Ok...just do it.“ It was barely more than a whisper. Jensen nodded.

„Hold on, buddy. I’ll be back.“

He drove the truck away, turning it around and positioning its tail to the wreck´s side. Hooking the tow he kept inside the emergency box around the car´s B column, he then wound it around his truck´s roll bar. Maybe fixing it that high up it would dampen the car´s fall a little – if he managed to drive real slow.

He hopped onto his truck´s seat.

„OK...let´s do this. Baby steps...“, he murmured, and turned the ignition. Releasing the break pedal as if in slow motion, he let the truck move forward inch by inch, all the time watching the other car in his rearview window.

„Come on, baby....“

The tow tightened, and he could feel the resistance the other car´s weight provided.

One more inch...one more...another.

The wrecked car moved, and –

„DAMMIT!“

The car fell. Jensen felt the fleeting urge to jump out of the truck and hold the damn vehicle up with his bare hands. Before he could even react, though, the truck jerked, and swayed; and when Jensen jumped out of his seat, he saw his plan had actually worked – the other car was hanging in the air, just a few inches above the ground, held up by the tow leading to his roll bar.

He ran over to the driver´s side window and peeked inside.

„Jared?“

A whimper was all he got, followed by a moan.

_OK...at least he´s still alive. You haven´t killed him. Yet._

„I´ll set your car down now, OK? Then I´ll get you out. Just a minute, OK?“ There was no response, and Jensen licked his lips nervously.

_You´re pathetic. And you´re all he´s got. So nut up, Ackles._
He managed to lower the car down rather gently, actually, and almost fisted into the air, when he remembered he hadn’t yet gotten the guy out of the wreck.

*Save the celebratory gestures for when you’ve the man - Jared - safe and sound in hospital, dumbass.*

He unhooked the car, drove the truck to the wreck’s driver’s door, and jumped out, winding the tow around the deformed metal of the door. It took him only a short pull with his truck to wrench the door open; a moment later, he was bent over the man inside the dented sports car.

„Jared?“

At first, he seemed to have passed out, which would probably have been a blessing – the following part would be far from pleasant. But then Jensen heard ragged breathing.

„Ok, man.... I´m sorry, but I have to pull you out now. I´ll try to carry you as much as I can, but, uhm.... well, let´s get your legs out first, OK? Then I can maybe take you over my shoulder or something....“

Jensen knew he was babbling. Truth was, he wasn’t sure what the hell he was doing, probably causing more damage than doing good – on the other hand, it was so cold by now they’d both soon just freeze to death if he didn’t get the injured man into his car ASAP. And there always was the possibility of shock – he was surprised Jared hadn’t gone into it by now, to be true.

With the car back on its four wheels again, it wasn’t too difficult to get Jared’s legs free; Jensen took one leg after the other, as gently as possible, and positioned the man’s feet on the frozen ground. „There you go“, he murmured, more as an encouragement to himself than to the other man. „Jared, uhm...can you move at all? I mean – can we get you into a sitting position facing me?“

Well, they managed. Not without Jensen almost getting sick when he realized how much he was hurting Jared; and not without Jared crying out loud when Jensen finally pulled him up and over his hunched shoulders to drag him over to his truck’s open passenger door. Jared was tall; sure taller than Jensen, but lean and gangly, and at least he was able to stumble along with Jensen’s baby steps, until Jensen had him in the passenger seat at last – he’d climbed into his truck with Jared hanging over his back, something he very much hoped he wouldn’t have to do again in his whole life.

„Are you – are you OK?“

He stared down into the blood smeared face, bent over the other man in the confined space of his truck’s cabin. „Jared?“

„Yeah....“ It wasn’t much more than a sigh, but it was a sign of life and consciousness, and Jensen felt more relieved than he’d ever have admitted to himself.

„I’ll lower the back of your seat a little bit...“

Jared tried to cradle his right arm with his left, not quite managing; he seemed ready to pass out any second. Jensen wondered if it would be better or worse if he stabilized the man in his seat with the safety belt, when Jared started shivering. Violently.

„Oh shit“, Jensen muttered. He scrambled to the back seat, frantically searching for the blankets he had always stuffed under the seats, in one of those blue IKEA bags , together with a pillow and a
Jared turned the ignition, and pushed the heating to maximum. Thank God his truck didn’t have one of those super-efficient modern motors not producing any unnecessary warmth; he knew it would heat up pretty fast. Which, considered his hands already felt like frozen, and he couldn’t even feel his feet any more, was not a small mercy.

„Jared? We’re going back to the city now. I’ll bring you towards town and try to get 911 while we’re driving...maybe they can meet us somewhere in the middle...Jared?”

No response; he stopped the truck once he had her back on the road, and scrutinized the younger man’s face. „Jared?”

The other man’s eyelids fluttered, opened at last, and revealed almost blown pupils.

„Fuck.” Jensen didn’t know for sure, but he could remember blown pupils never meant anything good in accident victims. He stared into the face for a second, worrying his lower lip until he pulled blood. „Stay with me, Jared, you hear me? Don’t fall asleep...I know you’re tired and hurting and...but please, just stay with me, OK? I’ll be as fast as I can...“

„K...“

Jensen almost cried when he heard the faint response.

Talk...I have to talk to him, keep him awake...

It was cruel, knowing unconsciousness would free the other man from the pain, and having to keep him from falling asleep nevertheless. He drove, as fast as he possibly could without risking another crash (and wouldn’t that just be a cruel joke of fate), and talked, asked, teased, prodded the other man all the time, sometimes touching him gently when his eyes stayed closed for too long.... he was pretty sure he hadn’t talked that much in his life, ever. Well, wasn’t that one more joke of life. Jensen huffed. „Dammit, boy, don’t be so damn shy. Swallowed your tongue, have you?”

His dad... always so disappointed when Jensen, once more, couldn’t get out a word in front of others, blushing and biting his lips. And now...now he was babbling as if his life depended on it — well, not his own, but maybe the young man’s at his side. The, he realized only now, seemingly VERY young man.

„Jared? How old are you?”

„S...sev’nteen...turnin’...“

„Turning eighteen soon?“

„ysss...“

„What about your family...any siblings?“

Jensen kept driving and asking, telling snippets about his own family, and college, even about his secret dreams... and tried to figure out the young man from the few words he got for answers. By the time Jensen finally got reception on his phone again, and his 911 call went through, he knew that Jared was a middle child with an older brother and a little sister, that he was still in High
School, but graduating in June, and would probably go to law school after summer; that he loved
dogs, and football, and his grandmas´ food; and that he was secretly dreaming of going on a two
months hike through all the National Parks after graduation, but hadn´t found the courage to tell his
parents yet. Just like about his even more secret desire to study arts.

Well, that was Jensen´s interpretation of the one-syllables, grunts and few words he got from the
young man at least.

Maybe you´re reading things into his answers, based on your own experiences...with family, and
fathers especially, and secret dreams.

The operator at 911 had told him which road to take so the ambulance would meet them at the first
possible moment; and sure as hell he saw the blue lights ahead when they´d just hit the deserted
outskirts of town. He pulled over, and stopped the truck.

„Jared? The ambulance is coming. They´ll take you to the hospital and take care of you.“

He´d done a good job keeping the other man awake – barely, but still -, but right now, Jared´s
energy seemed to be exhausted for good. He gave something like a small whimper though, and
Jensen took it for an answer, insides cringing at the sound.

„I´ll be back in a sec, OK? Just making ourselves known.“

He jumped out of the truck, and waited at its side, waving frantically. The ambulance flashed its
lights signalling him they´d seen him, and came to a halt right behind Jensen´s truck seconds later.

The next minutes, everything was a blur of movement and questions and clipped statements,
medical talk and numbers and needles and tubes, Jensen just keeping in the background trying not
to get in the paramedics´ way, feeling useless, until suddenly they were about to roll Jared into the
bus on the stretcher, and the young man, though half out of it already, from pain and exhaustion
and the medication he´d gotten, tried to move his head despite the fixations, frantically rolling his
eyes. Jensen saw Jared´s „good“ hand twitch and claw at the blanket covering his body, and the
young man was definitely trying hard to say something, but failed.

„Wait a moment, John“, the female paramedic held her colleague back. „Jared? What´s the matter?
Are you in any new pain?“

„...jjjnnn...“

Jensen had stepped closer, desperate to see what was happening.

Jared stared up at the young female, panic battling with the drugs and exhaustion.

„Jen....sn...“, he finally choked out.

The paramedic frowned, then she understood, and turned around.

„He´s asking for you, pal“, she said. „Make it quick. We need to get him on a table.“

Jensen nodded, and bent over Jared´s pale, sweaty, still bloody face.

„I´m here, Jared.“ The other man found his eyes, and seemed to relax.

„Don´....go...“, he murmured, already slurring the words. „Don´....leave...“

Jensen was surprised, but didn´t hesitate.
„Not going anywhere, buddy. I´m right behind you, OK?“

„K...“

„See you at the hospital then.“

„.. hh...“

The paramedic touched Jensen´s arm. „We really need to go now“, she said, an apologetic smile on her face. „You´ll be following? I think the police will want your statement anyway...“

„Yeah, sure, I´m – sorry“, Jensen stammered, getting out of their way. He watched them roll Jared into the bus, the female paramedic climbing inside with the injured man, the other one – John, Jensen remembered – closing the doors on them and hopping in at the passenger front seat. Watched the bus pull away from the curb, and speed down the dark street, blue lights flashing across parked cars and shop windows.

Well. He´d promised, so he´d have to go to the hospital, right? Even if Jared probably wouldn´t remember anything ...God, I hope he´s OK, Jensen thought, climbing into his car.

He´s so young...almost still a child. I wonder what he was doing out there in the middle of the night...and his clothes...

Yeah, a young man in full bloom, his face beautiful despite the blood and bruises ...Jensen wondered what it would look like without all the pain distorting the features...those slightly slanted eyes, their color kind of hard to describe, something between green and blue and brown...the boyishly upturned nose, such a contrast to the strong chin, with an adorable cleft just made for ... and then the lips...so kissable...

Oh, come on now. Seriously? You´re drooling over the guy you just pulled out of his crashed car half dead? Go get a therapist, man.

Ok, so he had noticed Jared was good looking, very much so, and had a body that normally would have made Jensen´s mouth water. Well, he was a young man with needs and desires, and he hadn´t had ONE indecent thought while rescuing Jared, not one! No time, and no energy, for that, right? Now, on the other hand...

Jensen felt exhaustion wash over him in a rush, making him stumble over to his truck, and fall onto the driver´s seat with a groan. He looked over at the now empty seat, shuddering at the blood stains on the back and head rest. Something got his attention, a small piece of plastic stuck between the seat and the back; he pulled it out.

A driver´s licence, Jared´s, obviously. A healthy, pain free Jared grinned up at him from the tiny picture. Dimples. Of course he´s got freaking dimples, too....

Then Jensen read the name.

Stared at it .... incredulously first, then with a well known anger building inside his chest.

Of course. He, of all people, had to come across the car wreck of this young man, pull him out and probably save his life. He could already see his father´s face when he´d hear about it. And he would, that was for sure, just as sure as the fact that Jensen´s mother lay rotting in a grave for years now, exactly 7 years that day to be precise. Killed in a car accident, of all things. His father always found out about everything, and especially about the ways Jensen let him..the family...down.
One more disappointment to add to the list ...

The letters began to swim in front of his eyes, and he closed them, leaning his head against the steering wheel, the anger suddenly gone, leaving him drained. Tired. He was so tired of it all.

Jared T. Padalecki, the license read. Age 17, 6’4”, 160 lb.

*You promised him*, Jensen thought. *You told him you’d be at the hospital. You promised not to leave.*

Jared’s eyes, a scared child’s eyes, pleading, fighting back sleep and panic for one more moment. His dimpled grin on the picture.

He banged his front against the steering wheel, once, twice, a third time, until it really hurt.

*This is so fucked up.*

*You are fucked up.*

*Your whole life is just that.*

*Fucked up.*

He straightened, and wiped his face with a gesture so tired he’d have looked like a world-wary 80 years–old man to someone passing by; turned the ignition, feeling a small comfort at the well-known sound of his truck coughing to life. He pulled from the curb, made the U-turn using the empty street, and went back in the direction he’d come from just...ten minutes ago.

Only ten minutes.

He rolled through the dark streets, no one outside at this time of night, and with the biting cold, not even one car driving by. Once he’d reached open land, he pushed the gas pedal. His truck’s hidden power roared to life.

He didn’t even look at the wrecked car when he passed the place of the accident 20 minutes later.
Chapter 2

Jensen dragged his feet over to the airport´s exit. His whole body felt like filled with lead, and his brain was in this special limbo where you couldn´t tell exactly if you were asleep or awake, a sluggish foggy mass whirling around in his skull, barely keeping him functional. 54 hours of travelling, from a hiking tour to the next river and motor boat available, to a crappy truck, to a crappier plane, to real planes and airports and waits and delays and more planes... and he felt every hour, and every mile he´d gone to finally arrive back in his hometown.

But then, maybe it was only the reason why he´d made the journey in the first place, weighing him down, pulling at his heart and filling him with hot pain and cold anger at the same time....exhausting him more than the thousands of miles he´d had to travel.

„Watch it, man!“

„Sorry....“, he managed to get out, jerking out of his trance. „I´m sorry...“

The heavy built guy he´d run into – business suit, heavy coat, thick scarf, the obligatory over-nighter clattering along behind him – shot him a disgusted glance, muttering something under his breath. Jensen rubbed his sore eyes. He knew he probably looked like some homeless guy, bearded and unwashed and clothes crumpled, with his huge backpack and the suitcase secured with several belts. *God, I´m looking forward to getting a shower...hot water in abundance, and big soft towels*...

He watched people outside the gliding doors hunch over, pulling caps low and scarves over their mouths. Dammit. His jacket was way too light for this weather....he´d expected late winter, yes, but he´d forgotten how viciously cold it could still be in March. He´d already put on two shirts, a pullover and his „warm“ jacket – but he knew exactly the wind outside would creep through all those layers without even slowing down, and freeze him to his bones.

„Great“, he murmured. Four, almost five years in hot and humid regions, drenching his shirts with sweat day in, day out – and he´d already lost his sense for home winters.

Home...he wondered if it would still feel like that at all. After his mum had died (*had been killed*, part of his mind whispered), it had been different...but his grandma had tried to keep some sort of family normalcy going. Jensen huffed. Normalcy....whatever that might be. With a family business like theirs, it would always be as far from any „normal“ life as possible – not on the outside, of course. They´d always played perfect family to the world ... while on the inside....

And now, another loss. A family torn to pieces step by step. Side effects of The Business.

He sighed, and rubbed his eyes again.

Maybe it had been the wrong decision to come home at all. He was too late for the funeral anyway...and he knew for sure Josh wouldn´t have minded. He´d always played along, been the perfect son and HEIR and what not – but truth was, he didn´t give a damn about the old fashioned way their father ran things – he saw himself as a business man, with a special market approach maybe, and a very special clientele... *had seen*, Jensen corrected himself in his mind.

*You´re not here for the dead, dumbass. It´s for your little sis, and your granny*..

He watched the scurring people outside for one more minute, everyone trying to get into the waiting cabs as fast as possible. Shivering, he took the handle of his battered suitcase, adjusted the backpack on his shoulders, and steeled himself for what was waiting for him out there – weather,
Jared rubbed his eyes. They felt like having been cleaned out with sand...together with his throbbing head, it was a pretty crappy feeling, even if you didn´t count the nausea and the wobbly legs.

Well, that´s what a hangover was all about, right? Feeling as crappy as possible, so you could do penance, atone for your not-so-past sins; you always had to pay dearly for the things real fun, or really amazing in life. He´d learned that early on, and all his catholic upbringing (POLISH catholic upbringing, which was like showing the pope – the now, according to his grandma, sadly non-polish-one - what catholic really meant) practically summed up to that – you sinned, you suffered, you confessed, suffered some more maybe, did your chores (two times Father in Heaven, three times Hail Mary, son)- and that was that. Clean start.

Yeah. As if it was that easy.

He wondered why he´d woken up at all, after his epic fall out the day before – well, things were pretty blurry from a certain point on, but he remembered vomiting into someones´ lap. Not a good memory.

His phone´s ringing told him why ... he grabbed for it on the night stand, too clumsy to actually find it; in the end, it clattered to the floor, and stopped ringing; only to start again 30 seconds later.

„Dammit“, he murmured, feeling his tongue dry and furry between his teeth. He scrambled up on his bed, managing to get his legs on the floor; locating the phone – finally – he bent down to grab it. Regretting it immediately ... at least he made it to the bathroom in time.

By the time he got out again, he started to hate „Heat of the Moment“ (his current ring tone for „close friends“), as it was the fourth time it had gone off. After getting rid of last nights poison, and washing his face with cold water (not to mention the gallon of water he gulped down), he felt much better though, and reached for the phone again.

„What!“, he growled, voice rough and raspy.

„Well, a good morning to you too, sunshine“, a cheery voice greeted him. „Was about to send an emergency team over to your place. How´s the head!“

„Asshole“, Jared mumbled, leaning his head against the wall behind him. „You know exactly how my head feels after ...god, how many shots did I have, Chad? It´s all dark and foggy in my memory...“

„God has nothing to do with it, sweetheart. And I´d rather count the bottles, you might run out of fingers and toes otherwise...or take a calculator.“

„Jesus ...“ Jared groaned. „Why didn´t you stop me!“

„Hey, I hold on to my body parts dearly, not to mention my life? You can get very... stubborn when you´re in that special mood...“
Jared huffed. „I know...sorry. ..“

There was silence on the other end of the call.

„Chad? You still here?“

„I shall be damned“, his friend´s voice sounded dumb struck. „You actually apologized. You feeling allright? I can be at your place in 50 minutes...“

Jared couldn´t help grinning. „I have my mellow days, you know...you got me in a tender mood. So – what´s up? You only woke me to make smalltalk and be your usual annoying self?“

„No, you moron, if I wanted to be annoying I´d have come over with a bucket of ice water and my trumpet. I´m calling to remind you you promised to fetch your brother from the airport at eleven. It´s ten, by the way.“

Jared jerked away from the wall, almost losing the phone.

„What?? Jeff? That´s tod- holy shit! I – why didn´t you call earlier, man! I´ll be late!“

He heard Chad huffing at the other end. „First: I did. Call you earlier. I´ve been calling for over an hour, moron. And second, no, you won´t be late if you get your lazy ass out of bed NOW and hit the road. Within the next ten minutes. And, third: I´m NOT your baby sitter, nor your PA slash slave! If so, you´d have to pay me, and I´d be rolling in dice!“

„Yeah, yeah“, Jared mumbled grumpily. „Thanks, then. I´ll be in touch...gotta make myself presentable now.“

„See ya, Sasquatch!“

„Laters, glupi!“

„Hey, don´t turn polish on me! You know I hate it to feel left out!“

„I was only being polite.“

„Yeah, I bet...“

Jared hung up grinning, and dragged himself to the bathroom again. Cold shower, toothbrush, coffee – that should do to make him feel human again.

Ten minutes later, he fell into the seat of his truck, and pulled out of the driveway.

Jensen

This time, it was Jensen who got bumped into.

He walked in front of the line of waiting taxis, trying to get his luggage to the nearest cab in one piece, looking back at the suitcase as its wheels seemed to have caught on something; and the moment he turned around again, he ran into a solid body. Not expecting the impact, and already a little unbalanced because of his backpack (which contained all the heavy, albeit mostly useless, electronic stuff he´d brought with him, plus his no-nonsense camera equipment), he was nearly knocked off his feet, stumbling backwards and hitting the suitcase – but before he could fall, a
hand gripped him tight on his upper arm, pulling him back upright.

„Sorry, I´m so sorry, I - are you OK? I´m just – didn´t see you, man! I was just...“

Jensen stared into the young man´s blushing face. He looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn´t quite place him; and the thick knitted cap he wore, together with a long scarf that was wrapped around his neck at least three times, made sure not much of his face was actually visible. The slanted eyes, slightly bloodshot, stirred some memory though. Jensen shook his head, more to clear his fuzzy brain than to answer the question.

„It´s OK“, he calmed the other man down. „I uh...I probably shouldn´t run around looking back if I don´t want to be thrown off my feet...I have to get used to crowded streets again I guess.“

The younger – and, Jensen noticed now, pretty tall - man´s interest seemed to peek at that. Jensen saw him take in the inadequate clothes, and his skin that showed years of 24/7 outdoor-life. 

Intelligent eyes, he thought.

„Oh – you´ve been somewhere remote?“

Jensen smiled at the enthusiasm. He felt a little old all of a sudden – well, maybe just tired. Bone tired.

„Yeah – you could say that“, he answered, smiling, thinking of the worlds that lay between a busy American airport and the jungle he´d spent the last four years in. It wasn´t only the climate, and the few thousand miles – it was like travelling a thousand years into the future within two...three? ... days.

He felt the other man staring at him, and looking up, he found him obviously waiting for something, the greenish eyes searching, strangely focused. It was his time to blush. For a moment, he wasn´t sure what was expected of him; he´d still not fully arrived mentally in his old world.

His confusion seemed to be obvious, as the other man now blushed furiously, too. It looked rather cute, Jensen noticed.

„I – uh, sorry, I didn´t want to be nosy. It´s none of my business. It´s only that I...“ His voice trailed away, and he looked endearingly embarrassed. And young. Jensen realized the other man´s hand was still on his arm, gripping him. It wasn´t an unpleasant feeling.... he had changed that much, living with people for whom touching was a means of communication, just like talking, for years. Five years ago, he´d have jerked away and broken contact at the first possible moment.

„Hey, it´s no problem“, he reassured him. „It´s ..uhm...I have practically been on planes for the last three days, my brain´s not at its best today.“

He got a broad smile in response. Dimples. Of course... again, something stirred in his mind, a sweeping memory, but it was gone before he could grab it.

„Three days? Man, where did you stay? In the middle of the jungle?“

Jensen huffed. „Pretty much, yes.“

The hazel eyes widened. „Seriously? The jungle? Like in Amazonas and piranhas and skyscraper trees?“
Jensen nodded. „Yeah, the like.“

„Wow. I wish...“ again, the voice trailed away.

A gush of icy wind made Jensen shiver, and shrink into his jacket.

„Oh, Jesus, you´re ..I shouldn´t have kept you. Sorry... I gotta go fetch someone anyway...“

Finally, he released Jensen´s arm. It felt unpleasantly cold immediately.

Jensen smiled, his teeth already clattering. „Yeah, I should be on my way, too.“ He took his suitcase´s handle again. „Thanks for catching me“, he said.

„Oh, I – you´re welcome...was my fault anyway“, the other man stammered, stepping back to give Jensen room to pass.

Jensen nodded a good bye, and manoeuvred his luggage around the tall guy. For an instant, he had the impression as if the young man was about to say something, but the moment went by, and he clumsily weaved between people to the next cab, feeling oddly disappointed. On the other hand, the thought of the warm inside of a car was very welcoming - five more minutes out here, and he wouldn´t be able to feel his fingers or ears any more.

He could still feel the other man´s hand on his arm, though.

Jared bit his lower lip, staring at the ridiculously big backpack and battered suitcase vanishing between other travellers. He´d wanted to ask for the owner´s name, but hadn´t dared to...he couldn´ t put a finger on it, but something was bugging him, had felt familiar; he couldn´t get rid of the impression they´d already met somewhere. But the moment somehow had passed unused...he opened his mouth to call after the stranger, who was now approaching a taxi. But again, no words left his mouth...

„Dammit“, he muttered. Since when had he become a shy little girl? That was so not him...he was outgoing, good-humoured, carefree, damn-hot party-boy Jared Padalecki, heir to the Padalecki Imperium, and he´d never missed the opportunity to hit on a hot girl (or, on his „special nights“, guy) during the last two years. He lived the life! College life! And if it was just kind of a fake life, a glove he struggled to fit into that started to itch and cut into his skin whenever he felt courageous enough to look at it, really look at it...it was what was expected, right? He was a smart, good-looking student with a healthy sex-drive and a rich background (and who cared how the money was made, right?). He had friends (lots of them) and real friends (a selected handful). He was the notorious, infamous King of Campus, the one guy EVERYone wanted to have, be it at a party or a debate club fight...or in their bed. And if it wasn´t his life...if that guy wasn´ t him...not who he wanted to be anyway...who cared? Who knew even? He was barely able to admit it to himself. And whenever the depressing realization hit him... there was always another party to attend, another night to be wasted away with alcohol and dancing and..other benefits; or another prize to compete for, cup to win, award to claim.

He had everything. He was happy. Right?

So why, after meeting a complete stranger for like two minutes, changing a few vapid sentences only, did he feel like an empty shell... like the virtual character of a video game someone else sitting at the controller was filling with their ideas of what his perfect life should look like?

He stomped over to the entrance doors, angry, at himself mostly; but when he turned once more,
finally ready to stop the man and ask for his name (and...a coffee together?), the cab with the intriguing stranger in it already pulled from the curb.

He followed it with his eyes until it vanished in the dense traffic.

Why did it feel like he’d just missed an opportunity.... THE opportunity maybe.

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Jensen

Jensen stared out of the window at the buildings passing by. He noticed changes here and there, a building gone, a new one constructed somewhere... but the neighborhood where his father kept „the town appartment“, as it was called in the family, was still the same, small streets, brick buildings, wrought-iron gates, trees lining some of them, everything nice and clean. Not as obviously rich as the suburban village where the family country house was situated, complete with horse stables, pool and everything, but inhabited by well-doing young couples, entrepreneurs and families, and students coming from well-heeled families sharing flats and costs.

The wind gushed through the streets, whirling the thin layer of fresh snow up into the air in beautiful shapes. It felt weird to see everything so – unchanged. As if he´d never been away.

Finally, the cab stopped in front of a set of steps. When Jensen didn´t react, or move, the driver turned in his seat.

„You said 227, right?“ He looked as sceptical as before, when Jensen had told him the address; sure, he looked like someone living on the street, not in one of the wealthier neighborhoods of town; no wonder it raised the driver´s suspicions. He´d asked for the cab fair right then, still at the airport – „No offence, son, but I´ve been screwed over one time too many“ – and Jensen was glad he had still a handful of crumpled dollars, drawn at the cash machine in ...jeez, he didn´t remember, somewhere between South America and Mexico – in one of his cargo pant´s pockets.

„Yeah“, Jensen muttered. „It´s the address I told you.“

With a sigh, he got out, nodded at the driver who pulled the suitcase out of the trunk, and watched the car pull away. He turned, and managed to get his luggage up the stairs, fingers freezing already, teeth clattering again. He fingered for the key on the chain around his belt, the one thing he´d brought that tied him to his „old“ life aside from family photos...He wondered if his father had had the locks changed back when Jensen had left, or ever since. „Updating security seems a pain in the ass, but being robbed, or worse, is much more painful“, his father´s mantra. Jensen and his siblings had grown up with bodyguards, security cameras and safety words. It hadn´t saved his mom, nor his brother...

The key fit perfectly, the door opened under Jensen´s shaking hands with exactly the same little squeak Jensen remembered so well, and he stood in the hall, surrounded by the scent of old wood, floor polish and lavender, and suddenly, he was seventeen again, excited and happy to have his first `own´ place, a small suite just under the roof on the fourth floor.

„Hello?“

Nobody answered. Of course. If someone from the family (not many left, weren´t there...) had been in town, he´d have been greetet (AKA stopped) by a butler (AKA bodyguard) by now. His voice, rough from many hours in air conditioned planes and airports, and deeper than usual – sleep
deprivation and disuse – echoed through the house with this special sound that told you nobody was there. He listened for a minute nevertheless, before finally putting down his backpack.

Almost five years ... he hadn´t set foot in this house, nor any other building remotely „house-like“ in all that time, but somehow, it still felt .... familiar. Like a place he could get used to again.

He started the tour through the rooms, noticing the few little changes, decoration mostly, curtains or pillows or rugs; when he reached the third floor, where Mack´s room was situated, together with an office, he finally found evidence that five years had passed for real. When he´d left, Mack had been a young teenage girl, and her room had still been a girl´s one, pink and white and fluffy-lacey, with stuffed animals and cute posters on the walls.

Now....

It was a different world. A bed, hidden under a tent of thin fabric (quite similar to the mosquito nets Jensen used to sleep under in the jungle); a small desk of drawers, the drawers painted in different shades of green and blue, a soft carpet in natural colors on the floor...and a comfy-looking chair in front of the window with the deep windowsill .. a chair Jensen recognized as the one his – their - Mom used to sit in and read, or cradle Mack, and sing her to sleep when she was still a toddler ... it had been in the attic, he was pretty sure of that.

He strolled through the room, touching the surfaces, and studying the pictures on the wall. Japanese wood cuts, beautifully stylized landscapes and sea scenes, cherry branches in full blossom, a carp, every scale a color of its own, wonderfully detailed...he looked at the writing on the ancient lookig paper, Japanese – it seemed part of the pictures, so artfully drawn and positioned... maybe it was. Jensen wondered if his sister had a Zen phase or something...or was she studying Japanese? Cultural studies? Asian literature? Art? With a pang, Jensen realized they hadn´t spoken in months, last time he´d really talked to her, she´d still been in High School. She´d always talked about becoming a nurse, but, well – he couldn´t imagine their father letting her choose such a profession. A doctor, yes. Nurse? Too lowly for an Ackles offspring. „It´s an honorable job, Mackenzie, I won´t deny it. But think of how much more good you can do as a doctor, having people´s lives in your hands every day, making decisions, operating, researching, deciding the future of medicine.“ He huffed. Of course, their father would never criticize openly, he used to disguise his disapproval by just pointing out the huge advantages of the job he deemed the right one for his children instead. He´d been surprisingly successful with that regarding Josh and Jensen...Mack, on the other hand, had always been the most stubborn of them all, and she had a way of twisting her father round her finger.

Jensen fell down into the old rocking chair. He let his hands wander over the smooth wooden armrests, fingers finding the little knob he always used to let his fingertips run over as a kid.

On a board above the bed, some of Mack´s stuffed animals still held watch over her room, and with sudden force, Jensen missed his sister, missed his dead Mum, missed his brother who he wouldn´t see any more now, too...wouldn´t hug and pat on the back and throw a few balls on the field, or help put together a motor he´d enthusiastically torn apart without any idea how to repair it. They hadn´t parted on the best of terms..in fact, they had had a huge fight, Josh accusing him of running away, leaving Mack, of not taking responsibility in the family business. Of being a dreamer and unrealistic do-gooder and a goddamn whining hippie. And yes, Jensen might have said hurtful words too, and not too few at that. They were at the point of starting to punch each other, and maybe they would have, if Mackenzie hadn´t come into the room, eyes in tears and looking so scared they both backed off, embarrassed and mortified.

And then he´d left, and hadn´t talked to his brother in years, and only a handful of times to his little
sister, mostly delivering short, scrambled, one-sided messages, leaving them both dissatisfied. He’d written to her, regularly, but he’d no idea if any of his letters had ever arrived.

All of a sudden, tiredness rolled over him, his body finally seemed to give in to the exhaustion; with difficulty, he got up from the rocking chair, and slowly climbed the last stairwell to his small suite, leaving his luggage just where he’d put it down in front of the entrance door... he opened the door to his small suite, an all-in-one bedroom-living room-kitchenette, fell face down on the bed he’d made the last time five years ago, and probably was already asleep before his face hit the comforter.

Jared

„Jeff!“

Jared waved frantically at the tall figure towering over the scrambling masses trying to get to the gates as fast as possible. His brother found him fast enough, Jared being taller than the average citizen too; Jeff grinned, and waved back.

„You look disgustingly relaxed“, Jared pouted, once they’d hugged and patted their backs.

„Yeah, you know, little brother – there´s a bonus in working for Dad. The job takes you all over the world – and to some of the really good places, too. You´ll see once you´ve finally got your degree. “

Jared shrugged. „Yeah, I guess....“

Jeff punched him in the arm. „Hey, don´t get too excited, Brobro. Don´t worry, I´ll show you around and hold your hand. I hear you´re a real hermit lately...all books and no fun.“

„Ha, ha“, Jared replied, adding, „and don´t call me that!“, trying to punch his brother back; but Jeff reacted too fast, and dodged his fist. His brother laughed. „Man, you´ve got `hangover´ written all over your face. Let me guess – tequila?“

Jared glared at him. „Yeah, and I don´t even want to know how you can tell. And, by the way, I dragged myself out here to fetch you nevertheless. I could have sent one of the drivers, you know?“

Jeff made an attempt at hurt puppy eyes (Jared at least would always beat him there). „And leave your brother, who hasn’t set foot on the sacred earth of his home city in two months, to a stranger? I´m wounded! Oh, my heart!“ His very theatrical gesture made Jared snigger.

„Oh, zip it, moron“, he said, shaking his head. „All our drivers are practically family. And I can still leave you here. “

Jeff eyed him, eyes sparkling. „Jerk. “

„Bitch. “

Jeff laughed, the easy, infectious laugh Jared remembered from their childhood, and started walking towards the exit.
„Come on, I´m starving. Has Babcia made her pierogi for me? I could kill for a plate full of those. “

Jared followed him. *Yeah. Yeah, you would,* he thought. *Literally. And that´s the problem.*

**Jensen**

Jensen was startled from sleep by a scream.

He jerked, and fell from the bed, hitting his head on the edge of the nightstand.

„Ouch! Dammit, what...“

He was so completely disorientated it took him a few seconds to remember where he was. Rubbing his front, he stared around bleary eyed... ah. Right. His old room. Baseball signed by his favorite pitcher from almost 15 years ago, on a shelf together with his old glove and the cups he´d won during his school years...baseball, and soccer, and one memorable science project prize. Posters of places he´d dreamed of visiting one day...still did, actually. His sleep-foggy brain needed a while to register that someone kept shouting somewhere, and was also stomping up the flight of chairs.

Within an instant, he was on his feet, only then noticing it was pretty dark in the room, light already fading outside. Dammit, he´d slept for – 6 hours? Seven?

„Jensen? JENSEN?“

The door to his room was jerked open and bashed against the wall outside.

„Jensen? Is that – Oh my God.“ The last words were only a strangled whisper.

Jensen stood there, unable to move for a moment, staring at his little sister who seemed equally rooted to the spot all of a sudden, breathing hard from running up the stairs.

Finally, he found his voice again.

„Mack“, he croaked, voice sleep-rough, and filled with emotion.

„Oh my God, it´s really you“, his sister whispered, still standing in the doorway, her face that of someone who´s been woken from a dream only to find out that reality was exactly the same. „It´s you. You´ve – you´re home...“ Her voice broke, and when Jensen could see tears welling up in her eyes, the spell was finally broken. He gasped, realizing he had held his breath all the time, and strode forward.

„Mack... I´m – I´m so sorry...“ He wanted to hug her, wanted it so badly, but didn´t know if he was still allowed to, after all that had happened. He stood in front of her, arms half raised. „Mack, I – “

With a sob, she landed in his arms, wrapping herself around him as if she still wasn´t sure he was real.

„Jensen...“ She cried for real now, and he had tears in his eyes, too, overwhelmed by all the battling emotions in his heart – joy, and grief, and guilt, relief, and worry....

He stroked her hair, took in her scent, the scent he remembered, it hadn´t changed at all, and somehow this made his tears flow for real.
„I´m sorry, Mack, I´m so sorry....I..“

„Shhh...“ She pulled away a little, cupping his face, touching the beard, the tangled hair, so much longer than it had been when he´d left. He stared down into her red-rimmed eyes, green like his own, followed the pattern of her freckles, so well known to him since their childhood days. She´d hated them when she was thirteen, but Jensen had to admit they looked adorable, all of her did, actually.

„You´re ...you´re beautiful, Mack“, he stammered, „Such a beautiful woman“, and couldn´t quite believe he´d said that aloud.

She smiled through her tears. „Not your little girl anymore, Jenny....Can´t really say the same about you before I´ve seen you for real under all this hair and ...and...grime. “ He blushed furiously, but felt a laugh bubble up inside.

„Yeah...sorry about that“, he murmured self-consciously. „Guess I´ll take a shower and..“

She snuggled against him once more.

„Oh God, you´re here. You´re here for real. I – when I saw the luggage down in the hall...your old backpack... I...“

„Shhh...“. It was his time to calm her down. „I´m here“, he mumbled, kissing the top of her head. „I´m back. For real.“

She looked up at him, eyes wet again.

„You´re not leaving again, are you? Not soon, I mean?“

He looked down at her face, the same face he´d known for all of his life, and still different ...grown up. Adult. More beautiful and serious than he remembered. There was a new layer of sadness in her eyes which hadn´t been there five years ago. Fresh pain.

*That´s the question, isn´t it? Am I staying? Leaving again?*

„Not soon, no“, he answered. „Can´t leave my beautiful little sister again, can I? Gotta defend your honor, being the big brother and all.“

She pushed his chest, but he saw the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

She breathed in a little shakily, and rolled her eyes, suddenly looking very much like her 13 years old self again.

„Good“, she said, finally pulling away, her nose wrinkled.

„And now go get that shower. You stink!“

This time, his laugh made it to the surface.

*Jared*

The drive to their family country home had Jared listening to his brother´s stories mostly, Jeff
telling him snippets of where he´d been (and who he´d screwed there – in every possible meaning of the word). Jared was glad not much was requested from him aside from the occasional impressed grunt. His head had started to pound painfully, and Jeff’s way of talking about the sexual benefits of business trips pulled at his nerves.

_He hasn´t always been like that_, Jared thought. _You were deceived by the way he acted at the airport...almost like old times._

Now, Jeff slipped back into the version of himself he´d become since finishing college and working for their father’s business imperium..._truth is, he´s an arrogant asshole_, Jared thought. _Truth is, if I didn´t know the old Jeff is somewhere in there, I´d not even listen to his disgusting stories any more. Truth is, I´d rather die than become that kind of person working for my father._

_Truth is, he´s still family. He´s still my big brother._

Once they arrived at the mansion, it was the usual chaos, everyone talking at the same time first, their grandmother pinching their cheeks like she did when they were still little boys; it got quiet only when they all sat down to lunch, and the general focus was on their babcia´s famous pierogi. It was one of the rare occasions their Mom was home too, as she had a garden planner coming in later in the afternoon, something regarding the dog kennels and the green house... Jared felt his mom´s eyes on him more than one time, but she didn´t say anything during the meal; when he excused himself right after lunch though, saying he had to go back to his studies immediately (well, he had a tricky paper to finish after all, so he wasn´t exactly lying), she went to the entrance door with him.

When he bowed down to kiss her good bye, she kept her hands on his upper arms.

„Are you allright, sweetie? You were awfully quiet at lunch.“

He tried his best `don’t worry, mom´- face. „Only had a –a late night, mom. And loads of work, really. And Jeff had enough to tell anyway“, he added, not quite managing to keep a bitter note out of his voice. Of course it didn´t slip his mom´s attention.

„You´re not jealous of your brother, are you?“, she asked with a piercing look at him.

„I know your father always made you two compete against each other, but - don’t envy Jeff, Jared. He´s got his qualities, and you’ve got yours.‟

„I´m not!“, Jared cried, a little exasperated. „I don’t wanna be – I mean, I don’t envy him. Not at all.‟

His mother´s sharp eyes bore into his. „What do you mean?“

When Jared only shrugged, and looked at his feet unhappily, she shook his arms.

„Jared Tristan Padalecki, dont you give me that `I´m such a miserable poor rich kid´ self pity crap again. We already talked about this. Your father needs you in the company. Jeff needs you as much. And I need you to get your mind focused so you can join them as soon as possible. You’re not 17 any more, Jared, it’s time you arrive in the real world eventually.‟ Jared kept studying his shoes.

„You have a responsibility, Jared, to this family, to the business. To our name. You´re a bright young man talented in many fields, and you´ll be a great part of the company once you´ve finished your studies.‟
Her face grew a little softer. She cupped his cheek with her right hand, forcing him to finally look up. „I know you had all those ideas about studying art and what not. Jared, you can be an artist and study history of arts once you´ve finished law school. I think it would be a great hobby, really. It could even prove a brilliant addition to our business – you know, you could specialize in art deals, focussing on the laws regarding them, and have your very own branch inside the firm. Doesn´t that sound like a wonderful combination of your interests and skills?“

Jared sighed. Yeah, we´ve had this discussion, mom. But it´s not as if anyone ever listens to what I ´m saying, or gives a damn about what I want. All I get is your sugar coated propaganda or dad´s `you´re a Padalecki, son – act like one´ - speech.

„I´ll think about it“, he said, with as much conviction as he could muster.

„I should hope so“, his mother answered coolly. „You´ve less than a year left of law school. We let you have your little escapades at campus, Jared, because you´re always top of your class. But it´s time to grow up. Getting drunk and pulling silly pranks won´t make the fact go away that you have to take your part of responsibility on your shoulders.“

Jared looked into her cool eyes. Sherri could be warm and understanding – but only to a certain extent. When it came to the family business, she was as hard as nails as his father.

„Well?“

Jared realized she was waiting for an answer.

„Yes, mom. I know. I...“ Honestly, how should he explain his behaviour? Trying to be the model of ´brilliant, but spoiled brat´? The one whose reputation would hopefully prevent him from taking responsibility in his father´s business?

„I see right through your scheme, son“, Sherri said, voice steely under the motherly tone. „And I agree with your father that this must stop, Jared. The parties as well as...the other matter.“ Jared looked up. The other m- .....dammit. They know. But I have been so careful...

„What do you mean?“, he croaked. Please, let it be something else. Please...

„Your little nights out, Jared. Did you really think they would go unnoticed?“ She huffed. „We knew all along, Jared. We decided to let you have your...experiences, to come over this phase. Now it´s time to forget about it. You will meet a nice girl, you´ll get married just like your brother, give us a few adorable grandkids, and that´s it. By the way.... do you already have someone in mind for the engagement party? Your father would very much appreciate it if you chose a girl from the Polish or Russian community, you know that. But if you insist, you can take Genevieve, of course.“

Take Gen to Jeff´s engagement party? Over my dead body. I´ll not throw one of my best friends to the wolves, thank you very much.

„No! No, I – I mean, I don´t know yet. I´ll think about it.“

„Well, seems like you have a lot to think about“, his mother replied, her ´mom of the year´- smile back in place. „Good boy. I know you´ll make us just as proud as Jeff.“

He nodded. „Bye, Mom.“

„Bye, Jared. And drive safely.“
„I will.“

He drove down the lane leading to the main street, hands shaking on the steering wheel, and a few more miles, before he finally stopped for gas he didn´t really need. He bought a chocolate bar and a coffee and sat in his truck munching and slurping for minutes.

He knew he could be good at any job his father would give him at the firm, just as Jeff was good at his. And he knew he could make his parents proud.

Yeah, proud like they are of their oldest son, who bangs high range prostitutes on his business trips a mere two months before his engagement party, and has a mistress right here in town (and who knows where else) he´s got no intention of dumping because of his MARRIAGE, and that´s only the sex part of his life. I don´t even want to know how his approach on business life looks like.

The big question was – did he want to? Have to?

Want? Not for all this family´s wealth. Have to? Well, that´s a whole different question.

He sure didn´t want to become the kind of heir to the family name his brother had turned into. But he had this – maybe naive, maybe romantic - idea stuck in his head...that maybe he could be the one to change things. Family politics. Company „methods“.

Yeah. I´ll turn it into a green, socially aware firm that shares it´s profit with the employees, not the shareholders. Dream on...

And then there was the other „matter“, as his mom had called it. His hands started shaking immediately again when he thought about the fact that his parents had known, and never talked to him. That for them, it was „a phase“, some rest of teenage sexual confusion that would vanish once he decided to make it go away. That his homosexuality was something to be treated at the same level as his fraternity parties and pranks: the follies of a college boy, his way of sowing his wild oats.

And yet, it was the first time his mom – his mother! – had even admitted knowing ... about being aware that he sneaked out to the special clubs once in a while, whenever he felt like climbing the walls. That he met random men there, danced and drank and fucked and got fucked.

And felt alive for a few precious hours.

He crumpled the paper cup in his large hand. The stranger from the airport appeared in front of his mind all of a sudden. The freckles he´d seen under the tanned skin, the wild hair and scruffy beard. Those green eyes, immensely tired and surprisingly sharp at the same time.

Again, the feeling of having lost an opportunity swept over him. Longing and sadness and a desperate, stubborn will to fight for what he wanted to be. What he was.

If I had grown up in a different family...a different religion....I would have brought the beautiful stranger to my brother´s engagement party. We would have danced under a tent lit by thousands of tiny lights...and people would have cheered, and would have whispered what a cute couple we were. And I would have fed strawberrys piled on a china plate to that gorgeous mouth, and then when I kissed him, our kisses would have tasted like sweet summer memories.

He felt a well-known strain against his trousers, and huffed.

„You´re an idiot“, he murmured. „A damn, sappy idiot having dreams worse than every unbearable romantic movie you´ve ever watched.“
He turned the ignition, and pulled away from the gas station. He was at his flat on campus in less than an hour, and in the gym, at the heavy weights, twenty minutes later.

**Jensen**

When Jensen came down the stairs after a very elongated shower, a delicious scent, wafting through the house from the kitchen, welcomed him. He entered the large kitchen/dining room to find his sister stirring something in a fancy copper pot, humming along with a song only she could hear through her earplugs. Jensen stepped at her side, and leant against the fridge, watching her with a smile.

„You cook?“

She smiled, and pulled out the earplugs.

„Guess I do a lot of th- Oh my God!“ Mack had looked up while speaking, and Jensen smiled at her surprised eyes.

„You like it?“

She reached up and gently touched his clean-shaven jaw. Then she let her fingers run through the short hair.

„You- you cut it yourself? How did you do that?“

He chuckled. „We didn´t exactly have a hair saloon in the rain forest.“ He ran his own hand over his short-cropped head. It was an unfamiliar feeling. „I kinda learned it down there I guess. Is it – is it OK?“

She took his shoulders, turning him right and left.

„Not bad, actually. Although it´s very short. You never wore it that short!“

He shrugged. „First time for everything, right?“ Bending over the pot, he asked, „So- what´s that deliciously smelling sauce in there?“

She leant against him, and he pulled her close, happy that she welcomed him back so easily. He´d expected – reproaches. Accusations. Questions. Maybe they´d come up later, but for now, they both seemed just happy to have each other again.

„Rosa showed me. Do you remember Rosa? I think she had just started when Dad ... when you left.“

Jensen searched his memory for a picture to go with the name.

He shook his head. „No, I – I don´t think I remember her...so she taught you how to cook?“

Mack smiled.

„Yes, because I asked her to. You were gone, and Josh at university, and ...“

Jensen watched her carefully.
„You were lonely.“

It was her turn to shrug.

„More like, bored. You know, without your fights with Dad, Sunday dinners became excrutiatingly
dull.“

„Mack...“

She rolled her eyes. „Ok, Ok. So I was lonely! I missed you! I was used to having you around at the
weekends!“ She turned the oven off, and poured the contents of the second pot through a seeve in
the sink. Jensen recognized spaghetti. His stomach growled.

„Mack.“

She looked up, steam billowing around her head. „Yes?“

„I´m sorry. I should never have left. Not like that. You didn´t deserve -“

She put down the empty pot, and her hand was pressed against his lips within an instant, shutting
him up very efffectively.

„Stop it. Now. I know you feel guilty, and I know you´ll never stop to, cause that´s just how you
tick, but...in case you´ve forgotten: we talked, back then. In fact, we talked in a way we never had
before, no one had ever – had ever taken me seriously like you did, you know? For the first time, I
felt like ... like my opinion mattered.“ Jensen tried to say something, but she just pressed her fingers
firmly against his lips again.

„When you told me...about wanting to leave...you know what my first thought was? YAY!
FINALLY!“ Jensen stared at her disbelievingly. What?

„Jen, you – we ... I saw how you ... how unhappy you were. With Dad, and ... law school. With
Josh´s internship at the firm. Back then, I didnt exactly understand why, and why you hated Dad´s
business so much, but – well, I could see how it ate you alive. And then you had this huge fight
with Dad...“ Her hand slipped off his mouth, as if the memory took away all her energy.

„I was so scared“, she whispered. „And then when you came to my room later...“

She paused, and Jensen used it to wrap his arms around her minute body.

„Mack, I-“

„Shhhh...“, she murmured. „Let me just finish, OK?“ He nodded. He owed her that much. And so
much more, in fact.

„I knew how The Big Plan killed you, Jen. I could see it day in, day out, for God´s sake. I might
have been a 13 years old kid back then, but I knew you better than anyone else in the whole world,
and I could see how it would slowly ruin you completely. And when you talked to me, it was only
confirmation for what I already knew, deep down.“ She pressed her front against his chest, and
Jensen rested his cheek on the top of her head.

„And then when you asked me for my permission – the permission of your little teenage sister, for
crying out loud – I didn´t even think about it. And you know why? Because I knew that if I´d say
no, you´d accept it and stay. That my opinion, my wishes would have been it for you. So ...letting
you go was actually easy, you know?“
Jensen took in her scent again, a mixture of shampoo and fresh mints and spices.

„And I never regretted it, Jen. Never. Cause I saw ...I knew it would have been the death of you to stay. Maybe not literally...but I´d have lost the brother I loved. I ... I saw what it did to Josh. And I – I couldn´t have watched the same happen to you, Jen. I couldn´t.“

Jensen´s eyes stung. How do I deserve a sister like Mack? How can someone like her even be related to Dad? But then, maybe Dad hasn´t always been the cold, ruthless „business man“ he is now. Probably not. I can´t see Mom marrying the man he turned into throughout the years. Guess he was like Josh once. Ambitious, headstrong, loyal.

Josh. The one who was missing. Gone for good. Just like their Mom.

His stomach chose that moment to give a distinctive growl again.

„Jeez“, Mack murmured, and pulled away form his embrace. „Did you bring some wild animal with you in there?“

He smiled, and took two plates out of the cupboard above. They settled at the table, each of them a plate full of spaghetti in front of them. Jensen got up again.

„Milk?“ He stood in front of the huge refrigerator, glancing at the different cartons inside. „Or orange juice?“

„Milk, please“, she answered. „Or is there still some of the Chardonnay left?“

Jensen jerked upright, and looked at her, a little shocked.

„Chardonnay? Mack, last time I checked, you were eighteen!“

„So?“ She looked extremely haughty, and, he had to admit, adult, practically staring him down. „No one´s here to check, right?“

„Am I nobody?“ He managed to look offended.

„There´s one thing for sure: you´d never tell Dad.“

„Fair enough.“ He grimaced. „But, Mack..it´s alcohol.“

„You don´t say....“

„Look, I don´t say you can´t try a drop here or there, but .. I mean, it´s a Wednesday night, not your birthday or something.“

She straightened up, and jeez, he remembered THAT expression well enough.

„And my brother coming home from a five year absence isn´t a reason to celebrate? To have a glass of freaking wine?“

Ok. Maybe her seemingly calm reaction had deceived him. There was still the maddeningly stubborn sweet girl inside her. Only turned into a maddeningly stubborn, smart adult. He sighed.

„I´m just saying.... don´t make it a habit, OK?“

She grinned, and there was the girl again. And Josh, he thought with a pang. Her grin is exactly like Josh´s...
„I won´t, Jen. I´m way too smart for that.“

„Yeah, you are. I begin to realize that.“

„Good for you.“

He smiled, and started to dig in.

Only after the third or fourth fork full of pasta he noticed her watching him.

„What!“, he asked, gulping down the last bite.

She grinned mischievously.

„You know...I can leave you two alone if you need some privacy?“

„What? Why -“

„You´re making sounds, Jen. Kind of PG 18 sounds.“

He felt the blush creep up his cheeks, hot and burning.

„I..uhm...sorry, but it´s ...it´s fantastic, and I haven´t really eaten in quite some time, I -“

„Jen, it´s OK.“

A soft smile took the place of the grin. „Jen, you´re a walking stick. Any less weight and you´d be transparent. If Gran had seen you like this, she´d have started force feeding you immediately.“

Jensen looked down at his plate, playing with his fork.

„How is Gran?“

Mack´s face turned serious. „She´s...well. OK. There are good days and bad ones, you know? Depends. “

He studied her face, found the sadness in it again.

„It´s tough, you know...watching her fade away like that? Losing herself some more day after day...“

Jensen reached out with his free hand, and took his sister´s smaller one into his.

„I´m sorry I haven´t been here for you in all ...all of this“, he said, searching her eyes. „First Mum, and then Gran, and now...Josh. You shouldn´t have had to face all of that alone.“

„Jen, I told you it was OK. And you´re here now, aren´t you?“

„Yeah...“ He still wasn´t convinced by her assertions; the guilt that had been nagging at him for the last five years seemed to grow and weigh heavier and heavier now that he was finally home again.

„Mack, it´s – you know I´m not saying you can´t manage on your own. That you need some badass big brother to protect you or ...I can see what an amazing person you´ve become, how strong you are, and all on your own.“ She opened her mouth to say something, but he went on quickly, „It´s – I only wish I could have been on your side, that you´d had someone to talk to, to have your back. I do hope I can be that person now that I´m back.“
She squeezed his hand gently.

„I know you are. And I haven´t been completely alone, Jen. I have friends, good friends, and in the beginning, there was still Gran. Josh, too... he tried.“

„Yeah...“ Jensen felt his throat constrict. He and his brother hadn´t been on good terms in a long time, in fact hadn´t seen eye to eye for years. It still hurt to know he´d not have the opportunity to reconcile any more. At all. He rubbed his front. A headache was building, jetlag and exhaustion and grief mixing up to a tension that would take a while to get over.

Mack started eating again, so Jensen took up his fork too, and emptied his plate, focused on not making any embarrassing sounds this time.

Jared

Jared rubbed his hair with the towel some more, so it wouldn´t wet the fresh t-shirt he´d already pulled on. He stuffed his sweat-drained work-out clothes into the duffle bag, slipped into his warm jacket, and pulled a knitted cap low over his head. The cold wind outside could be a bitch when you came out of the shower after two exhausting hours in the gym. He couldn´t afford a cold right now – exams were nigh, and there was still this paper he had to finish. He wasn´t keen on sitting over his books with chamomile tea and a dripping nose, and his family had given him enough of a headache already, he didn´t need any addition, thank you very much.

He was just reaching for the doorknob, when someone busted the door open, letting a gush of cold air in.

„There you are!“ Chad grinned up at him, cheeks pink from the wind, some kind of shawl wrapped around his head, wearing at least two shirts under a sweater under a jacket under a vest. He looked like someone taken out of `Oliver Twist´. Jared raised his eyebrows.

„You know plume jackets have been invented already, do you?“, he asked, looking his friend up and down. „They are actually quite pleasant to wear, especially in weather like this.“

Chad shook his head. „No way I´m wearing one of those...things. I dig the good old layer style, pilgrim fathers and all...“

Jared huffed. „I doubt it the pilgrim fathers wore artificially ragged denim for 200 dollars.“

Chad shrugged nonchalantly. „It´s the thought that counts, right? I´m with them..in spirit. Consider my palms full of virtual callouses.“

„The important part being the `virtual´one.“

Chad eyed him, head tilted. „Now, what can possibly have gotten you in a cranky mood like that? Well, let me guess...Ah! You went to see your family. Always the straight and fast way to turn Jared Padalecki into the Grinch.“

Jared rolled his eyes, but he couldn´t help the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

„I´m so NOT the Grinch. If anything, I´m Grumpy Cat. On occasion.“ Chad huffed, and drew his eyebrows together.
“You OK? You look even angrier than usual. And that´s after what – two hours of work-out? You should have regained your cool by now.”

Jared shrugged. He was used to Chad´s abrupt changes in topics, and his way of getting right to the point when they had just been bantering a second before.

„It´s not as if I didn´t know what would expect me“, he mumbled. „Jeff back from the big tour and all...“ He felt reluctant to tell Chad about his mom´s speech, and the revelation that had come with it. He would tell him, eventually – probably. Chad Lindberg was his best friend, had been since elementary school. They shared an eventful history, starting from the very first day at school, when they decided to climb the huge, and very tempting, oak in the school´s yard, instead of returning to class after break. They were found only an hour later by a frantic teacher who was already sure two of her high-range pupils had been abducted (she probably didn´t know about the carefully placed devices and well disguised body guards on the premises). Chad and Jared, on the other hand, were totally lost in their game, surprised anyone would have missed them at all. From that day (and the „meet the head of school“- tour they both had to endure after their adventure), they were ChadandJared. JaredandChad. Chad, always full of (crazy) ideas, and energy, and life; Jared, his considerate, pensive counterpart, more reserved, but always ready to follow his friend´s lead – and easy enough to push into the general direction of „fun“ (Chad´s definition) or „trouble“ (everyone else´s). When Chad decided to stay in town to study psychology (of all things), it was clear Jared wouldn´t go away (as he would have wanted, secretly); and he started law school and business school (not his choice, really) sharing a flat with his best friend.

They walked down the wind blown path winding through campus, heads lowered, shoulders hunched against the cold. Chad shot Jared a glance after a few silent minutes.

„Jay... talk to me, man. I know you´ve always had a few issues with your family, but, man – it´s like you suddenly look for flaws and fights on purpose. That´s not you, Jay.“

Jared huffed, a bitter note underlying the sound.

Chad raised his eyebrows. „See? You are on the best way to turn into a cynic! What´s wrong? Man, I´m your best friend, and I´ve never seen you like that! They can´t be that bad...you always got along well with your parents! And Jeff can be a dick, but he´s OK as far as big brothers go. Believe me, I know.“

„You don´t even have a big brother, Chad!“

„So? I know enough people who do, and it seems Jeff is by far not the worst, at least compared to others. “

Jared stayed silent for a moment. He was glad the oncoming exams kept people inside their dorms and the library. He wasn´t in the mood for meeting anyone reminding him of last night´s party. He sighed.

„I know. It´s ...Jeff´s ... I don´t know. When I fetched him from the airport, for a moment, it was like... as if...“

Dammit, he hated it when he stumbled over his words. It was a side of him only his closest friends (and, of course, his family) knew: the „official“ version of Jared Padalecky was the eloquent, smart, stunning guy beaming down at an audience from a podium(or a room full of more than half-drunk party goers from the top of a table, shirtless). The problem was, he wasn´t sure what he wanted to say, and how much he wanted to tell Chad. Which was, in itself, weird. He ´d never had this feeling before – that he had to consider what to keep to himself.
„Like old times? When you were kids?“

Jared looked up, surprised. „Yeah, that´s..yeah. For an instant, it was like having Jeff back, you know? The old version. How did you...“

Chad rolled his eyes. „Dude, I´ve practically spent all my life at your side. I´m not blind, deaf, or stupid. I can see it effects you that things are...changing."

They walked around the buildings full of dorm rooms, most windows lit already, people studying everywhere.

„But, Jay....that´s how it is. You´re not kids anymore. WE aren´t kids anymore. In less than a year, you´ll be out there doing your law thing, I´ll be ...somewhere, too. Jeff´s moved on, man, he´s in the business now. He´s got responsibilities...duties...the whole adult thing! He´s getting married in less than six months, for Christ´s sake!“

Jared huffed again, rolling his eyes at the same time. Chad shot him a sour look. „You´re doing it again, dude."

„Sorry“, Jared mumbled into his scarf. „But - how can I not turn into a cynic, when my older brother, the one everyone tells me is the rising sun on the firm´s sky, is banging whores in Bangkok 8 weeks before his engagement party, and has no intention of getting rid of the mistresses he has in every freaking city? Not even one of them?“

„So?“

Jared stared at his best friend, incredulity all over his face. „So? So how is that ...how about moral standards? Being a decent husband? How about NOT turning into a total douchebag who doesn´t give a damn about anyone but himself?“ Jared felt his cheeks grow hot. All the things that had nagged at him during the drive back from his parents´ home (well, for much longer, actually) seemed to just stumble out of his mouth now.

„That´s not who I want to become, Chad! Dammit, I already study law and economy because they wanted me to, I – I´m not gonna marry a woman I can´t love for appearances! I won´t!“

He realized Chad had grabbed his arm and stopped him in his angry stomping.

„Hey. Hey! Dude, calm down. Jeez, what happened, Jay? Did...you didn´t have a row with your parents, did you?“

Jared stared into the other man´s eyes, breathing heavily. „I – No! No. No row. That´s not how things are done in the Padalecki family.“ He heard the bitter tone in his own voice. „It´s – I -“ He deflated. What the hell...

„They know, Chad. They knew all along.“ He buried his hands in the pockets of his thick jacket, staring at the floor. „They know I sneaked out to...the clubs. My mom told me right away, just...just before I was about to leave. Just like that. Told me it..I had to stop. That it was time to...leave the escapades behind.“ He looked up then, searching Chad´s eyes. „They know what...who I am, and they´ll never accept it. Never, Chad.“ He knew there was desperation in his voice now. „Chad, they – my mom, she....“

„Jay.“

Chad held both his arms now. Jared stared into the blue eyes, shaking badly.
„Jay, come on. Let´s get you into the flat, OK? And then we´ll talk. You can tell me everything, and we´ll have a ...tea. We´ll have tea. OK?“

Jared felt weird. Like looking at himself from the outside, observing the scene like a spectator. *This isn´t my life. This isn´t even me. This is the family approved version of me, and ...fuck, I don´t even know what the real Jared P.´s life looks like.*

He merely nodded, and turned to walk on; Chad hurried along at his side, throwing him worried glances.

The tea was good. Steaming hot, strong and black and with just the right amount of rum in it to loosen Jared´s already cramping limbs. Chad leant back in one of their low vintage 1960s chairs, blowing into the steam emerging from his jumbo cup. Jared´s nose crinkled when the aromatic scent of hot alcohol hit his nose. He vaguely remembered making a vow the night before...something around the line of ´no alcohol whatsoever until after exam week´. *Well, screw vows. Screw family. Screw this whole fucked up life, and especially screw your whiny ego - feeling sorry for yourself again, huh! Mom´s right...*

„So. Your parents knew? About...the gay nights out?“

„Yeah“, Jared grumbled. He took a sip of the hot liquid, enjoying the warm feeling that spread through him.

„Well, sorry to bring it to you, man, but – how you ever could convince yourself they wouldn´t find out beats me.“ Jared opened his mouth to reply (brows already drawn together angrily); but Chad raised his hand to stop him.

„No, listen, Jay. Your father owns one of the big business conglomerates, he´s got his fingers practically everywhere, and if he hasn´t made it into the top ten list of the town´s richest people by now, it´s because he wants to stay off it, not because his name wouldn´t belong there. He´s rich, he´s well known, he´s very ...ambitious; and he´s made a lot of enemies during the years.“ Jared grimaced. Well, that´s what you get when your business methods are of the more...ruthless kind, and when engaging in shady but highly lucrative business branches.

Chad went on, rubbing his earlobe. „You know he´s absolutely paranoid when it comes to safety and control. Remember when we found out about the video system he´d had installed at school? At EVERY school you attended?“

Jared nodded. Of course, those weren´t official safety measures. His father had his own rules and a special team to follow them.

„You can skip the safety part. It was about control. Always has been.“ He drove his hand through his hair. „I guess that´s his idea of being a caring father.“

„Hey, he´s not that bad. At least he takes an interest in what you do. That´s more than many others invest in their kids.“ He sipped at his tea again. „And then...“ He hesitated.

„What“, Jared asked, a little irritated that his friend practically took his father´s side.

„Ok. I´ll give you the short and clear version. First: You attend one of the best law schools, you are doing great, outstanding in fact, you have a nice flat and an amazing flatmate“ – Jared snorted, and Chad grinned shamelessly- „and you exceed in your business classes as well. You have a position in one of your family´s companies ahead, challenging, yes, and probably 80 hours per week, but, man – you´ll be on the top in no time!“
Jared shook his head, and wanted to protest, but Chad stopped him.

„I know it´s not what you dreamed about as a kid, Jay. But – you’re an adult now, you have responsibilities, and no one says you can’t have the art stuff in your life too. Work for your father, climb the ladder, and once you’re in a position to make decisions, you decide to extend your field of work on art...and slowly glide into the life you’ve always dreamed about. Dammit, Jay. Nine out of ten people your age would kill for a life like yours, for your possibilities. On top of it all, you don’t look too bad, and your body makes every girl and a few of the men in every freaking room swoon. So stop whining. You’ve got it all, really. The golden ticket!“

Jared stared at his friend, eyes narrowed. They didn’t often talk like that - mostly, it was fun and bickering – but deep down, Jared always could be sure that Chad would have his back, and that they were on the same page...but that? It almost sounded as if...

„Did you talk to my mother?“, he asked, suspicion painting his voice.

„Your mom? Not since...since...last christmas I guess? Why?“

Jared shook his head. „Nothing.“

„Come on, you can’t ask me something like that and then leaving me hanging out to dry.“

Jared sighed, „Ok... It’s only that – well, you sounded exactly like her. I’ve had this whole speech earlier today, when I went home from the airport with Jeff.“

Chad glanced at him cautiously. „Well, you should...you should maybe consider the fact that your mom is right. I mean, what’s the odds that me and her share an opinion? Must mean something, ey?“

Who knows...I’m ...confused. Frustrated. I know they are right in some points, but others...others I just can´t ...I don’t want to see their way.

He shrugged, stirring his tea. „Maybe...“

Chad leant back in his chair. „So, how´s Jeff?“

It was an obvious move to change subject, and Jared was glad about it.

„He´s ...he´s his usual self“, he settled on answering after a few seconds.

„Ah – arrogant, charming, confident, all-in-all perfect firstborn?“

„Around that line, yes. Or cheating, ruthless, self-important, manipulative heir. Pick your favorite. “

„Aww, don´t be so harsh. You two are related after all....could be you share one or the other quality...“

Jared glared at his friend. „I’ll pretend I haven´t heard that. You still interested in sharing this flat with me, aren’t you?“

„Jeez, what are you today, the Princess with the pea under her matrass? I’m just saying...maybe you’re not that different in some aspects.“

„What?“ Jared was honestly baffled by Chad’s statement. Before he could protest though, Chad went on hastily, „I mean, you’re not a douchebag and ruthless and all of that, obviously, but , Jared, you can be stubborn like an ox, too, and you´re as ambitious as Jeff, in your own way. Your
purposes in life may differ hugely from your brother´s, but you... well, until now, you have put them aside to follow your family´s wishes, and what´s wrong about that? You´ve got morals, and a conscience, too much of it if you ask me“ – Jared tried to kick him, but Chad was fast – „and you´re not cheating so far, I can vouch for that, as there´s no one to cheat on, sadly enough.“

He grinned maddeningly at Jared, who did his best to kill him with his death stare (never had been much good at that). „See? Similarities, and differences. It´s all about the differences, and how you use the similarities, and, voila: meet the white sheep of the Padalecki family!“

Jared felt his lips twitch. Chad had always been good at that...making him smile, or laugh even, when he was in one of his gloomy moods, brooding over something for hours, or days even. His smile faltered when he remembered the reason for his brooding. One of them, that is.

„So, what – I´m just gonna play straight until my parents pass away? Get married to one of the russian bi-- girls and have a bunch of kids?“ He shoved his hands through his hair.

„They´ll never allow ... they won´t even acknowledge that I´m gay, far less accept it. What am I to do, Chad? That´s the one fundamental difference between Jeff and me – I´m not willing to ... there are limits to what I´m willing to do...to fake.“

Chad glanced at him in an unusually pensive way.

„Well...guess we´ll have to find a way, then....we´ll pass those bridges when we get there, right? But for now...just let´s pass the exams, and be our awesome selves. Can´t see anything wrong in keeping up life as it´s been for the last years for a while, and once you´re out of your usual after-family-contact shock, you´ll find it bearable again, too. So – what´s the plan for dinner?“
Jensen stared at the map on the wall, looking for the red „you´re here“ dot, and comparing it with the tiny and very general map he´d gotten at the secretary´s office ten minutes earlier. It didn´t make sense – either the map on the wall and the one in his hand didn´t show the same buildings, or his ability to read maps had miraculously vanished overnight, right before his first day at a new university started. Great. His head went up and down a few times, until he came to the conclusion the only thing out of place were a few writings (he was pretty sure the deacon didn´t have his office in the toilets) and the big red dot he´d been looking for.

He sighed. Probably one of the typical fraternity pranks ... he hadn´t missed those. He hadn´t been part of any fraternity when he´d been to college the first time, and he sure as hell wouldn´t be now; he´d always despised the senseless waste of energy and brains, not to mention the stupid regulations and ceremonies ... he´d seen real initiation rites in the jungle during the last years, an the humiliating, disgusting things the hopeful to-be fraternity brothers had to go through were just ... embarrassing. He shook his head. Not his world ... not then, not now. He´d always been more of a lone fighter ... his schedule had been more than tight anyway, with a second subject (that was really his first).

Law school had always been a compromise. His father had wanted him to go to business school („You got the real brains, Jensen, Josh is a great executor and has people skills , but you´re the mastermind“), Jensen dreamt of studying anthropology and sociology. Law had been where they´d met – after weeks and weeks of fighting. A compromise Jensen only gave his consent to because he already knew he´d take anthropology as a second main subject (his father probably knew as well). Which left him with a crazy workload and practically no time for socializing. Not that it bothered him...on the contrary. Josh was the party boy, the college football hero, the womanizer – and, of course, fraternity member par excellence. Jensen was the embarassingly bookish younger brother, who played soccer of all things – well, and baseball, and not too bad at that – and collected vintage toy car models since he´d gotten his first from his grandpa for his 4th birthday.

He smiled at the memory, as blurred as it might be .... the tall, impressive figure of his granddad, the huge cake with the four sparklers on it ... and the little box with the 1967 Chevrolet in it, black and sleek and beautiful. He could still smell the sparklers´ smoke mixed with his Mom´s perfume and melting chocolate frosting.

He was lost in his thoughts, turning from the wall and still glancing down at his small map, when he realized too late a large number of students was now crowding the hall, all of them obviously hurrying somewhere, lots of scurrying feet crossing his gaze; he looked up surprised – he hadn´t noticed the change while deep in thought -, and before he knew it, someone´s backpack hit him sharply in his back and made him stumble forward and against a broad back with some force.

„Hey!“ Broad Back turned around with a frown. „Watch it, moron!“

Jensen tried to regain his footing and adjust the heavy bag on his shoulder. At least he hadn´t dropped something ... He already felt the blush before it crept up his throat.

„Sorry, I – someone – uhm...sorry.“ No need to explain. No use either.

He looked up, ready to meet an angry glare.

„Well, I – oh.“
“Next time, just- “ The other, taller guy stopped dead mid sentence, head a little cocked, as if studying Jensen´s face. His frown slowly gave place to a surprised expression.

“It´s you...“ An almost whispered statement. „But-your hair! Why did you...“, the other man burst out, blushing furiously the next moment, and clamped his mouth shut.

Jensen glanced into the slanted eyes. Greenish. No, hazel. That was the word he´d been looking for. Hazel... He frowned.

„Uhm...“

„The airport? We ´ve met outside! Last ... Wednesday? I bumped into you.“

Jensen searched the face in front of him: narrow, but with a strong chin, elegant eyebrows over cat ´s eyes that would have made Halle Berry jealous. A few adorable moles here and there. Delightfully curved lips ...he remembered the dimples. Oh yes, he remembered.

„Yeah....sure. You caught me when I.... Sorry, I wasn´t really awake at the time...“

They stared at each other for a moment, and then, before Jensen could come up with anything but another „Sorry“, the other guy reached out his hand.

„I´m Jar – I´m Jay. Guess it´s time to get acquainted properly...or do you want to go on with the knocking-each-other-over thing?“

It made Jensen smile – the joke, but even more, the grin (and the VERY adorable dimples accompanying it).

„As long as you catch me each time...“ he surprised himself saying, and shook the other man´s hand automatically.

„I´m Jensen.“

„Guess I can arrange that“, Broad Back - no, Jay – answered, eyes wandering down Jensen´s body, and resting on his face again with a sparkle in them.

Jensen felt warmth on his cheeks again. How on earth are you flirting with this guy?

He seemed out of words, or brain at that, for the moment.

„So – can I help you find a lecture room or something? The map is...uhm..it has been compromised lately, so to say.“

Jensen huffed. „I noticed.“

„No friend of pranks?“

He shrugged. „Not really, no. “

The other man watched him, a curious expression on his face.

„Oh – don´t tell me you´re an ´all work and no fun´ – type?“

Jensen grimaced. „I just seem to have a different idea of the ´fun´- part.“

„Oh – I see....“ Jay seemed a little embarrassed. Maybe he´s one of the pranksters? He looks the
„Jay? Hey, man, come on, we gotta-“ A blonde guy had gripped Jay´s arm and tried to pull him away, when he noticed Jensen.

„Oh! Oh. Sorry, didn´t see you were – uhm – talking.“ His piercing eyes seemed to x-ray Jensen for a second.

„Hi, I´m Chad. You a newbee here? I haven´t seen you around.“

Again, Jensen shook an offered hand robot-style. A little reluctantly – he never felt comfortable giving information to strangers -, he gave his name again.

„I just got into law school here. I´m Jensen.“

The other man scrutinized him with an intensity that made Jensen feel slightly uncomfortable. Then the blonde guy seemed to remember his manners.

„Law school!“ He turned to Jay, eyebrows raised dramatically. „Just like our Jay here!“

Jensen noticed the dark glare Chad got from his friend in return.

„Anyway, uhm – Jay, we should be on our way, you promised Gen to drop by at her project room.“

Jensen watched Jay shoot another warning glare at his friend, and heard him sigh.

„Yeah...right. So, Jensen –“ – he turned his attention on Jensen again, so abruptly it startled him.

„Where are you headed? Maybe I can show you the way while Chad here goes ahead to see our friend?“

Jensen had to suppress a smile at Chad´s face – surprised at first, then settling on a mixture of wonder, slightly sour irritation, and an underlying dread Jensen couldn´t quite explain.

*Interesting.... and a little disturbing.*

„Uhm...I don´t want to keep you...“, he murmured. As much as having someone showing him the ropes around here would have been nice, he didn´t want to be the reason for tension between friends. Because that had been the main reaction coming from the blonde guy, Jensen realized: tension.

„Oh, come on. It´ll take us a few minutes max to find wherever you need to be. Tell Gen I´ll be with her in a sec?“ Jay´s sentence was a dismissal. Chad rolled his eyes. „Sure, whatever you say, your majesty.“ Jensen watched him weave through the crowd, and turned to Jay.

„Look, I don´t want to -“

„Forget Chad, he´s just being a jealous mother hen. So, which room were you looking for?“

Jensen opened his mouth to argue some more, but Jay´s face had a stubborn look on it he knew very well from his sister. Absolutely no use arguing against such determination. He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his jeans´ back pocket, squinting down at it.

„Ok, uhm...thanks, then. I, uhm....I need to find lecture hall E ... and...classroom 257. And the office of..uhm...Prof. Harvelle?“

Jay´s longish hair tickled Jensen´s cheek when the other man bowed down to look at the printout Jensen had gotten from the secretary earlier, with his schedule and assigned professor. It was a
pleasant tickle.

„Harvelle?“ Jay whistled. „Good luck with that. I hope you’re a devoted student. She won’t accept anything beyond outstanding...“

Jensen looked up. „Are you one of her students too?“

Jared grinned. „I am...not for much longer, though. It´s my last year in college ...she keeps telling me she’ll open a bottle of champagne the day I walk out of her office for the last time.“

Jensen watched him attentively. „That means you must be outstanding? To meet her expectations? Or did you just say that to make me think you are?“

He had the pleasure of seeing the other man blush furiously – a rather endearing sight, as it made Jay look far younger and less self-confident than he probably wanted everyone make believe.

„I uhm...well. Guess I wasn’t very subtle here, was I...“, the tall man tried to joke around it, but Jensen just smiled at him knowingly. Jay cleared his throat. „Yeah, so – uhm....you’re back from the jungle for a few days, and now it’s law school? How come?“

It was clearly an attempt to change subject. Jensen hesitated. You don’t really know the guy...he’s got nice dimples and an interesting mix of emotions showing in his eyes, and he’s hot as Hell, but...

„I already studied law for two years before I went to South America. Just picking up where I left, I guess...“

„Oh, where did you go to college then?“ The interest seemed genuine.

„California...“, Jensen found himself saying, and before Jay could ask the question that he obviously had on his tongue, he hastily added, „not Stanford or Berkeley, though. I went to San Francisco Law School.“

Jay looked at him quizzically. „Nothing wrong with that.“

Jensen huffed. Tell that to my Dad... „You got accepted at freaking Stanford, and you DELIBERATELY choose a different, less renommated college? Is this some joke to you, Jensen? Or are you so keen on embarrassing me, and your family, you are willing to sacrifice your own future for it? In this case, you’re behaving like a childish teenager. I thought you were more intelligent than that, son.“ His father, always one for a nice pep talk...and always grating the surface of things, while never getting any deeper. Not even trying to. What for...he was the Big Boss, be it business or family.

They wandered down the third corridor in a row, and Jensen had the feeling he should maybe pay more attention to the way. The connected buildings seemed kind of labyrinthic.

„Why did you leave?“

The question startled him out of his musings. „Sorry, what?“

„Why did you leave California for...the jungle?“

Jay looked at him expectantly, but something on Jensen´s face seemed to make him row back. „I mean – sorry, it’s none of my business. You sure had your reasons.“

Yeah, enough reasons, but in the end it came down to two: family. And business. And the need to
leave both of them not to drown or get smashed....

„It´s Ok. I can imagine it makes you wonder...“ Jensen looked for the right words. „I had...family troubles. Needed some space, I guess – time to – find out some things about myself?“ He huffed. „God, that sounds awfully like taken from some crappy TV drama.“

Jay shrugged. „Sometimes our lives are like that...“, he murmured. „I can relate, believe me...“

Jensen looked up at him, noticing the deep frown.

„Family...sometimes I think they´re only there to make us feel miserable“, Jay muttered, a lot of suppressed emotion seeping into his words.

Jensen couldn´t stop the short laugh. „You should meet my uncle Jim. It´s exactly what he kept telling me when I...“ His voice faded away. I might tell you, Jay...sometimes.

He realized the idea of someone – besides his sister – to talk to, about family, and all the troubles that came with it, felt unexpectedly pleasant. So you pour your heart out to the first pretty stranger you meet? Great plan, Jensen....now THAT will go so much better than last time then!

„Jensen?“

He startled. Get a grip, man...

„Sorry... I´m still ...not really here yet I guess.“

Jay smiled. It lit up his face in a way...stop it, Jensen. You´ll be drooling all over the floor within the hour if you don´t stop! But there was this voice inside his head, small but persistent, that wouldn´t shut up...you deserve it, man...deserve some fun...it´s been a long five years...fun, and who knows, maybe even more...

„We´re here. That´s Profesoor Harvelles´office; the lecture room is just down the corridor. Classroom 257 is one storey up, you can´t miss it, the coffee machine´s between 256 and 257. Don´t ever try the coffee, though. If you want to keep your stomach and your taste buds intact, that is.“

„Thanks“, Jensen smiled back. Jay seemed to have that effect...he felt himself smiling a lot.

„So... if I am in need of real coffee...where do I go?“

Jared´s smile became even deeper, mixed with a cute shyness.

„Uhm, if you want, uhm...I could show you? Later? I gotta go see my friend Gen, she´s got this art project running today, but...“

Jensen felt weirdly happy. „Oh, that´s Ok, I´ve got my appointment with Professor Harvelle now anyway....“

„Great! Then let´s meet afterwards? Let´s say...11? I can fetch you here if you want, or you can come by, Gen would be happy to have some more audience ...“

„Yeah...sure. Can you show me the room on this ridiculous map? I survived four years in the jungle without getting lost, I should be able to find a room in a college building...“

Jay´s eyes went wide. „Four years? You were down there for four years? Wow...“

Jensen felt himself blush again. „Oh, right. You didn´t know, of course. Yeah, I...guess I kind of lost track of time there. It´s easy, you know.“
Jay looked at him pensively. „Or it was the time you needed to sort things out.“

„I wish“, Jensen murmured, more to himself. „So- 11? At room..“, he squinted at the map and the big cross Jay had scribbled on it. „Hall C, Jefferson Building?“

„It´s a date!“, Jay grinned, blushing a vivid red right after. „I mean – not a date, date, you know – I mean-“

Jensen´s cheeks felt warm, too. „Hey, it´s OK. I know how you meant it. See you, then...“

„See ya...and don´t forget, after the glass corridor, you.“

Jay looked up when the door at Jensen´s back opened. „Professor Harvelle!“

Jensen hastily turned around. A middle aged woman stood in the doorway, dressed in a brown suit that managed to make her look intimidatingly elegant and comfortably casual at the same time. Her sharp eyes darted from Jay to Jensen. He barely suppressed a flinch – all of a sudden, he was a little boy again, standing in front of his impressive grandmother, waiting for being seriously told off (usually, with good reason).

„Are you my ten o´clock appointment?“, she asked, in a clipped voice. „Because if you are, I suggest you come in now or go look for another professor tutoring you.“

Jensen knew his face must have been a bright tomato red, if the heat he felt was anything to go with.

„Yes, Madam, sorry, I – I am sorry. I lost time.“

„Why doesn´t that surprise me at all“, she murmured, giving Jay a short, but frightening death stare.

„I am on my way...right on my way“, Jensen heard Jay´s hasty retreat. „See ya, Jensen!“

Jensen only dared to wave at him faintly. Great. So much to a good fresh start. But when he turned to the intimidating professor again, he found a small smile on her face, and warmth in her eyes following Jay´s figure.

„That boy“, he heard her mutter under her breath, before her eyes found his own again.

Her face fell back into business mode again, but she seemed friendly enough now that Jay had vanished.

„So, you are Mr. Ackles, then. Let´s take this into my office, shall we? I understand you finished pre-law down in San Francisco? In record time?“

Jensen followed her into the small, but perfectly organized office, and took his seat behind the huge desk, once the professor had taken hers.

Twenty minutes later, he knew what Jay had talked about – Professor Harvelle didn´t take prisoners. But, weirdly enough, he liked her a lot – under all the tough outside, a motherly core shone through from time to time, of the no-nonsense parent kind. The kind that Jensen had missed for a long time now.

Jared
Jared was fidgety. Well, he always was kind of restless, it was in his blood, some parts of him always seemed to move; but this time, it was worse. He wandered over to the hall’s entrance for the fourth time, looking outside, and feeling strangely disappointed when only the usual faces drifted by, barely answering the countless hello’s and hi’s he got form the crowd. He was on his fifth round when Genevieve, obviously, had had enough of it. She grabbed Jared’s arm, and pulled him to one of the mismatched chairs that were part of her „living art project“, pressing him down into one of them.

„So. Tell me!“

Jared gave her his best `innocent frowny face´. „Tell you what!“, he asked.

All he got back from his best friend (because, even if he´d never tell Chad, Gen was his best friend and confidante in many aspects) were raised eyebrows. Ok – it had been worth the try.

„You´re antsy, and your mind is somewhere beyond this galaxy. Do you have any idea how often you´ve looked at the door during the last half hour? Well, I didn´t count, but I guess well above 50 times. So, tell me – did you invite Santa to my party? Or the President? Andy Warhol´s ghost?“

„Better ask him about Mr. Mysterious“, Chad murmured grumpily from two seats over. Gen eyed him for a moment curiously, then turned back to Jared.

„Mr. Mysterious? Jay?“

Jared made his second attempt on murdering Chad with the full force of his death stare – sadly enough, it turned out equally futile as the first.

„There is no Mr. Mysterious. Just a guy I met at the airport.“ He sounded unusually restrained. Of course, it peeked Gen´s interest more than any enthusiasm he could have shown.

„Oh...just a guy, huh.“

Jared fingered the frayed-out knee of his jeans, not looking up at her. When he did, finally, he found a small smile on her face.

„So?! He is ... interesting.“

„Is he, now....“ Gen´s calm amusement was highly irritating.

„He studies law. Here. Now.“, Chad filled in, ever the helpful friend. His sour tone destroyed the effect a little.

„Oh, really? But that´s wonderful. Did you meet him on campus already, then? Jay?“

But Jared was distracted by some movement at the door, and the next moment, he was up and at the entrance.

„You made it! I was wondering if...well.“ Jared felt like being 13 again all of a sudden. Jensen smiled at him in his cautious way, „Well, it isn´t exactly the jungle in here...and I´m capable of reading a map, if the map is correct in the first place.“

Jared felt his own blush. „Oh, I – I didn´t mean that you – I mean-“

The much brighter, and warmer smile he got form Jensen for all his stammering made up for his
embarrassment.

„Let´s have coffee, then?“, he asked, pulling himself together, glad he could still manage sensible sentences.

Jensen looked around the hall, where various pieces of furniture were positioned in unusual groups and heaps, partly occupied by students. Jared felt an unusual protectiveness all of a sudden. He just – he wanted to have Jensen for himself for now.

He took Jensen´s arm, and pulled him out of the room. *He feels...skinny, but ...firm...like someone who´s worked hard, and not eaten enough for a while. I wonder what he looks like without all those clothes wrapped around him...* With some effort, he pulled his imaginative mind back on track again.

„We can have a look at it later, if you want? I just..uhm...I´m starving, and.... I´d really like to get out of here right now."

Jensen shot him a curious glance, but didn´t say anything; Jared led them outside the building, and around the huge complex of brick and concrete buildings that formed one part of campus. Jared could see Jensen shiver. Although the other man wore much more adequate clothes now – in fact, a well-used down jacket that looked too big on him, and a knitted cap – he still seemed to be cold all the time. Instinctively, he stepped a little closer – *if I only could wrap my arms around him, I would keep him warm...everyone says I´m a furnace....* it wasn´t as cold as it had been a few days earlier, when they´d met at the airport, but the wind was still biting.

Jensen had his hands burrowed deep in the pockets of his jeans, head ducked into the collar of his jacket.

„It´s just around the next corner...the cafetería´s not bad, but Ava´s Cafe is much..uhm...cozier. Plus, her coffee is legendary."

Jensen only smiled back at him, and nodded.

Five minutes later, they were standing in front of the small cafe a group of students had started as a real life business project years ago, and had then left in the small, but very capable hands of one of them who had dropped out of business school, only to become a successfull business owner instead.

Jared opened the door, and saw Jensen look up surprisingly when an old-fashioned doorbell rang. The whole cafe looked like a collage made of old photographs, put into a new frame. Old, slightly battered chairs (not two of them the same style), old tables, the surfaces smooth and shiny, wooden panelling on the lower part of the walls; but modern lighting, lampshades formed into stunning creations of semi-transparent fabric, like flowers yet unknown, or deep sea creatures elegantly floating midair. Colorful paintings were hung on the walls, abstract but giving the impression of showing something organic, growing, living.

Jensen had stopped at the door, taking the room in.

„Do you like it?“ Jared asked, feeling unusually nervous. This was the place where he most felt himself, even more so than inside his own flat.

„It´s beautiful“, Jensen murmured. „I can see why you like it here."

The relief Jared felt sure was a little disproportionate. He felt a happy grin spread over his face.
“Wait until you’ve tasted the coffee“, he said, pulling Jensen further into the room, right to his usual table at the back.

“Hey, Ava!“

“Jay! Haven’t seen you in a while!“

Jared waved at the petite girl who came in through the back door, a tray of deliciously smelling cinnamon rolls in her arms. When she’d put it down on the counter, she came over, and Jared hugged her, almost lifting her up her feet.

“Crazy workload, you know...papers, and exams are coming up, and..well, you know.“

“Oh, believe me, I do“, she answered, heart-shaped face pulled into a wide grin.

“Oh, hi there!“ She had finally noticed Jensen, who stood waiting behind Jared, watching the exchange. „You’re new here, right? Would remember such a face for sure.“

“Ava!“

“What! I can acknowledge beauty, can’t I?“

Jared rolled his eyes, aware of the deep blush that crept up Jensen´s face. So...he’s not comfortable with people hinting on his looks...his incredibly, mindblowingly good looks....how cute is that...

After a moment, he became aware that Jensen and Ava both were looking at him expectantly.

“Oh, uhm – sorry. Ava, this is Jensen. Jensen, meet Ava, the patron of this wonderful establishment, and queen of heavenly coffee.“

“Patron? Establishment? You make it sound like I run a brothel here, Jay“, Ava huffed, but gave Jensen a sweet smile, shaking his hand. „Let me guess“, she went on, head tilted. „Double espresso, black, no sugar.“

Jared grinned again when he saw the surprise on Jensens´s face.

„She’s psychic like that“, he explained.

„The usual?“, Ava asked him, a smug smile tugging at her lips.

„Sure!“

They took a seat at the table farthest from the entrance, where the counter created a little niche and kept them hidden from the outside. Jared waited impatiently until Jensen had finally peeled off the thick jacket, the scarf, and the hat, making his short hair stand up in funny spikes. It looked adorable; but when Jensen tried to bring it into some kind of shape, he enjoyed the sight even more. It was clear Jesnen wasn’t even aware he was doing it, his attention on the hand written menu on the table. Jared studied his body, well, the upper part of it, for the first time not hidden by too many layers of clothes (well, still way too many for his taste, but at least without jackets and scarfs). Even in a sweater and a shirt (Henley!, Jared thought. Yes!Yes!), Jensen looked skinny. In his head, Jared immediately started cooking for him ... all his grandma’s famous recipies...I’ll feed him pierogi ...no one can resist my babcia’s pierogi...

When Jensen finally looked up, he caught Jared staring, which resulted in one more blush – on both sides.
„Sorry, I – uhm...I didn´t mean to...“

„I´m sorry, my hair´s just not used to its new cut...“

They had started to talk at the same time, and stopped at the same moment, too; for an awkward instant, they looked at each other, before Jared´s grin took over again. His heart seemed to beat faster a few times when the small smile appeared on Jensen´s face again.

„Why did you have it cut?“, Jared asked. If Jensen was suprised by his question, he didn´t show.

„It wasn´t practical“, he shrugged. „And I never had it that long...well, not that short either.“

„I like it“, Jared burst out. „It looks nice on you that way.“ He could have bitten his tongue off the moment he´d said it. Jensen didn´t seem bothered by his straightforwardness though.

„Thanks“, he simply said. „I like your hair, too.“

Which, unsurprisingly, had Jared blush deeply again. His thoughts drifted fast towards a scenario where he had his fingers buried in the short spikes of the man sitting across from him, while Jensen´s hands grabbed at his longish fringes, pulling him close, lips ready to kiss and be devoured...*Jesus, those lips, it´s impossible to look at them without...having thoughts...they are just...perfect...*

„One double vanilla extra foamy, one double espresso, black as the deacon´s soul!“

Ava´s cheerful voice jerked him out of his thoughts – hell, sinful thoughts for sure.

„Thanks!“, he smiled at her, frantically trying not to give away anything that was going on inside his head.

„Anything to go with it? You saw the cinnamon rolls...but there´s a lot more if you want to have a look at the counter?“

Jensen seemed to come out of his own thoughts at that. „Do you have pie?“, he asked, voice hopeful.

„Are you kidding me? We´ve the best pie you´ll get this side of the river. Apple, chocolate/pecan, blueberry...I think there´s even some of the cherry pie left.“

„Apple, please?“ Jared had seen Jensen´s face lighten up at Ava´s litany.

„Coming right at you, sweety...God knows you need it. The wind here´s a bitch, and you look like it could blow you away any moment.“

Jensen grimaced. „You sound like my grandma. And my sister“, he added.

„Well, guess they must be right, then!“, Ava responded, retreating behind the counter to fetch the pie. „Anything for you, Jay?“

„I´ll have a cinnamon roll...no, make it two!“, he called back at her. „Thanks for asking, by the way!“

She rolled her eyes at him, and put the deliciously looking pastries on their table.

„I come here for years, and the moment a prettier face walks in, you forget all about me“, Jared mocked her. „Oh, my poor heart!“ For which he got a punch in his arm, and raised eyebrows.
„Seriously? Well, suck it, Jay, shouldn´t have brought someone with you who´s totally out of your league, then.“ He made his best attempt on puppy eyes. Strategical warfare.

„Oh, stop it!“, Ava cried out exasperatedly, and padded his cheek. „I still love you, you know? My favorite client forever.“

„Promise?“

„Promise.“ She drew a cross above her heart with her finger.

„I´ll forgive you, then. Plus, you´re right. He´s not my league at all.“ With that, he looked over at Jensen again, having been focused on Ava for the last minutes. Jensen stared down into his coffee, cheeks red, a little frown on his face. He looked ... miserable? Annoyed? Disappointed? Embarrassed? All of it at once... but how can he do that... and what did I do to...

„Jensen, what´s wrong?“

He saw the other man follow Ava on her way back behind the counter with his eyes, before he glanced at Jared only for an instant, and cast his eyes down on his pie again.

„I, uhm... I ...“ He grimaced. „Sorry. It´s nothing. So, you´ve known Ava for quite some time?“

He was clearly changing subject, and Jared went with it, having the strong impression he´d upset Jensen somehow.

„I´ve known her for all my time here in college – practically from day one. Gen – you know, my friend who does this art project thing today? She designed the lampshades. The whole interior design is her doing. “

Jensen looked at the interesting shapes hanging above the tables, some of them turning and moving slowly above the heads of the people sitting there. Even more than before, they looked like living creatures, beautiful and ethereal.

„She is very talented, then. The lampshades are absolutely stunning.“

„She´s a genius“, Jared said proudly. „And a very good friend. I´d like you to meet her. She´s ... stubborn as a mule, and sometimes she might seem a little ...crazy...and she´ll give you her opinion without ever sugarcoating it....but you´ll love her!“

Jensen had started to pick small pieces off his pie, spreading them over the plate and arranging them into patterns.

Jared watched him for a while, but waiting had never been his strong side.

„Jensen?“ He heard the insecurity in his own voice. „Is something wrong?“

At that, the other man finally looked up.

„What do you ... what do you expect from me, Jay?“

„Expect?“

Jensen made a sweeping gesture at Ava, at Jared himself, the café in general. „This here...having coffee together? Meeting your friends? What – I – why are you doing this? You don´t know anything about me.“
For a moment, Jared was speechless; then he found his voice again, and rushed on, before he lost his courage again.

„Maybe because – because I want to know more about you? Because I want to know YOU? Because...when we met at the airport, and you left before – before I could ask for your name or phone number or anything...it felt like I’d lost something important. And then when you bumped into me right here at my own college, I – it was like fate had offered me a second chance. And I don’t want to miss it, this time.“

Jensen stared at him, frowning.

„But why? Why would you want .... I´m not... I mean... you´ve got friends, good friends, obviously, and everyone knows you, likes you, I could see that when we walked through the hall...what would you want with me then? I´m not...I´m....I don´t....“

„Jensen?“ Jared reached over the table and took the other man´s hand, pulling the fork out of his grip. Jensen had totally destroyed the piece of pie, leaving only crumbles with pieces of apple sticking to them.

„It´s true, I have got good friends. I might also be well known around campus, maybe for reasons I´m not very proud of though. But you – you´re the most interesting person I´ve met in some time...in a very long time, actually. You´re ... the moment I met you, I felt like I had to know more...find out more about you. Spend time with you. I don´t know why, exactly, but...I felt attracted to you within an instant, and in a way I haven´t ...I haven´t been attracted to anybody in ...years. Or...forever. Not like this. It was like...feeling a magnetic pull, you know?“ He looked into Jensens face, eyes pleading.

„I don´t expect anything from you, Jensen. I just...I really, really would like to ...be your friend.“ He hesitated, watching the other man cautiously.

„I can´t deny, you look freaking hot, and I – I mean – I´d love to be more...to have more of you, man, I´m practically dreaming of kissing you since we met in the hall earlier...and jeez, If I have made you totally uncomfortable with this, please, please just forget I ever said it, OK? We can just be friends. Just friends. “

Jared gasped for air. He´d fallen into his old habit of speed talking when he was nervous – and, hell, he hadn´t probably ever been that nervous in his life. He searched Jensen´s face for signs of disgust, or disapproval; instead, he found confusion. And....wait. Was that...want? Something lingered in the other man´s eyes, Jared couldn´t quite name it, but it was definitely not contempt.

„Why don´t you try it, then.“

Somehow, Jensen´s voice had fallen an octave or so, a deep, rough whisper barely audible at all.

„What?“ Jared´s brain seemed to have severed all connections to the rest of his body.

His voice, contrary to Jensen´s, sounded more like a pup´s yelping. Then Jensen looked up, straight into his eyes, and Jared finally got what was shimmering through the cautious reserve...insecurity. Suppressed need. And want.

„Why don´t you... kiss me, then.“

Jareds eyes were glued to Jensen´s lips. They were barely moving when he whispered the last words, but it was enough...enough to get his imagination going again, sinful, they are definitely sinful, they were cracked and even split open in one place, and still looked softer and ... more
kissable than anything...anyone he´d ... and they were waiting, right there ... and he wanted, wanted to kiss them, kiss this man more than anything...and he´d gotten an invitation, right? But there were his eyes, too, and the insecurity in them, almost...fear...behind the reservation, and the want, there it was... fear... how could you not have seen it before? Too wrapped up in your fantasies, huh? And as much as Jared longed to taste those lips, feel their softness under the rough surface, he hesitated. And it was new... new to him, he´d – he´d enjoyed his nights, the girls and the men, had never thought twice about... taking... and giving... but this... this was different. Felt different. Because, for some reason he still couldn´t really understand, he cared for the man sitting across the table. Really cared. And the last thing he wanted was to... fuck up things by being... by reducing this to a sex thing. You want more this time, more, more, more ... he´s the one, and you’ve got no idea what hit you... and why him, why why why why

He was staring into Jensen´s eyes now, looking for something, for a sign that this was important for him too, not only want and need, and he sure saw something there, a deeper longing, maybe, or was he reading things into it – was it wishful thinking? God, he´d never felt that vulnerable in his life. This was new territory, unclaimed land, no path to follow, no experience to use as a compass.

Only when something new appeared in the other man´s eyes, did he snap out of his paralyzed state. The moment he detected hurt, and something he interpreted as – disappointment? – he felt so much dismay – how cruel can you be, the man practically asks you to kiss him, and you... you just sit there frozen to the spot, staring at him? – that he finally found the guts to lean forward, take Jensen´s face into his hands, and kiss him.

Just like that.

Jared tasted like cinnamon. Cinnamon, and sweet coffee, and something warm and earthy that he´d probably be longing for for the rest of his life.

God, I forgot ... I forgot how good this feels... how it makes you feel whole like nothing else... complete, and centered, and part of the world... how could I ever forget that?

From that moment on, tasting, smelling cinnamon, there would only be one thing on his mind ... one memory on his lips.
Chapter 4

Alan

„You´re sure?“
„Absolutely, Sir.“
„Good.“

Alan watched his employee retreat. When the heavy door had closed behind the man´s back, he got up, wandering over to the large window; he looked down at the snow-covered city, followed the dark clouds with his eyes, a stampede rolling over the sky like a herd of wild horses shown in slow motion.

Returning to his large desk, he picked up one of the framed pictures from the smooth, shining surface. There they were, crowded around his own younger self...his wife, kind and beautiful as on the day he´d met her, little Mack on her knees...Josh, grinning widely, his tie just a little askew (he sure had messed it up on purpose); and Jensen. Alan looked into his second son´s face, the cautious smile, so different from his brother´s. They all had inherited their mother´s eyes, her freckled skin, Jensen most of them. Alan remembered how he´d always had to wear a shirt in summer, when they spent the Sundays at the lake. For a moment, he could hear the kid´s voices, excited over some piece of bleached wood they´d found, or splashing around in the water like little monkeys, squealing because it was so cold... could smell the sun lotion on his daughter´s skin, on his wife´s hands, saw her laugh and wave at the boys, her sun bleached hair dancing around her face.

Happier times.

Now, two of them were reduced to just that ... memories. Their family pictures had become a target list, two crossed off already... the thought of his wife´s death still stung, even after all those years. But Josh ... Alan´s insides began to burn again, a rage buried in there came to life each time he even thought his oldest son´s name. It had been four months, but...the wound was still fresh, and so was his anger. It wasn´t so much the pain of loss that tormented him, but the knowledge that, again, someone had managed to get to his family, not family in the business sense, that was part of the game ...

„That´s what will happen, Dad, you´ll get us all killed, in the name of this fucking business, and you know what? It´s not the other families who are responsible, it´s you, Mom´s death is on you, you alone, because you pulled her into this game, all of us, and you´ll never be able to keep us safe, not if you go on with this freaking war like this!“

Alan heard his son´s voice again, the rage in it, the desperation beneath. And Jensen had been right, hadn´t he ... he had been a fool to think he would be able to keep them out of it ... Josh, well, he´d been an active player already, it was kind of ... predictable he´d be targeted next, take the heir away to make the king stumble, right?

Jensen, who now was on his way back home, so his informants had told him, back from this godforsaken patch of jungle he´d spent the last four...almost five years in, too remote to be reached even by his father´s long arm. Jensen, who´d been told of his brother´s death after three months only, by his sister, who he´d been calling about twice a year, on his rare trips into something
coming close to civilization. He´d promised her he´d come home, as soon as he would have settled things down there, and of course Mack had told him to stay. Alan knew, because he had listened to their recorded conversation, had been doing so from the day Jensen had left. Mack might have suspected it a few times, in fact she was changing her cellphones far more often than the usual teenage girl .. but, well, you didn´t become, and stay, head of a big mob organisation/successful business man without technical backup. Alan had never had any scruples whatsoever, using it for his family affairs, too. It was for their safety only.

His cellphone blinged. He opened the private message, and stared at the photo for over a minute. Having closed the phone and pocketed it again, he studied the old family picture once more ... the gangly boy, hair neatly parted, shirt, jacket and tie perfectly in order, leaning slightly against his Mom. He´d still worn those wire-framed glasses back then ...later on, Jensen had changed to wearing lenses, although they´d often irritated his eyes.

There was another picture, more recent, the already decimated family at Jensen´s graduation: Hair much shorter, but still neatly styled, everything on and around Jensen had always been...neat, his clothes, his face and hands, his room, nothing like Josh´s smelly chaos or Mack´s overstuffed girl cave. It was what made you suspicious in the first place ... it wasn´t `normal´ for a boy to be that ...clean, and orderly, and obsessed with organizing and labelling and catalogueing.... until the psychologist he´d sent Jensen to, because he´d practically stopped talking for weeks, had declared it was Jensen´s way of copying ...with the loss of his mom, the changes inside their family, leaving for border school.

„He needs some kind of order he can rely on, needs to be in control of something at least, to find his footing again.“

It sounded logical.

Well, obviously, Jensen had overcome his obsessions. The jungle would probably have that effect.... Alan opened the phone once more, the last picture sent to him, studied the longish, sunbleached hair, the rather wild beard. The tanned skin on the prominent cheekbones...he imagined it would bring out the freckles, like the sun did when the boys were still kids ... their mother had always kissed the larger ones on their faces, telling them stories about their magical powers, about secrets written on their skin by a mysterious fairy...

With a force he wasn´t used to any more, he felt the loss tug at his heart. He hadn´t been aware he could still feel like that.

He´d gained so much in his life.

And he´d lost so much more.

With a snap, he closed his phone´s case.

It was time those responsible for it paid the price.

Jensen

Jensen freaked out.

Not because something wasn´t right. He freaked out because...everything felt too right. Too good.
Too good to be true.

And way too fast.

So, he pulled back after what seemed like the longest and at the same time chastest kiss he’d ever shared with another man, more confused than he’d been before, and more frightened also. Jared immediately released his face, although his lips still followed Jensen’s for an instant, reluctant to part. Jensen’s cheeks felt cold where Jared’s big, warm hands had been before, and his lips...he touched his lips with his fingers, as if to memorize the pressure, the perfect way Jared’s mouth had touched his own.

He looked down at his plate, the battlefield he’d turned it into. Ruins left in your wake. Your very own speciality.

Five years. He hadn’t touched a man – anyone, in fact – in five years, not ...not that way.

Maybe he was just ... needy? Starved? And did this mean that he was reading too much into this kiss, into the smiles, the dimples, the warmth he saw in Jared’s eyes?

„You´re overthinking things, Jen. Stop thinking so hard, it makes you frown and you´ll become all wrinkled an ugly.“

Matt had always laughed at him when his brain started to override, when he got lost in his own mind and his thoughts took over reality. Until Matt was gone, vanished from the face of the earth from one day to the next and all Jensen had left were a few black and white photographs Mack had taken of them the one time she visited him in San Francisco. Happy faces, and loving hugs.

„Jensen?“

Again, he had to force his thoughts back into reality. It happened a lot...

„Jensen´s inside his head again....“, they’d always teased him, since when he was a kid, his parents even had sent him to a shrink back then, worried ...

„Sorry, I ...I´m sorry. I didnt want to ... to make you ...“ Jared sounded hurt.

He looked up into Jared´s wounded eyes, realizing he´d drifted away again, and how the other man must have interpreted his behavior.

„No! No, it´s ...you didn´t. I ... I liked it. I ... I haven´t done this in a while. I´m sorry. I´m just... confused, I guess.“ After a moment, he added, „...and a little ... overwhelmed, maybe.“

He was rewarded with a slowly spreading smile on Jared´s face, starting in the other man´s eyes, and finally reaching his mouth, until the dimples showed, and his whole face seemed to radiate a careful joy... Jensen couldn’t help it, he had to smile back, it was contagious, and, well, he really had loved to kiss this man, had loved the feel of it, the taste, the way Jared had been so careful and slow.

And still... What do you know about the guy? And, more importantly ....what does he know about you?

One bad experience, and it tainted how he looked at people...reacted to people...for the rest of his life. The only one who can change that - is you. What will it be? Be a victim of your own fears forever ...or face them, and try again...maybe stumble again? Stumble, and fall ... and suffer ... make others suffer ... and where will you run this time if it ends like ... if someone else ends up...
like Matt ... because of you?

„I... I have to go.“

He got up so abruptly Jared jerked in his chair.

„What – no, Jensen, wait!“

Jared reached out to him over the table, his long arms just brushing Jensen´s before he flinched back; and Jensen could see the way it hurt Jared, could read it in his eyes, in the way his shoulders slumped, his face crumbled.

You can´t pull him into this... into your world. Better hurt him now, before it all starts ... than... having another missing persons report to fill out... a body to identify... it was stupid... selfish... to come here at all. To kiss, and act like it was something easy... normal... something leading to happy endings and ...

Something restricted his airways, a pressure settled on his chest, inside it, the blood was pounding in his ears, thump thump thump thump, and it was back, five fucking years, and the first week you´re home, it´s back, you´re back in the hole, and it sucks you in, down, down, down, do...

„JENSEN!“

Jared

Jared felt Jensen pull back, and the moment he looked into his eyes, he knew the other man was freaking out.

Too fast, you´ve been too fast, have scared him away, ruined it, you ruined it ... but he asked, didn´t he, and it felt so good.. so right... and he kissed back, he did, you weren´t... forcing it on him, and his lips seemed so... needy... longing for it...

He was confused, he couldn´t read this man, and it intrigued him all the more, he saw all those different emotions struggling in his eyes, it was like deciphering a complicated message, in a language he had thought he knew, and found out he didn´t understand anymore.

Jensen´s eyes were unfocused, he seemed to be far away, and it made Jared feel more insecure the longer it went on, something´s not right, did I trigger something here? Is there something wrong with him? Like... mentally? Or am I just an asshole for approaching him like this, without any idea about... anything?

He stammered an excuse, not even sure what came out of his mouth, everything went wrong all of sudden, and how can that be when the kiss was... felt like ... coming home... finally... and it snapped Jensen out of his trance. His eyes focused on Jared again, and he apologized, fucking apologized, and said he liked it, and Jared felt the tension solve into a big smile on his face, felt relief wash
over him head to toes, but the best thing was the smile he got back from the other man, warm and... hopeful? For a moment, he thought everything was alright.

And then something else creeped into Jensen´s eyes again ... the doubt, the suspicion...the fear. Jared could feel him retreat into himself, could feel it physically, as if Jensen had detached himself and left the room... I´m getting backlash from the emotional roller coaster that is this man, and it makes me want to know him even more...

When Jensen got up, it caught Jared by surprise, though, and he reacted on autopilot, wanted to grab him, hold him back.

Jensen´s flinch came like a slap in his face.

He didn´t have time to contemplate the fact how the rejection of a man he´d just met, and barely spoken to yet, could hurt so much. Jensen stood there, eyes huge, something wasn´t right with them, and with his breathing, either, way too fast, Jared scrambled to his feet, dimly heard the chair fall, clumsy moose limbs, and grabbed Jensen for real, shook him, but there was no reaction but... panic, panic in his eyes, panic in his rigid body; painful sounding shallow, hitched breaths made his throat constrict in a way it made Jared feel sick .... he shouted, then, panicking himself, and shook the other man, other clients got up, he heard Ava´s voice at his side, but warbled and muffled as if they were under water.

„Jensen!“, he had to come through to him, had to pull him out from ...wherever he was stuck, „JENSEN!“

But Jensen´s eyes, fixed on Jared´s face but not seeing anything, obviously, rolled back in his eyesocks, and he went limp, body slipping out of Jared´s grip ... and he fell.

Sherri

Sherri Padalecki waved the architect good bye, and went into the house with her usual long strides. In her casual jeans and thick knitted sweater, she could have been taken for far younger than her 48 years; her boyish figure, and purposeful, sure movements did nothing to diminish the impression of youth and energy. Of course she was perfectly able to play grande dame whenever the occasion deemed it necessary (actually, she always saw it as a game, a theater role she had to play convincingly); but she enjoyed the days when she could leave the tailored costumes and pearl strings inside the cupboard.

It was still deep winter, what with the latest snowstorms and ice cold winds – in March! - but spring would come, eventually, and she wanted the changes in her garden right on track the first day possible. Jeff´s wedding was only a few months ahead, and she wanted everything to be perfect. Usually, whatever Sherri Padalecki took in her very capable hands turned out just that – perfect. She had a hand for organizing events, and it was probably her ability to run charity dinners or electoral fundraising parties smoothly – and successfully – that had opened the doors of society for the Padaleckis. That, the right amount of background money, and acting skills - if you looked at it from the official side (there was, of course, a darker one, which included unspecified threats, blackmailing and bribery).

Somehow, moral standards had gone down when it came to taking money, at least if the sums were substancial enough; or they had never been any higher, and politicians or companies had only been
less smart about hiding where the money really came from. The internet, global economy, and pleasantly downgraded legislation in the globalized financial world had seen to that.

Sherri – even now, she preferred the short version of her name, she´d always hated `Sharon´ – nodded at Marta, the Mexican woman working at the house together with her husband.

„Is my mother in law ready?“

„She is waiting in her room, Mrs. Padalecki.“

„Good. I´ll change and be with her in twenty minutes. Please have her dressed and wrapped by then. Doctor´s appointment is at 4pm, we´ll have supper in town afterwards.“

„Of course, Mrs. Padalecki.“

She went to her dressing room, and sat in front of the big mirror to renew her hair and make-up. Brushing through her shoulder-length hair, so much like Jared´s in colour, she thought about their earlier conversation. Telling her son about their knowledge of his ... „other“ life had probably been a shock for him; she was well aware he´d been sure to have kept his trips to the gay clubs a secret. But she saw no sense in sugarcoating it. She´d waited for him to finally find the guts to tell them; when his move never came, she found it only appropriate to confront him directly. Jared was less than a year away from starting his career in the family business; it was time he stopped dreaming, and playing around, and learned to man up and stand up for himself. Which, of course, didn´t mean they´d accept it, should he ever decide to live what he thought was his „true“ sexual orientation. He could keep his little escapades now and then – heck, Jeff had his affairs up and down the country and who knew where else in the world – and play the role that was waiting for him, like a good son. No - a heir. Time to grow up, accept responsibilities and duties.

Maybe they´d been too soft with him – she had to admit, his artistic side had always fascinated her, and when he was still a boy, she´d been proud to show his talent off a little.... well, the prizes he won, for paintings, or this one sculpture he made in art class at High School. The things he created out of ... waste, just paper and cans and wood sticks, a piece of cloth...

And the clothes.

When he´d come down one morning, maybe ... 9, 10 years old? And wore this ....creation he´d made, all alone.... she´d known. The suspicions had been there, but ... Well, it was the sign she needed. From that day on, she saw to it that he was occupied with sports, and started to draw his life out for him, just little hints and phrases and motivational speeches, repeated like a mantra: school – college – family business – marriage – kids – success success success.

And he seemed OK with it, loved the football, basketball, skiing, the bike tours „into the wild“, coming home all dirty and scratched and with a broken limb now and then.

There simply wasn´t any time left for ... art, or fashion, or other suspicious subjects.

She´d known all along when he started visiting the clubs, some time during his second semester at college; he kept his visits rare, and secret (not to her, but, well, she´d be damned if she didn´t make use of her husband´s arsenal of security equipment to use it on her own family!). Sherri had watched it for a while, had installed a reliable spy close to Jared, and had taken his behavior as his way of dealing with „it“ realistically.

Of course, on the long run, Jared´s gay side would make him a target, vulnerable, especially with the big fusion going on ... the Russians weren´t exactly gay-friendly, and wouldn´t tolerate a fag as
co-boss in the united forces of their ... businesses. So, clearly he´d have to stop giving them a reason to detest him, deny him his place ... it´d ruin the whole treaty (it was fragile enough, but their common enemies had somewhat brought them together – charity begins at home, right?).

She wouldn´t have it. The Family wouldn´t have it.

So, Jared would suck it and get his horses in a row. And follow exactly the path they´d laid out for him. They´d worked too hard and built too much from scratch to see it threatened because one of her sons preferred dick to cunt. That little niece of the Russian Mob boss was cute enough, and she even had taken art classes in college .... and there was Andrej´s daughter, of course, Bela... spoiled, but smart as hell. The dream couple, she could see it in her mind, Jared and the Russian princess... Jeff´s engagement party would be the perfect place to have them meet. Jared was smart enough to understand what was expected of him.

Sometimes, it wouldn´t do any harm though to push and drag him a little – the boy could be awfully stubborn (he got that from his dad for sure); and, like Mary Poppins said, sometimes people needed a piece of sugar to swallow down the medicine.

Or a best friend to work in the message subtly, but steadily.

She took out her phone, and called Chad.

**Jared**

„Call 911!“

„What happened?!“

„Jesus, he just...“

„Let me...I can...“

„SOMEONE CALL 911 ALREADY!“

A firm hand grabbed Jared´s shoulder and shook him none too gently.

Glancing up, he looked into the face of a fellow student... one of the regular guests at the café.

„I´m working as a paramedic. If you let me have a look, I could...“

Jared got up from his knees, where he´d tried to get to Jensen´s slumped form, stuck between the table and the wall. Standing at Ava´s side – she´d taken his hand, but he only registered it later -, he watched the young man work.

„Let´s get the damn table out of the way“, Ava finally said, and everyone around them – a little crowd had gathered already – started busying themselves with pulling away chairs and lifting the rather heavy table up and away. Jared was kind of paralyzed ... he took in the commotion around him as if under water, eyes fixed on the man kneeling on the floor, on Jensen´s slack face, pale under the tan. He was lying on his back now, and the young paramedic searched for vitals, checked the pulse, even took a tiny flashlight out of his pocket and pried Jensen´s eyes open to test
the pupils’ reaction.

„Vitals are OK“, the paramedic/student finally said, turning back to Jared. „Maybe he just hasn´t eaten? He´s awfully skinny ... maybe he got up too fast?“

Jared felt helpless. How should he know? Jensen hadn´t eaten his pie for sure ... and what did he know? I´ve just met the guy, dammit, I don´t know shit about him, only that he´s come back from some jungle lately, and studies law here now...and that his eyes are stunningly green and his smile is the best that happened to me today, and his freckles make this little cluster on the right side of his nose, and one is even just under his right eye, and I always want to touch it with my finger.

„Basically, I think he´s OK, just fainted for some reason. Did anybody call 911?“

Several people answered, but Jared didn´t really pay attention, because at that moment Jensen´s eyelids started to flutter. Jared was on his knees before they had even opened.

„Jensen? Jen? Are you OK?“

The green eyes were a little dazed, and the whole face looked painfully vulnerable, a kid waking up from a dream, unguarded. Then the eyes focused on Jared, and his heart made a weird little jump when he saw something like a smile in them... or warmth, at least... something pleasant.

„Jensen? How are you feeling? You scared the shit out of me, man.“

Jensen´s eyes darted from his face to the other young man bowed over him, and to the small group of people standing around them. He frowned.

„Did I pass out?“ His voice was rough. Croaking.

The paramedic took over. „You fainted, obviously, and fell. I´m Aldis , by the way, and I work as a paramedic when I´m not studying. Jensen, right?“

Jensen nodded slightly, and winced.

„Don´t move“, Aldis immediately said, and gently took Jensen´s head between his large hands. Jensen closed his eyes.

„Is he hurt?“, Jared croaked.. He looks so tired, Jared thought. Oh God, if he´s really hurt .... we just met... the kiss...

„He could have banged his head – did you - “ The whole group of people turned as one at the noise of an ambulance pulling over and stopping in front of the café.

„Ah. Guess we´ll let the professionals on duty take over“, Aldis smiled at Jared reassuringly, turning back to Jensen. „Jensen? The paramedics are here. I guess they´ll take you to the hospital, OK?“ Jensen only groaned, but it sounded more exasperated than painful.

Aldis got up to make room for his two colleagues, and pulled Jared up with him.

„Let´s give them room to do their job“, he said, patting Jared´s shoulder. „He´ll be OK. Might have to get a headscan though ... you never know.“

They watched the uniformed men check Jensen again, bring in the stretcher, and carefully heave Jensen unto it before fixing it to the gurney. Jared stepped closer.

„Jensen?“
The eyes opened. They were clear now. *So green ... he carries part of the jungle with him...* for some reason, Jared felt his eyes prickle.

„Hey there“, he murmured, voice a little thick. „They´ll take good care of you. I´ll come with you, OK? Keep you company and all? Make a poodle out of a balloon? Put on my red clown nose? Hold your hand?“ His fingers itched to touch the other man´s face, follow the line of the eyebrows, the prominent cheekbones. Feel the softness of those lips again.

*Keep your fingers to yourself... You´ve fucked up enough already, dumbass.*

A smile tugged at Jensen´s mouth, and there was something in his eyes... *longing*, Jared thought. It was immediately replaced by ...pain, just a glimpse of it, before Jensen closed his eyes again.

„You can´t“, he said, voice low.

„What?“ Jared asked, bewildered. „Why – what? Of course I can, it´s no big deal, I haven´t got classes today, and I can go see Gen´s project later, she´ll -“

Jensen interrupted him, voice firm now, if a little forced.

„I don´t want you to come with me“, he said, eyes still closed.

Jared flinched. „What? But ...oh.“ Something cringed inside of him, painfully so.

„Oh“, he repeated, barely audible. „I – I didn´t – I ... sorry.“

At that, Jensen´s eyes opened once more, and Jared almost jerked back at the raw emotions showing in them, for an instant only, before the other man had his face under control again.

*I don’t understand you, Jensen, you tell me to leave, but your eyes...they tell me differently... I don’t know what´s going on here, and why you can´t tell me... lost, I feel lost, it has never been that difficult, and never been so important ...*

„It´s not your fault, Jay“, Jensen whispered. „It´s... me. I just ...I can´t.“

Something ghosted over his face, sadness, and a hint of ... anger?

„I´m sorry“, he said, gently now, and Jared had to press his lips together, keep himself from asking, demanding explanations, or ... begging. Pleading.

He nodded, slowly, and watched the paramedics roll the gurney into the bus, and close the door behind Jensen´s feet.

One of them turned to Jared once more.

„You were with him when it happened?“

„Yes...“ Jared croaked. *Was I? „With“ him? Or did we just .. share a coffee... a few words...like random people running into each other at an airport...* 

„I´d need your name and address please, a phone number would be great too. Just in case there are questions.“

„Ok....“ Jared gave his name, everything the guy wanted, all the while staring at the bus´ closed doors.
"I don´t want you to come with me".

You´ve met the guy ... twice. And yet those words hurt more than any fight you´ve ever had so far, every insult you got from others, every tell-off from your family.

The paramedic got behind the wheel, and Jared stood there, numbly, as the bus pulled from the curb and vanished, whirling up snow in its wake.

"I don´t want you to come with me."

He turned, and walked inside the cafe´ again, where people were already putting everything back in order, someone had even placed Jensen´s plate with the sad remains of his apple pie on the table, the cup with the now cold double espresso.

Aldis, the student/paramedic, was on his way out. He squeezed Jared´s shoulder briefly.

"I know it looked scary, but he´ll be OK. You´ll see."

Jared nodded, again, he felt at a loss at what to do, and finally sat down at the table again, staring at the crumbs on Jensen´s plate, the half eaten cinnamon roll on his own. The table where he´d got that tiny smile. That look, warm and ...

"I´m so sorry, Jay."

Ava stood close, her voice was low, full of sympathy. She hugged him, firmly, and Jared could smell the cinnamon on her, vanilla, and freshly grained coffee.

"That didn´t go as planned, huh", she murmured, giving him a brief smile. „But he´ll be OK, and you can ... come back here, next coffee´s on me, ok?"

Again, he nodded, feeling strangely empty, and wounded, and it doesn´t make any sense, how did this... stranger... get under my skin like that, in so short a time? No sense at all, no explanation, aside from former-life-theories, and I´m not desperate enough to believe that shit... or - am I? Desperate?

"Thank you“, he murmured, and she squeezed his shoulder just like Aldis before, smiling at him reassuringly, and went back behind the counter.

Jared needed to get out, his legs felt restless, the gym would be great, two hours of taking his body to its limits, music blearing into his ears, something to keep the thoughts away... He knew he´d feel better afterwards.

He got up abruptly, the chair´s legs screeching over the tiled floor. His sudden move had sent his jacket to the ground, the scarf and knitted cap he´d just haphazardly thrown over the back of the wooden chair when they´d arrived. Somebody must´ve taken Jensen´s clothes and given them to the paramedics, cause they weren´t on his chair any more. Jensen´s chair.

With a sigh, he crouched down to grab his things from the floor, all of them probably as dirty and wet as his trousers where he´d kneeled on them. Something caught his eyes, wedged in between the chair at the empty table next to them and the wall. Jared fished for it.

It was a phone.

He was just about to turn and give it to Ava, when it hit him.
Jensen´s phone. He must have lost it when he fell.

He stared at it for a moment, unsure what to do ... you can´t possibly...you can´t keep it.

„I don´t want you to come with me.“

He´d been as clear as day about it, hadn´t he? No sugarcoating. Jensen didn´t want his company, although it hadn´t seemed like it when they... he looked perfectly Ok with it when they....

The kiss. It was the kiss.

Too much, too early?

But it felt so good. So right.

He turned the phone in his hand. It looked relatively new, nothing fancy, no artsy case adorning the back.

Almost looks like the burner phones they always use in action movies...

The phone started buzzing. Three times, and music started to play, volume very low, some Indie Rock song Jared didn´t know. It stopped after a minute or so, only to begin buzzing again seconds later.

It was weird, but it gave Jared the push he needed to make his decision. He pocketed the phone, feeling its buzz inside his jacket´s pocket, waved at Ava, and left the café.

Outside, he went straight for the next doorway to shelter himself from the icy wind, and pulled out the cellphone. The music had just stopped, but before Jared could even press any button on the little divice, the buzzing´s vibration started again.

He pressed the little green telephone shaped button.

„Yeah?“
Chapter 5

Jim

Jim Beaver checked his tie in the large bathroom mirror.

Perfect. He smoothed down his suit’s jacket, padded his cheeks. Clean shaven and soft as a newborn’s butt. Well, not quite, but ... smoother than they’d been in weeks.

A last critical look at his own image ... he looked as business-y and smart as he´d ever be.

So ... the Boss had called. There had been a time when he´d called Alan a friend .... brothers in arms, that´s what they´d been back then, on the dirty and dangerous streets of their youth. They´d survived the first mob war, and the second ... Alan with his tactical mind and ruthlessness, Jim by being always as prepared as possible, and by trusting no one.

Jim had taken part in all of Alan´s kids´ baptizing ceremonies, a proud godfather ... and he´d loved them like his own. He´d taken his role seriously ... trips to the zoo and the planetarium, birthday cakes and weekends at his cabin in the woods, complete with a night spent outside, marshmallows roasted over the open fire, and horror stories that made the kids shiver with anticipation.

He always had the feeling it was what his life should have looked like ... having a family, kids, weekends and a nine-to-five job like everyone ....

Well, he had a job. He even had a few of them ... there was the garage, his cover-up for ... other occupations, the representation of his official self. All his other jobs were tied to The Family somehow, most of them pretty unpleasant in the beginning; later on, he´d climbed the ladder, thanks to his old friend becoming the bosses´ right hand, and his hands didn´t get bloody as regularly any more.

He knew Alan would end up as The Boss one day, and his friend proved him right, even faster than Jim had believed possible. Things looked pretty good for a while, the mob war had been on hold, all parties wounded and weakened (and the mayor had needed some success to present to his flock of voters, so they agreed on a temporary ceasefire, in exchange for certain .... bonusses.)

When Alan´s wife had died in that car accident ... it had changed everything.

Most of all, it changed his old friend. Alan had truly loved his wife, and losing her, the part of him that was loveable and caring and still... human ... was gone too, at least into deep hiding.

Alan notched up security around his family – well, what was left of it -, and at a time when his children would have needed their father, he turned into some kind of drill sergeant/prison guard, and finally sent them away to remote schools where security was easier to control (and manipulate in his favor) than in the city.

Even Jim, oldest family friend and trusted godfather, had been shut out most of the year; and when he dared point out to Alan how his actions and behavior might enhance their security, but ripped his kids from the safe haven they still had – family – Alan had lost it, and accused Jim of illoyalty.

They´d parted on bad terms, and it was only in memory of old times that Jim didn´t end up as some unidentifyable corpse floating in the river or rotting somewhere in the woods.
He’d always tried to keep contact with his godchildren though, writing letters, sending presents; some of them arrived, some didn’t. He received a few letters himself, mostly from Jensen, who somehow found a way to outsmart his father’s tight security measures; and although he didn’t see the kids for years, he kept feeling responsible for them, and part of their family.

When the kid of one of the other Families had been hit in a car accident, and barely survived, saved by some random stranger, he knew immediately it was retaliation. Revenge. And he knew what it meant, on the long run... The War was on again. Fiercer, more violent and brutal than before, only smarter and less visible to the public. Messages were sent, bloody messages, and were understood, and answered.

Jim started to fear for the life of the kids he had sworn to protect, swallowed his pride, and went to see his old - rather, former – friend.

To his surprise, Alan did not only open his door, metaphorically speaking, but also invited him (back) in. Obviously, he’d come to the conclusion his family could need all the protection it could get in this mess. Jim got his role back, and a new job in the Family Business: trusted godfather to Alan’s kids, bearer of secrets they wouldn’t tell their father, with the mission to protect them where their father would maybe come too late because they didn’t confide in him (and as sophisticated as the technical equipment might be, it didn’t always give them intel in time to react).

The only downside was that he had to keep his deal with Alan a secret. It went right against his heart and beliefs, but – well, if it helped keep the kids safe and alive, he would bite the bullet.

And it worked. The mixture of technical data, spies, security men, and his „secret“ knowledge prevented at least two attempts on killing Josh, and Jensen; even Mack, only a little kid not even in High School back then, had been targeted.

Jim had never taken to ask Alan about the „accident“ that had nearly killed the son of one of his opponents, nor about any other suspicious death occurring within the Russian or Polish mob families. He tried to stay „clean“, staying in character for his godchildren. And, honestly, he already despised the methods then, had come to hate the whole system of „eye to eye“, ruining family after family, for the sake of power and money and pride.

Jim sighed.

Josh had grown up, followed his father’s footsteps, joined The Business with enthusiasm. He’d slipped out of Jim’s grip ... and he’d paid the price.

With the opponents’ succeeding in killing the Bosses’ son, The Heir, the game had been catapulted unto a whole new level. Open War had been declared, and with the ongoing fusion of the Russian and Polish Families, it would leave nothing but blood soaked grounds everywhere. Graves and crosses...

When Jensen had called him, from an airport somewhere in South America, telling him he was on his way home, Jim’s stomach had almost turned. He’d tried to reason with the boy, make him stay down there in his damn jungle ... but it had been in vain.

Of course. Jensen was fiercely protective of his siblings, especially Mack, and he wouldn’t repeat what he must have seen as abandoning her. Jim had been surprised enough that the boy had found the courage to actually leave – Jim, and everyone else, most of all Alan maybe. Jensen had come to Jim, actually, already on his way south, to say good bye; had begged him to look after Mack, and
Josh, too, and to forgive him for running away like that.

Forgive him! That boy ... always so quiet, thinking way too much for his own good... and with so much love to give, caring for those he loved so much it would consume him one day...

And yet, he left. Probably filled with guilt and self-loathing from the minute he stepped out of his home...

Jensen had called, and Jim had told Alan; the Family’s security system was put on high alert, people were activated in very remote countries, and a few hours later, a picture had been taken, of a shaggy, sunburnt young man, skinny and bearded and with the same backpack weighing him down he’d left with, five years before.

Jensen had arrived, had gone back to the family’s old town house, and spent a few nights there. He’d met his sister, as far as they knew, had registered at the local university, and was looking for a job. Jim wasn’t sure how much of it Alan already knew...probably everything, Alan had never been shy to spy on his own kids. Jim, on the other hand, had the benefit of Jensen’s trust (goosebumps made him shiver each time he thought about how he didn’t deserve it .. how he’d betrayed someone he loved dearly, time and again...) of course, his reasons were ... they were good intentions. Pathway to Hell...

But Jim knew, the moment Jensen would find out about his betrayal, something would break between them, irrevocably ... and yet: if it was the only way to keep the boy safe, alive, Jim was willing to take the risk: better to lose him as a friend...a godchild..a beloved son; than to lose him entirely, to a murderous game others were playing, sacrificing their pawns and bishops and knights without hesitating.

He washed his hands, dried them carefully.

Jensen had contacted him once more, already in town, and told him about his plans; it had been a short call, Jensen seemed a little...jittery. His voice had changed ... it was deeper, now, rougher, and he still didn’t use more words than absolutely necessary, but even for Jim, who knew him well, the phone call seemed a little...weird.

Does he know?, he asked himself. Did he find out...about the arrangement between Alan and me?

No way. Jensen would have cut the ties, Jim was sure of that.

Maybe he was just careful; maybe he just knew his father too well, and wanted to avoid him as long as possible. Wanted him out of his life for some more time.

Maybe he was grieving.

Jim couldn’t blame the boy.

With a sigh, he left the bathroom, and took the elevator to the office right on top, the one with the nice view and the soft carpets, where The Boss reigned over his Family.

Jared

„Jensen? Finally! So now you’re back for a week, and already keep your little sis hanging out to
dry? How was the meeting! Is Harvelle really such a scary old dragon? You know, Osric told me she-“

Jared cleared his throat.

„Uhm...hello?“

The line went quiet. Then a voice full of suspicion asked, „Who´s there?

„Hey there, I´m Jay, and-“

„Where´s Jensen? Oh God, did something happen? What did you do to him!“

Jared was taken aback for an instant. Why would she ask that?

„I – nothing, I did ...he lost his phone, and-“

„He LOST his phone? JENSEN?” Jared heard the girl – Jensen´s sister, obviously – take in a shaky breath. „What do you want?“, she whispered. „Jensen would never lose his phone. Or anything else. Jensen doesn´t lose things.“ Jared felt as if he´d fallen into some thriller movie scene by chance, and he had no clue what the scene´s plot was about.

„Please, don´t hurt him...please...“

He heard the tears in her voice. It snapped him out of the surreal world he´d found himself in for a moment.

„Hurt him – what – NO! I´d never hurt him! Why would I – listen. Jensen is OK. Well, I hope he is, he had this – seizure, or something, I´m not sure, we-“

„Where is he? Who are you? What – what happened...why do you have his phone?!”

Jared sighed. A headache started to build right above his eye sockets.

„Listen, I ...just let me tell you what happened, OK? It would be easier than...“

„Of course, sorry, I .... I probably overreacted, sorry, it´s ... since Josh´s accident I´m a little...“

Her voice died away. Josh?, Jared wondered. Accident? Something stirred in his mind, TV news with flashing blue lights on the screen, a fancy car reduced to a pretzel. Why did he remember it...must have been someone famous... or well known, at least?

„It´s OK. Look, we had coffee together, Jensen and I, I met him today, and at the airport also, we bumped into each other, actually, and ...“

*You are babbling.*

He took a deep breath.

„Anyway, we had coffee together, and everything was fine, you know? And suddenly he wanted to leave, and had this – he couldn´t breathe right, and went kind of...I dunno, it was scary, and then his eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness.“

„Oh, God....“ The voice was small. Scared.

„There was a fellow student here, at the café, thank God, a paramedic, and he checked him. He
said he was alright... But the paramedics who then came took him to the hospital, he’d bumped his head pretty bad, I think, and ...they wanted to be sure. He was a little ..dizzy."

*He was clear enough to tell you to fuck off.*

„Where did they take him? Which hospital?“

Ah. Jared frowned. „I didn´t really ask...shit. I was ...it ... sorry.“

„Oh, so you´re not... oh. That´s OK, I´ll find out. So - he lost his phone for real...Listen, can we meet somewhere so I can give it to him? He´ll need it.“

„Yeah, of course.“ Jared needed only a moment to come to a decision.

„You know what? I’d like to visit him anyway, so why don´t we meet at the hospital?“

„Yeah, great idea! I’ll find out where he was taken to, and text you the address? I’ll go there straight away, and I’m not gonna leave, so you’ll find me there anytime.“

„Sounds good to me.“

„Ok, so ... see you, then?“

„See you...“

„Wait a moment!“

Jared´s finger froze over the „end call“-button. „Yeah?“

„What do you look like? So I can be sure you´re not some ki- some creep taking advantage of the situation?“

*Interesting, Jared thought. What the hell have I gotten myself into here? A bunch of paranoid psychotics? Witness protection program? Jack Bauer´s extended family?*

He cleared his throat.

„Uhm, I´m 6’5 tall, longish hair..uhm..chestnut brown..and I´m wearing a dark blue plume jacket with this kinda fur rimming around the hood?“

„Is it fake fur?“

„What?“

„On your jacket. Is it fake fur? ´Cause if it´s not, I ain´t gonna talk to you. “

„Yeah, I suppose it is.“ *What the hell?*

„Good. Call me on this number before you show up, OK?“

„OK ... bye, then.“

„Bye!“

Jared looked at the phone in his hand after ending the call.

*What the fuck is going on here ...*
He squinted into the pale light, still wintry and grey, despite it being March already. The wind whirled the powdery snow around his feet, making it dance and curl like a living creature.

Jensen’s reaction earlier...the way he withdrew so determinedly ... his eyes, speaking to him for tiny moments, belying the words that left his mouth ... and now, his sister’s weird reaction. The siblings acted like they were on ... constant alert, or something. Threatened by an invisible enemy.

He knew the feeling. Oh, he knew.

„Always watch your back, Jared. Trust no one before you’ve got proof of their status, you hear me? No one. Not your friends, not the hot girl who wants to take you to her room to get fucked after a fun evening. Our enemies are many, and to think they are stupid or lazy, or would show mercy against you ´cause you are young and still... innocent... it would be beyond foolish.“ His father had drilled it into them. Time and again. There was Family. And there was The Enemy.

Jared had followed the warnings, grudgingly, had endured the heightened security procedures whenever the situation tightened. Had started to get sloppy, and lazy, and angry at his father for making a mountain out of a molehill. Then, his accident had happened, an accident he only survived because some stranger had found him immediately after he’d crashed his car – and wasn’t it a miracle, because how big were the chances that someone would actually drive down that lonely road late at night, on one of the coldest winter nights of that year?

His father had told him only much later, when Jared was fully recovered and was ready to go back to school... that the accident had been everything but, the car had been manipulated, and the crazy driver who’d pushed him off the street had most likely been a member of one of the other families. The Enemy.

Jared had been scared, at first. Who wouldn’t be? He’d stuck to his father’s security protocol like it was the Holy Bible. His path to survival.

Then, after a specifically annoying fight about having a body guard (a visible, official one) accompany him to his prom ball, he’d made a 180 turn.

What was the sense of staying alive, if „life“ meant being in fear all of the time, hiding behind massive shoulders or bullet proof walls.

It was not what Jared wanted.

He hadn’t asked for being born into a family that lived in a secret war with other, equally dangerous families; people saw the money, the power, but they didn’t see the downside; and they sure as hell didn’t even know about the real game behind the veil of wealth and influence. To be true, Jared envied his fellow students at college, those who had to bend over twice to make ends meet, took on odd jobs and gave tutoring lessons to spoiled rich kids to be able to pay for their beer.

Jared was stubborn. His parents got that right, he admitted to it. You could also say he was determined... in this case, he set his mind on not letting The Family ruin his life – he’d rather live for real, and maybe die early, than be caught inside a golden cage, forced to double and triple check everyone who dared approach him, or read confidential files about every professor, classmate (and the classmate’s parents), or janitor on campus.

He stopped playing along. Got a job. Frankly refused every active role in keeping his security up.

He wasn’t sure if his father had just doubled the secret body guards or the spies around him, or if
he was just lucky (or downright too unimportant to his father´s opponents): but nothing happened. Nothing he was aware of, at least.

With a sigh, he pocketed Jensen´s phone.

So he would meet the sister – little sister, from the sound of her voice.

Maybe she could be his way to...

*No way, man. You are NOT using her to get to her brother, sneaking your way into his life. You´re not that desperate, and by the way, you don´t even KNOW the man!*

Jared huffed derisively at himself.

*He´s hot. He´s smart. He´s .... there´s something in his eyes that makes me want to hug him and never let go.*

*He´s a mystery.*

He stomped back between the college buildings, wind tugging at his jacket´s hood, to get his car.
Chad Lindbergh had a very relaxed view of life in general, and college life in particular.

He’d been born into a family with a comfortable enough financial background; not rich, but definitely upper middle class. His parents could afford good schools for their son, expensive ones, even if that meant their family vacation would rather bring them to one of the lakes than to Tahiti. Chad was OK with it – he was the kind of kid who found friends easily, especially for a week or two; it was much more difficult to keep them, as Chad was also the kind of kid who pulled trouble like a magnet. It started in kindergarten, where his mischievous creativity started to unfold; parents tended to make their children steer clear of the scrawny kid with the almost too alert eyes and the head full of ideas they tried to keep out of their offspring’s minds. It seemed like it would continue like that in elementary; some of his kindergarten mates were sent to the same private school, and Chad’s reputation had followed him, spreading faster between the parents than an infectious disease.

Chad was sitting on his desk, alone, trying to get the attention of the kid on the desk next to him, a serious looking girl with piggy tails wearing a ridiculously pink dress. It got him the first admonition of his school career, and left him sulking and bored out of his mind, fiddling with the new pencil case and crumpling the sheet of paper on which he was supposed to color the fonts that, as he well knew, formed his name. He was about to start folding a paper plane out of it, when the door opened, and a man appeared in the doorway, a man so tall Chad had to bend his neck way back to see his face. It was a serious face, hard lines around the firmly closed lips, a frown on it that looked kind of permanent. Chad instinctively avoided to look into the somehow cold eyes, ducking his head. That was when he noticed the kid behind the man, a boy as skinny as Chad himself, with shaggy hair (that had obviously been worked on with a brush, with little effect), and a cautious expression on his face.

Chad tried to get the kid’s attention immediately, their eyes met, and he made one of his best funny faces (it was his fish face, and he knew it was simply hilarious). The boy’s lips started to twitch, and a grin spread on his face. It vanished though, when the man – the boy’s father, obviously – pulled him in front of the class, and kind of shoved him into the direction of the teacher, who had a maniac smile plastered to her face.

„Children, this is Jared. He will be in our class too. Say hello to Jared!“

„Hello, Jared!“, the kids dutifully welcomed the new classmate, and Chad was delighted when the teacher took Jared’s hand and pulled him over to Chad’s desk.

„You can sit with Chad, Jared. I’m sure you’ll be best friends in no time.“

Oh, and how right she was ....

They lived through elementary together, through the quicksand depths hidden in puberty, and threw their graduation hats in the air as one. They’d shared the pain of growth spurts, pimples and female cruelties; had enjoyed driving practice (their own private „lessons“, on the parking place behind one of the malls Jared’s dad owned, at 3am); had suffered through dancing lessons and prom ball, and finally had filled out their college applications together.
And through all those years, it had always been Chad who dragged Jared along, to parties, private little celebrations, movies, concerts; Jared, on the other hand, organized learn groups and field trips to art museums, forcing Chad to participate (and although he’d never have admitted to it, he actually enjoyed most of them; even the learning circles, as Jared always saw to it that a few hot girls were present to spice things up.)

Chad had lived through the nightmare of sitting at his best friend’s bedside, after the accident that almost got Jared killed, talking himself hoarse, and keeping him company later, when Jared had woken up, telling him every little bit of school gossip, making his friend smile, and laugh again.

It was then that Jared’s mother, Sherri, had approached him.

He would have rejected her request, fiercely, at any other moment; but he’d waited outside an operation room for hours, fearing for his friend’s life, and it kind of made what she told him very convincing.

„I need your help, Chad“, Sherri had pleaded – pleaded! - eyes scarily serious. „Jared’s such a stubborn kid...he won’t listen to us forever, there will come a time when he refuses to be protected by his parents. That’s where we will need you, Chad. To help keep him safe.“

So, Chad agreed...

To spy on his best friend.

**Jared**

Jared hated hospitals.

First, there was the smell... disinfectant, hospital food, and sick people, mixed together into very special, very unpleasant memories. And the weird combination of hectic activity and an oddly calm silence ....waiting for something to happen, death, or survival, or - anything at all.

He’d had his share of hospital time at a young enough age, after his car accident, and he’d hated every single moment of it (even if he’d mostly been to a very expensive, very secure private clinic); sometimes, he still dreamed of it, nightmares in which he was strapped to a bed in a bare, too brightly lit room, his family standing around his bed with mockingly pitying faces, announcing their decision that he’d be hospitalized for the rest of his life, „for his own good“; and when he wanted to protest, to scream, he found himself gagged, straining against the holds...

You don’t need to be Freud to analyze that one.

He always woke up panting and drenched in sweat, his throat hurting, and some of the panic of his nightmares used to surface every time he visited a hospital, making him feel uneasy and restless, eager to leave again. Ready to run at any moment, in case...

They’d taken Jensen to the nearest hospital, one of the smaller, public ones; nothing like the fancy clinic Jared had been to. *It will smell like overboilt cabbage and bad coffee and fear, I’m sure of it. Why did it always smell like cabbage? They usually didn’t even serve it, as far as he knew. He’d checked.*

Nevertheless, he took a deep breath, and entered. Bad memories were maybe the lesser problem he
´d have to face this time.

When the smell hit him, as soon as the gliding doors closed behind him, he felt the usual goosebumps crawl up his spine; but somehow, it was different, like overrun by the other feelings struggling inside him, the thoughts running crazy since he´d pulled his car out of the parking lot.

Was it really smart to come here? Did he make a mistake?

He stared down at the cellphone he´d been clutching in his hand without noticing.

If you want a second chance, better try now. Before you go crazy. You can always disguise it as an act of .. friendliness? Helpfulness? Show the Good Samaritan hidden somewhere inside you?

He huffed. Green eyes had been haunting him all the way here, serious, or distant, or with that small smile in them, the sudden spark of warmth that came unexpected, but was so welcome...

Who are you kidding, man ... you´re totally gone, and you don´t want to accept reality. He´s not interested in you, maybe even ... worse, and if fainting right in front of your nose hasn´t been a clear enough sign that he ... prefers not being in your company ... then I don´t know.

Jared rubbed his front. Yeah, true. There was that.

But.

There also were the conflicting emotions running over Jensen´s face, the longing in his eyes, that glimpse of honest, surprised joy when they´d met again.

Something didn´t add up here, and he was going to find out what.

Instead of asking for Jensen´s room at the counter, he called back his sister.

„Hello?“

„Uhm..hi. It´s me, Jay – the guy with the phone? I´m at the hospital now. Which room is Jensen-is your brother in?“

There was a second of silence, another. When Jensen´s sister finally talked, her voice was cautious.

„I´d rather meet at the cafeteria, if you don´t mind. Jensen´s still asleep.“

„Oh – uhm. Ok. I see. Yeah, let´s meet there, then.“

„I´ll be down in a minute. You said you´re tall, long hair, blue jacket?“

„Yeah...though the hair´s not really long. More like...chin length?“

Was that a chuckle he heard on the other end? So she was able to laugh. He´d started to doubt it, with a voice that seemed always so ... careful. Suspicious.

„Ok, longish hair, then. I´ll find you, tall guy.“

He followed the yellow lines on the wall to the cafeteria, and lingered at the entrance, watching people. Wheelchairs, drips, walker-rollators. Bandages and casts. The smell of sickness was even worse here, the coffee scent not able to whitewash it. Suddenly, Jared longed for one of Ava´s perfect lattes. The scent alone...
A girl came down the corridor, well, a young woman, and Jared straightened up. One glance, and it was clear she had to be Jensen´s sister. The same fair skin, big green eyes; her hair was blond, though, long and smooth, mostly. It was a little tangled where she´d obviously pulled off a cap, and seemed electrostatically charged in the dry hospital air. He´d felt it too, earlier, pulling off his hoodie: His hair had crackled, and stuck to the fur on his hood´s rim. The FAKE fur.

He put on a smile.

She´d come close, and he could see the freckles on her face, now, just like Jensen´s, only paler – well, she hadn´t been exposed to southern sun lately, like her brother, wherever it was he´d been; maybe she also wore make up to cover them. Although Jared wouldn´t know why, as they were just as adorable on her as on Jensen.

„Are you Jay?“

He smiled even brighter, trying to wash that suspicious look off of her face.

„Yeah, that´s me.“ He held out the small phone. „And that´s Jensen´s phone.“

She took it, looking relieved, and shot him a smile.

„Thanks. I´m Mack – Mackenzie. It was very nice of you to come here personally.“

Jared shrugged. *If you knew my motives... you wouldn´t be so grateful maybe.*

„Uhm...yeah. Well, that´s me. Do-gooder head to toes, you know?“

The stupid joke somehow broke the wall of coutiousness surrounding her. She grinned, now, and Jared saw a very mischievous sparkle in her eyes, if only for an instant.

„Yeah, right... well, I guess I owe you a coffee at least.“

„I fully agree with you, there“, Jared replied. „Although I might regret taking a coffee at this place once I´ve tasted it.“

„Coffee snob, are we?“, she teased, but the grin didn´t leave her face.

„Guilty as charged“, Jared answered, „but only where coffee is concerned. It´s all Ava´s fault. She got me addicted to the really good stuff...“

„Ava?“

They had found a free table behind a big plant ekeing out a sadly neglected existence in a corner. „A friend of mine. She owns a cafe on campus. Best coffee in town ...in the whole state, maybe.“

„I can see why Jensen and you get along“, she said, smiling a little distractedly. „He´s the biggest coffee junkie I´ve ever known.“ She fiddled with the phone in her hand.

„Is that where ... where you...“

The lighter mood was gone again.

„Yes“, Jared said. „We went to have coffee. We´d ... we´d just met.“

*Of course you have, moron, if he´s only just come back from The Wild.*
He took a deep breath.

„So – is he OK? What did the doctors say? He´s OK, isn´t he? His head – he...“

When Jared noticed the look on her face – there it is, again, the wall...what is it with those two? – he backpedalled. „Sorry. I – it´s none of my business.“

Mackenzie scrutinized him for a moment. She seemed to come to a decision, shaking her head.

„No, it´s OK. You were there with him, after all.“ She sighed. „Doctors say he´s got a light concussion, and want to keep him over night.“

„Dammit.“

She grimaced. „Yeah, he wont be happy about that...Jensen hates hospitals.“

Jared huffed. „I can relate, believe me.“

She shot him a sharp look. „Bad experience?“

He shrugged. „Had my share of it, yes.“ She kept looking at him, so he went on, „I had a car accident when I was 16. Pretty bad one. I was in hospital for weeks. Only survived ´cause some stranger pulled me out of my wrecked car and took me back to town, obviously. The car wreck burned out later, seems like there had been some explosion...so, if I´d still been in there...“

Her touch came unexpected, but there it was, her hand, small and warm on his own big, restless ones. It was weirdly comforting, coming from a person he hardly knew.

„I´m sorry to hear that. It must have been ... horrible.“

Her eyes were kind, and warm. Oddly sad too, and pained.

So, that´s what she looks like when the wall is down. That´s probably what Jensen is like when he opens up...

„Yeah, it was ... weird. To feel like... you know. Like you´ve barely escaped death. And, well, the hospital, it was... long. And boring. One more week of day TV shows and I´d have gone crazy.“

„But you´re ... you were OK, then? No remaining damage?“

At that, Jared laughed. „Well, my brother´d say my head´s been damaged for good, but – no, not really. I was a tough six months, but eventually, I was back to normal. If I ever was normal in the first place.“

She grinned. „Well, who of us is....so, you got a brother?“

He was a little surprised by the sudden change.

„Yeah, an older one, Jeff. He´s a jackass, but, you know...family. Gotta love them. And I´ve got a little sister, too. She´s at college.“

She rolled her eyes. „So she´s got two older brothers, just like me? Poor girl. She has my sympathy.“

„You and Jensen have another brother?“ Finally, he was getting somewhere.
Her smile faltered, and vanished.

„Had. We had an older brother. He – he died a few months ago ... in a car crash.“

It was Jared´s time to take her hands in his.

„I´m very sorry to hear that.“ Her eyes were dangerously shiny. Jared´s instincts took over. Without thinking, he leaned over the small table, and hugged her. He felt her stiffen, but before he could pull back – *dammit, you´re such a dumbass, you can´t just force yourself on people like that!* - she relaxed against his shoulder. After a minute or so, Jared carefully straightened up again, holding her shoulders, searching for her eyes.

„You OK?“

She nodded, dipping at the corners of her eyes with her sleeve pulled over a finger.

„Sorry about that“, she said, a little shakily. „It still - it still hurts. Even if I didn´t see Josh much, and he could be a total douchebag, but ...he was my brother.“

„Yeah.“ Jared knew exactly what she meant. „Family.... guess it´s never easy.“

She huffed. „Amen, brother... Jensen would agree with you, I can tell you. Well, me too, actually.“

They smiled at each other. Something had changed...they´d connected, somehow, and Jared had the impression she´d come to the conclusion he wasn´t a threat.

*Good...first step, Jared. Don´t ruin it now.*

He was irritated by his own thoughts. Fact was, he didn´t want to ruin it, of course not, but not only because he wanted to get a second chance on meeting Jensen. He liked Mack, he realized. She seemed like someone he wanted to be friends with.

*Gen would like her, too. And Megan ... they´d get along fine.*

Suddenly, he felt the urge to be – honest.

„Is that why he – why he is so... cautious?“

She looked up at that, a little surprised. Jared went on hastily. „I mean – I´ve only just met him, and we haven´t spent more than forty minutes together, all in all, but – I – when – when ...“ He shook his head in frustration. Jared P., the winner of many a debate, ladies and gentlemen, at a total loss at how to explain...

Mack´s face went soft, though. A little smile tugged at her mouth.

„You like him, huh.“ It wasn´t a question.

Jared felt warmth on his cheeks. *Damn blush.*

„Yeah, I – I like him. And I – well, there was this moment when I thought ... when I was sure he liked me, too. For a moment.“ *Great, now you´re turning into a parrot.*

She sighed. „What happened?“

Jared hesitated for only an instant. If he wanted to earn this girl´s (*and Jensen´s*) trust, he´d have to show her some of it, too.
„We ...we talked, and then we – we kissed. And he seemed OK with it, he – he even asked me, you know, I’d never – I’d never even have tried, otherwise! And then he suddenly – I don’t know. He freaked out. I don’t – Mack?“

Noticing the incredulous look on her face, he stopped babbling.

„What’s wrong?“

„You – he – you kissed?“

„Uhm...yeah?“ Jared knew his face had to look like a well ripened tomatoe. „I’m gay, and well, I thought that Jensen -“

„What?“ She seemed confused, or irritated for a moment. Then she made a dismissive gesture with her hand. „That’s OK, Jensen is gay, too, it’s no problem, but – he seriously kissed you, after knowing you for – what, a week?“

This was so awkward ... „Uhm, well, we’ve met twice. I was ... I don’t usually do ... uhm ... it felt right, somehow. As if - “ He stopped. 
*It felt like coming home, but I’m not gonna say that out loud, ’cause it sounds crazy enough inside my head.*

He knew he was blushing more than before, if that was even possible.

A new smile spread on Mackenzie´s face, mixed with surprise, and a hint of excitement.

„You – you really like him, don’t you.“

He shrugged, suddenly very interested in the pattern of scratches on the formica surface of their table. „I guess?“

Then he looked up. Honesty, right?

„I know it sounds crazy, we don’t even know each other, but – I dunno. I feel like I want to .... spend time with him. Get to know why – get to know him better."

Mack glanced at him thoughtfully. „And it’s more than ... sexual attraction? You don’t only want to get into his pants?“

„Wh- What – n-no, I – of course not!“ Jared spluttered, and yes, his face was definitely hotter now than ever before. In a comic strip, he’d have steam coming out of his ears by now. Mack kept her calm, in fact her face was unscruitable, eyes piercing. “If you think Jensen’s some pretty toy to play with and throw away, you’re very, very wrong”, she said. „He might look like anyone’s wet dream, but he’s a person, with a heart and a soul, a very kind one, at that, and I’ll not let anyone hurt him.“

The last part sounded fiercely protective, and Jared had the strange feeling of being lectured by someone older and wiser than himself. He tried to get over his shock.

„Mack, I – I’m sorry if I gave the impression that I – that I only wanted Jensen for – jeez. We shouldn’t even be talking about this! You’re – what, seventeen?“

„Eighteen“, she answered coolly. „And I’m not a baby, Jared, I kow about the bees and the birdies. And, FYI, I find the idea of two hot naked males in bed together, having mind blowing sex, very...appealing.“

Her tone was conversational, as if they’d been talking about the weather; but there was a smug little grin on her face, and Jared knew she had a lot of fun teasing him, making him blush and
stammer. Well, she was pretty good at it. His ears had probably melted off by now. She seemed to find something in his eyes though that convinced her he was serious.

When she went on, her tone was determined.

„If you...if you really want to have a chance with Jensen, you have to know a few things“, she said, eyeing him wearily. „I guess he´s already told you he´s not interested in any relationship.“

Jared´s face must have shown his surprise before he could even burst out, „Wh- yes, how do you know!“

She looked down at the table, tracing one of the deep scratches with her finger. Her nails were very short, Jared noticed.

„It´s what he does“, she said quietly.

„What – so he tells everyone to fuck off?“

Her eyes darted up to him, and there it was again, the protectiveness he´d felt before.

„Sorry, I shouldn´t – he didn´t say it that way, but he – he was pretty clear.“

*I don´t want you to come with me.*

„You are hurt“, she said, giving a tiny nod. „And angry ´cause you don´t understand.“

„Damn sure I am“, Jared murmured, ashamed of his outburst. He felt like an idiot, showing his hurt pride like that. *There you go, Princess.*

She sighed, and rubbed the bridge of her nose, and he recognized the gesture immediately. He´d seen Jensen do it a few times. *Family.*

„Jay, I think you´re a great guy, you seem nice and considerate, and you sure feel attracted to my brother in more ways than – in the important ways. So."

She fixed him with her eyes.

„I´m gonna help you.“ When she saw the expression on his face (God, was he that easy to read?), she huffed.

„I´m not giving you an easy way into my brother´s pants, hot stuff. I want you to become his friend. A real friend. God knows Jensen can need one.“ The last sentence was only a murmur, spoken to the table, and Jared could sense the sadness behind the words.

„Maybe more will come out of it, maybe not, guess that´s in your hands. But the only way you will be able to get my brother to – open this armor of his – it will be friendship. He really needs a friend, Jay. Someone he can learn to trust.“

Jared stared at her for a moment, again surprised by how she seemed so much older than her years. His curiosity was eating away at him, but he tried to be patient.

*There´s a story behind all this,* he thought, *and it´s weird, and unexpected – but I really want to know it.*

„I can be that“, he said, and felt like he´d just given a vow. Mack nodded slowly, bitig her lower lip. *Another family thing...*
Jared tore his attention from her mouth and looked straight into her eyes.

„So – why is he - what the hell happened to him?“

Jensen

„Mack?“

Jensen had already been staring at the slightly blurred face at his side for some time, before his vision finally cleared, and the pale shape turned out to be his sister.

His voice sounded raspy. Like dry leaves on gravel.

„Jensen!“

The next moment, his face was full of hair, and something wet rubbed against his cheek. It took him a while to realize it wasn´t Mack´s lips, but her tears.

„Are you crying?“

He tried to sit up a little, despite the dull pounding inside his head, to be able to hug her back.

„Hey, hey...I´m OK, Mack, you don´t...shhhh...“

He pulled her close, rubbing her back soothingly, and murmuring senseless calming syllables into her ear. She was sobbing, but in the silent way he remembered: He felt the tears still running down his skin, the little gasps she made to get enough air in between the quiet sobs.

„I was so ... so scared...I thought...I thought...“

„Shhh...“

He started rocking back and forth, the way he´d done when they were little, Mack only a toddler, and she hadn´t been able to sleep, or was scared about some dream she´d had, or a shadow in her room. They´d often ended up sleeping in one bed, cuddled together, Jensen telling endless stories about a fairy Mack was especially fond of, or Valentino the anxious teddybear (a character out of Jensen´s rich fund of imagination). It had stopped, of course, once he and Josh were sent away.

Finally, she calmed down. Jensen patted the side of his bed, and she cuddled at his side, snuggling close, her head on his chest.

„I love to hear your heartbeat“, she murmured, voice still a little thick.

„I love to smell your hair“, he said, chuckling. „You´re still using that baby shampoo, huh.“

She boxed his side playfully. „Hey, I only still use it because I know you like it!“

He grinned down at her. „Yeah, whatever....“
She boxed him again, this time a little harder.

„Ouch! Hey, stop beating the guy on the hospital bed with a drip attached to his arm! Not fair!“

She grinned back, and put her head down again, sighing deeply.

„I´m so glad you´re OK“, she said. „For a moment, it was like – like Josh all over again.“

He wrapped his right arm around her, pulled her close.

Staring at the white ceiling for a while, he took his time to answer.

„I know. I´m sorry. I didn´t mean to scare you.“

She was quiet. Jensen listened to her breathing, enjoyed the warmth of her body. He was always feeling so cold, lately.

„Jensen?“

Her fingers played with the rim of his shirt, a little frayed and out of shape, one of his favourites. With a pang, he remembered it had been a present from Josh, back when they´d still been talking. 

_In the olden days, when everything was still fine between us. When I didn´t know..._

„Yes?“

„What happened?“

He closed his eyes. He´d expected her to ask him. Didn´t mean he was keen on answering. They´d always been honest to each other, though. Mack was the one person he trusted, well, and maybe Jim, his godfather. Yeah, Jim, too.

Sighing, he said, „I panicked. It was ... a panic attack. Plus low blood pressure, and I hadn´t eaten. Stupid, I know.“

She raised her head, propping it on her hand, elbow on his pillow.

„Why?“

„You know I´m not much into breakfast.“

She pecked his cheek with her fingers.

„Why did you panic, smartass!“

He blushed, felt the warmth spread from his throat up to his cheeks.

„None of your business, little sis.“

„Jensen Ross Ackles, don´t you `little sis´me!“ She pecked him again, harder.

„Ouch! I´ll call a nurse! I´m being harassed here!“

She smiled sweetly. „Guess you´ll rather call that cute doctor with the nerdy glasses, huh. He´s got a really nice a-- smile.“

„Mack!“
„Yes, big brother?“

„Stop it.“

„I will, if you tell me what happened.“

He sighed, and the playful mood was gone again.

„I met...this guy. At the airport ... and then today, I ran into him when I was looking for Professor Harvelle´s office.“

At that, Mack sat up, excited. „Harvelle! Oh God, I totally forgot! How is she! How was it!“

Jensen frowned. „She´s ... intimidatingly smart. The no-nonsense type. But I think she´s got a big heart under her rough attitude.“

„Wow, you seem .. impressed. So – not the dragon my friend described her as?“

Jensen smiled. „Oh, I bet she can be – scary. What I´m saying is – she cares. About her students. And she doesn´t take any shit.“

„Wow. Very deep.“

„Yeah, that´s me.“

He grinned up at her, winking. She shoved his shoulder, and after a moment lay down again with a sigh.

„So – the panic attack?“

Jensen sighed again. „You won´t give up, will you?“

„Absolutely not. You met `this guy´... “

„He helped me out, with finding the office, I mean. And, well, we went to have coffee after my appointment.“ He played with her hair, wrapping strands of it around his fingers.

„He´s got this friend who did some art project today, right in one of the halls. I think you´d like her style...´democratic art´ or something like that... I think her name´s Jenny...Jen...I dont remember.“

„Ok...yeah, sounds interesting. So, the guy?“

Jensen rolled his eyes, but went on. „We went to this really nice cafe on campus, a friend of Jay - of the guy runs it... Ava. The coffee´s heaven. The scent in there....“

„You found your drug den, I see.“

„Oh, you´ve got no idea.... well. It was ..nice, actually. We talked...and then...I dunno. Somehow, we ended up kissing over the table.“ He was blushing again, he knew it, but didn´t really care.

Mack raised her head again. „You did?“

„Yeah... and....it was weird, but I felt like...“

She waited for a moment, but when he didn´t go on, asked: „What did it feel like, Jen?“

Her voice was very soft, as were her fingers on his hairline, playing with his spiky short strands.
„It felt like coming home“, he whispered, closing his eyes, embarrassed; and at the same time, glad he’d found the courage to say it out loud.

Her fingers wandered down to his ears, until her hand rested on his cheek, cupping it, warm and reassuring.

„Maybe you were“, she whispered back.
Chapter 7

Jared

Jared was barely paying attention to the traffic on his way back to campus; until he nearly bumped into the truck in front of him at a red light, that is. Swearing, he brought his car to a screeching halt.

„Get a grip, man...“, he murmured to himself, rubbing his eyes and flipping his tangled hair back. His thoughts seemed wayward, though, jumping from the picture of Jensen, slumped on the floor between the table and the wall, to his sister’s inquisitive glance, x-raying him, to Chad’s annoyed huff when he’d gone with Jensen to show him Harvelle’s office – had it really only been this morning? His mind revolted back to Ava’s cafe, to Jensen’s lips, the expression in his eyes right before they met over the table. The taste of coffee on those lips, bitter and strong, mixed with something spicy and warm and sweet, like old wood and dried grass. The softness under the chipped skin, the gentle sound of the other man’s breath when their lips touched.

A loud hoot ripped him out of his musings; jerking, he raised an apologizing hand to the driver behind him. The traffic light had changed to green, and the truck in front of him had already passed the crossing – he’d been totally lost in his own mind, not taking in anything going on around him.

„Dammit...“ Jared took the turn right, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it.

Mackenzie had just been about to tell him why exactly Jensen would drive anyone getting close away, when her phone had started ringing; with a glance at the screen, she’d frowned.

„Sorry, I have to get that, or my Dad will send his cavalry. Listen, Jay... can we meet somewhere else and ...talk? Maybe in that cafe of yours? I’d really like to - “

Her phone rang again, a different ringtone now.

Beethoven’s fifth Symphony...interesting choice, he thought.

„Jeez“, she muttered, rolling her eyes. „Just a sec...“ Jared watched her type in a few words.

„My Dad“, she said again. „He doesn’t like being kept waiting.“ She looked up. „So – what about Friday afternoon? I am free after two, so if you want...“

„Of course!“, Jared said hastily. „I haven’t got – oh shit.“ He rubbed his front. „It’s – I promised a friend we’d study together."

„That’s OK ... let’s see... I have got study groups all weekend, so... Tuesday?“

Jared scrolled through the calendar on his phone.

„Tuesday’s perfect. Three pm? At Ava’s?“

She smiled. „OK. Can you text me the address, or a link or something?“

Jared nodded. „Sure. Uhm, Mackenzie...“
„Please...Mack. Only my father calls me Mackenzie.“

„You think I could go see Jensen for a minute? To know if he’s alright?“

She squinted at him for a moment; then she shook her head. „I don´t think that´s a good idea“, she said. „Trust me, Jay – it´s better if you keep your distance for now.“ She gathered her bag and got up, phone in hand.

„I gotta go, or my phone will explode any second from my Dad´s impatience alone. See you on Tuesday?“

Jared got up too, towering over her. „See ya. And thanks for...you know. Helping me. Us.“

She nodded slowly. „Don´t make me regret it“, she quietly said, before heading out of the cafeteria, already pressing a key on her phone.

Jared had watched her walk away, head tilted towards the cellphone at her ear, making fluttering movements with her hand while talking agitatedly. Disappointment about the delay filled him, mixed with a weird excitement at the thought that he’d soon know more about the man who so disconcertingly filled his mind since he’d first met him.

He managed to get to his apartment building´s parking lot without further endangering anyone, and had just gotten out of his car, when his phone rang. Chad’s ringtone. Jared felt a pang of guilt – dammit, he should have called the guy. Or Gen, at least.

„Hey, Chad!“ his voice souded creepily cheery.

„Hey Chad, my ass“, his roommate´s grumpy voice came back via phone. „Where the hell have you been! Took your pretty boy to Canada already?“

„What? Can- what the hell are you – No!“ Jared´s cheeks were aflame, with embarrassment and anger alike. „And he’s not my pretty boy, Chad! Stop acting like a jealous douche!“

He stomped the snow off his boots in front of the entrance, with much more force than necessary, glad to get out of the still icy wind. „I was at the hospital, actually“, he went on, keeping his voice calm with an effort. „Jensen had some.... wait, are you at home? I’m already on the staircase."

„No, jackass, I´m still sitting my ass red and blue here at Gen´s exhibition. Gen, that artsy friend of yours, long dark hair, tiny build, scary brains? Just in case you forgot.“

Jared stopped dead. The exhibition – shit. He´d promised Gen he´d be there.

He rubbed his front. „Oh, shit.“

„Yup.“

Chad´s smugness got to his nerves, all of a sudden. „Ok, I’ll be there in ten minutes. Sorry, I – it was a little crazy here.“

He heard Chad´s huff, and could practically see him rolling his eyes. „What did you go to the hospital for? Had each other checked out already? HIV-test? Genetic analysis? Or – did you leave sperm samples for your future child? I bet you’re looking for a white picket fence alr-“

Ok – now Jared´s anger flared up again.

„You´re such an asshole“, he growled.
„Yeah, but I’m YOUR asshole“, Chad answered, unimpressed, before he suddenly coughed, and spluttered, „I mean, not your – I mean, not in THAT sense. Obviously. Just your best friend AKA voice of reason. I mean.“

„Chad.“ Jared pinched the bridge of his nose, pressing his eyes shut. A headache started to build behind his eyeballs. „Just shut up. Tell Gen I’ll be there in ten minutes, OK?“

„You owe me, man.“

„I know“, Jared sighed, and stuffed his phone back into the pocket of his jeans.

He turned on his heels, and stomped down the path to the main building, where his friends would be waiting, surrounded by Gen’s Fur´n´ture Art. It was mid afternoon, and most students were on their way to the library, cafeteria, study groups or their dorm rooms; when Jared entered the main building, he felt like a fish swimming against the current. He wasn’t surprised to find the hall where Gen had installed her project almost empty; a few fellow students were still gathered in front of the doorway, munching on cookies Gen had talked Ava into making (and for free, which was a mystery to Jared). Chad was strewn in a pose he maybe considered languid on the old ottoman standing right in the center of the hall; Gen sat on a throne-like carved chair that looked as impressive as it was obviously uncomfortable.

„Jay!“ With a happy cry, she hopped off her throne, and danced over. He hugged her, and she kissed his cheek, standing on her very toes.

„What happened? Chad here -“ she waved a hand towards their friend, who was raking on the fake fur covering the old piece of furniture like a cat (or so he probably thought; it looked more like a clumsy imitation of a really bad porno scene to Jared) – „Chad only uttered some nonsense about hospitals and you eloping to Canada with some mysterious Prince Charming.“

„I didn’t call him that!“, Chad protested, stretching in a way his pale soft belly showed.

„No, you used a far less polite term, and I’m not gonna repeat it in front of these innocent ears“, Gen said, a hint of sharpness hidden behind the joking tone.

Jared threw Chad a dark glance, and made a face when he found his friend scratching his own belly with a blissful expression on his face.

„Eeeew, Chad. Can you keep that to you own room, please?“

Gen shook her head, and took Jared’s arm, pulling him over to the row of mismatched chairs on fake animal legs. She sat gracefully down on a black model with spidery legs reminding of a tarantula, and shoved Jared into one that showed elegant furry tiger pawns. „Jay, what’s all that about? Talk to me.“

Jared shot Chad a nervous glance, but their friend only shrugged and rolled his eyes.

„I met this guy – the one I came by with this morning?“

Gen’s eyes widened. „You mean - Mr. Perfect Cheekbones? Green eyes, freckles, spiky short hair? Lips worthy of a greek statue? Adorable bow legs?“

Jared blushed, wondering how she’d noticed all of Jensen’s most adorable features within the minute they’d spent at the entrance, the room crowded with people.

„His name is Jensen“, he murmured somewhat grumpily. „And he doesn’t have bow legs.“
Gen laughed. „Oh, believe me, Jay, he does, and they are sexy enough to make my cheeks flush, and you know I don’t usually swing that way.“ Her face turned more serious again. „Chad called Ava when you didn’t show up, and she told me your guy – I mean, Jensen, he was taken to the hospital? What happened? Is he alright?“

Jared saw Chad pulling out his cellphone; obviously, it was time for his virtual social life. Chad’s attitude grated on his nerves sometimes; they’d been friends for so long Jared couldn’t quite imagine life without him, but lately Chad had shown a weird mixture of unprecedented protectiveness, acting almost like a reasonable (annoying) parent, and a tendency to compensate by organizing impromptu parties, mid-term/mid-month/mid-week celebrations (he always found a reason to open a bottle of booze and bring a few girls), or dragging Jared to fraternity house parties he didn’t want to go to in the first place, and always ended up leaving totally drunk, sometimes high, having played his role of party king dutifully; the photos that ran through the social media on the following days never did anything to lessen his reputation – on the contrary.

Lately, Jared had become increasingly tired of this role. Chad sensed something was wrong, of course he did; and maybe that was one reason why he acted so weirdly.

Could be he fears to be replaced? Or loosing his state of exclusive best friend – well, male best friend at least – to a lover?

Chad frowned at his phone’s screen, so Jared turned back to Gen.

He had had enough time to get his thoughts in order, so when he told her what had happened, it made enough sense that she didn’t have to interrupt him; but then that wasn’t Gen’s style anyway. She listened attentively, studying his face, and Jared was well aware she was probably the one person who looked through all his carefully built deceptive layers – and still didn’t try to change what she found.

„You care about him“, she stated after he’d finished.

Jared shoved his hand through his hair, an almost desperate gesture. „I do, and- Gen, I have no idea why! I mean, sure, he’s attractive and all“ – Gen huffed at that, a grin pulling at her lips – „but it’s – you know, usually I’d be interested in getting into his pants and have a fun evening together, but – I dunno, it’s not like that. It really isn’t.“

Gen’s grin turned into a slow smile while she studied Jared for a few moments.

„I can’t believe it“, she murmured. „Jared Padalecki, maybe The Most Sought After Bachelor on campus, has been hit by Amor himself.“

„Gen...“ he wailed. „I’m serious!“

„So am I."

He rolled his eyes. „Looks a lot like you’re making fun of me though“, he muttered, cheeks growing warm.

She patted his leg. „Nah, I’d never ... just had to saviour this memorable moment, honey.“ She grew serious again. „So, it’s him. I mean – he’s The One, huh?“

Jared shrugged, feeling a little helpless. „But how can he - how can that be? I don’t know him! How can I feel so – like – gah, I dunno.“ He raised his hands, at a loss of words.

„Maybe you’re meant-to-be“, Gen said, still studying his face, an odd expression on her own.
„That´s fairy tales and Hollywood crap, Gen, and you know it!“

„Maybe it isn´t? Maybe we´re just all .. a generation of cynical, disillusioned people marred by their own parents´ divorce fights, cheating, or indifference ... maybe you two are – the exception? One of those couples the myth was based on in the first place?“

„Gen...“ This time, he sounded more tired than affronted. „Stop it."

„No!“ She took his hands in hers, a gesture he´d always loved about her. „Jay, you can´t know ...you´ll never know if you don´t give it a try. What does your instinct say? Does it tell you to back off? Does it feel wrong?“

He looked down at her small hands enclosing his own, big ones.

„No“, he admitted.

„So? What keeps you from following your ...heart, or whatever, I know it sounds ridiculously like a really bad Nicholas Sparks novel, but – wait, is it your family?“

Her eyes had narrowed. „Are they – did they-“

„They know.“ Jared looked up. „But that´s not what´s keeping me back – well, not entirely. I think I ...“

His friend looked at him expectantly. „You what?“, she asked gently.

„I´m ... for someone like Jensen, I think I might .... I might just tell them to screw themselves, and go live this Nicholas Sparks life you mentioned, somewhere on a sandy shore, you know? And it – it scares me.“ He knew he blushed again, and was surprised by the spark he saw in Gen´s eyes.

„Good!“, she said. „Finally!“

„You make it sound like it´s a good thing to go against one´s own family – or, abandon them, or something!“

„Well, sew me, Mr. Lawyer-To-Be, but that´s exactly what I think! Look, Jay, the way I see it, they´re never gonna accept you for what you are, who you are, or what you want, so – yes, screw them! They´re not gonna support you, the real you, I mean – so why feel obligated to be a part of their game! You´ll never be happy, you´ll live a lie, and they´ll be totally OK with it? It´s time you stand up for yourself, Jay! You´re smart enough to make it on your own, and you´ve got us. Family, real family, has got nothing to do with blood, and sometimes you gotta find your own – choose your own. You deserve happiness, and acceptance, and love, and – and - I´m running out of cheesy words here!“

Jared smiled down at his hands, now left alone, as Gen needed hers to underline her words with fluttering movements. It was a subdued smile though.

„It´s not that easy“, he murmured. „I know you are right, Gen, and believe me, I – what you say about family – but – it´s complicated.“ As complicated as it gets when your parents run a successful business upfront and an even more successful one hidden from the public eye ... and when getting in their way usually doesn´t include a happy ending for those involved.

And, well, he loved his family. Even Jeff, despite his flaws and questionable morals ... his parents, too, and Megan – Megan had probably chosen the smartest way of dealing with family, studying in Paris, far from them all.... Jared knew well enough she wasn´t out of his father´s sight, or
surveillance; but it made a difference if a whole ocean kept you out of his, or their mother´s, reach.

„Is it ever?“, Gen asked quietly. „Guess there wouldn´t be one memorable Shakespeare drama if it were.“

„But I don´t want to be a character in a Shakespearean drama!“

Gen shrugged. „Well, then you´ll have to find a way out. Write your own textbook.“

Jared sighed. „Yeah...“

Gen huffed. „You know, if this Jensen of yours is really as awesome as you seem to think, you could show a little more enthusiasm in making the two of you happen.“

„It isn´t – it´s not – dammit, Gen, did you ever consider the possibility that HE´s the one who doesn´t want ME?“

„What?“ The look on Gen´s face was pure incredulity. „He – what? But Ava said she saw-“

„It´s complicated“, Jared grumbled. „But I am not giving up yet, if that´s what your speech wanted to -“

„Oh fuck. Fuck! FUCK!!“

Jared and Gen turned as one at Chad´s sudden outburst. They found him sitting up straight as if stung by something, staring at his phone; then he jumped off the furry sofa, and strode over to them, a determined expression on his face that Jared had seen a few times on him only. It always gave him a creepy feeling of not really knowing his best friend, despite all the years spent together.

„Jay, we gotta go. I gotta show you something.“

Even his voice sounds different....

„What? Why? Can´t you show me here? I´m sure Gen-“

„No I can´t. Now let´s go, dammit!“

Jared was as bewildered as Gen looked.

„Chad, what the h-“

„Dammit, Jay, just – it´s something to do with your family business!“

„Family b-“ Jared stopped dead. „Oh. Oh. OK.“

`Family Business´ was their code word for everything related to his family´s `other´ line of work; Chad was the only one of Jared´s friends who knew about it at all. The Padaleckis were very careful to keep the unofficial branches of their businesses well hidden from the public eye; if there were rumors (there always were), suspicions, even investigations from time to time, they were either crushed under the full force of the family´s law enforcement, trickled away for lack of proof, or were quieted in other ways, some of them permanent in the old fashioned way.

Jared was intent on keeping his friends out of the picture; first because he was sure no one in their good mind would willingly be acquainted to a mob-related family (to put it mildly); second, because
he tried to convince himself it would keep his friends out of harms way.

Jared studied Chad’s face for a moment, wondering what had unnerved his friend enough to openly refer to the secret parts of his life.

„I see – sorry, Gen, is it OK if we leave? I promise to be back to help you clear the place – right, Chad?“ He looked at the other man questioningly, silently communicating with him. Chad’s tiny nod, after a second of consideration, was all he needed. „Right. We’ll come back as soon as possible, promise!“ He tried his most reassuring smile to take some of the weird feeling of urgency out of the situation.

Gen’s eyes darted from one of them to the other; then she shrugged.

„OK, boys, but don’t you dare leave me to deal with all that stuff alone, you hear me?“

Jared could tell she was dying to know what was going on; he hated not being able to tell her about all aspects of his life, always had.

It’s only for the best.

He kissed her cheek, and got up, joining Chad, who was already walking towards the doors.

„See you later, then!“

„Don’t do anything stupid, Jay.“

He was already turning around, but stopped at that.

„What? I’d never – what’s that supposed to mean?“

She rolled her eyes. „Whenever you and Chad take off like this, with `family matters´ or something like that – it always gets you in trouble or ends with both of you drunk somewhere you shouldn’t be. I’m just saying. Promise me you’ll not give in to Chad’s crazy ideas at least one time.“

He felt a little guilty – she was right, after all, Chad and he had had their share of `trouble´, as she’d called it – and at the same time, relieved about the fact she didn’t know about the much bigger problems that were usually connected to his family.

„Promise“, he said, grinning down at her, and turned, waving.

„And you owe me one of Ava’s coffees!“, she called after him. „Plus a double chocolate chip muffin for leaving me all alone here!“

He waved once more from the door. „I’ll make it up to you!“, he called, before following Chad down the corridor.

„Chad! Chad, goddammit!“

He grabbed his friend’s shoulder from behind, and turned him around.

„Would you stop for a moment? Has something happened? Something bad?“
Since his so called car accident, it had always been like this – his thoughts were running wild, images of burning cars or exploding flats filling his mind. „My family, are they – is everyone OK?“

*Please, don´t let it be Megan. She´s the one supposed to get away from... the business.* He hated himself for even thinking it – trading his sister´s life against his father´s, or brother´s, in this cruel mindgame.

Chad tried the handle of the classroom door behind them. It opened, and he pulled Jared into the empty room.

„Calm down, Jay, nothing ´s happened to any of them.“

Jared searched his friend´s face.

„Then what – what is it? Why did you -“

„It´s your Pretty Boy.“

Jared felt the blood leave his face. His hands turned cold.

„Jensen? He – is he – did he – but it´s only a concussion, they said, how-“

„Jay, shut up for a moment, would you? He´s OK too, as far as I know, that is. But it doesn´t matter anyway. You can´t see him anymore.“

Jared was so surprised he only stared at his friend for a few seconds. Something like anger started to bubble deep inside his stomach.

„What? Are you crazy? Is this a - a jealousy-thing?“

„You can´t see him anymore, Jay, for ... family reasons. I didn´t know who he was, either, although I had this weird feeling I knew his face...had seen him before... from the beginning – should have known, of course. Know your enemy, and all that.“

Jared blinked. „Your enemy ..what...Chad, you´re not making a lick of sense. Jensen is not my enemy – anyone´s enemy, I suppose!“

„Oh yes, he is“, Chad said. „He´s an Ackles.“

„And?“

Chad stared at him incredulously. „He´s an Ackles, Jay! As in, Ackles Industries, as in, Alan-freaking-Ackles, as in, the Irish version of your family´s business! His dad is the damn boss of the Irish Mob, Jay!“

Jared froze, then stumbled back against the closed door.

„What?“, he croaked. „But Jensen – he ... he wasn´t even here, in the US, I mean, hasn´t been for years, and - Chad, I´m sure he isn´t part of ... the business.“

„Both your families are practically at war, Jay! You – you can´t just ... date the arch-enemy or whatever, no matter how angelic his face might be, or how innocent his soul looks. And, by the way“ – he squinted at Jared, biting his lower lip – „How sure can you be that what he told you is even the truth? I mean, how coincidental can it be to run into you first at the airport, and then here again, on his fucking first day on campus? And this whole ´incident´ at Ava´s – I dunno, Jay, it all
smells dirty."

„Are you saying ...what are you saying, Chad? That Jensen is some...spy or something? That his family is whoring him out to get to me?“

The anger was back now, not so much directed at Chad, but rather at a life that made thoughts like that even possible.

„That´s a harsh way to put it, but – yes!“

Jared glared at his friend, eyes burning, hand balled into fists.

„No“, he pressed out through clenched teeth. „It´s not like that. Jensen is not like that!“

Chad held against his barely suppressed anger.

„You can´t know that, Jay. You said it yourself, you don´t even know him. He could -“

„No!“

Jared´s cry made Chad flinch. „I DO know that much! I may not know much else about him, but – no!“ Jensen´s face came into his mind, the moment before they kissed:

He hadn´t been able to decipher his expression back then, but now he knew...it had been hope, a careful spark of hope under layers of suspicion and ... fear.

*It all makes sense now...the seemingly paranoid behavior of his sister....him pulling back all of a sudden. He´s trapped... we are both trapped. In golden cages.*

Suddenly, it was all too much. Jared turned on his heel, ripped the door open, and stormed out, banging the door against the wall.

„Jay! JAY!“

Jared didn´t stop. He didn´t even look back.
Jim

„Yeah, yeah, I´m coming...“

Jim Beaver followed the ringtone of his cellphone through the overstuffed, not exactly tidy living room/study into the kitchen, where the small object danced on the counter while playing the title melody of „The Godfather“.

„Yes?“

„What the fucking hell, Jim? I thought we had an agreement?“

„Well, a good day to you too, Alan. What exactly are you talking about?“

He´d learned to keep his cool where Alan Ackles was concerned – for the sake of his godchildren, and his blood pressure.

„You were supposed to have an eye on my son!“

„And?“ He knew he was walking the line, but Alan always had this effect on him.

The line was quiet for a second, two, three.

„Either you have lost your step, Jim, or you´re playing a very dangerous game here. Either way, I´m getting the impression I counted on the wrong man.“

It was Jim´s turn to be quiet. What the hell has happened that I don´t know of?

„What is it, Alan? And may I remind you that we have an agreement on Jensen, but it doesn´t include me following him 24/7. As far as I heard, you´ve others set on this task.“ His voice was calm, tone dry. They knew each other too well for melodramatic scenes.

„He´s in hospital, that´s what happened!“

„What?“ Jim felt his knees go wobbly. He sank down into one of his kitchen chairs.

„Yes, but it´s nothing serious, he fainted in some café on campus. Banged his head while falling or something. What bothers me more is who he´d been to that damned Café with.“

Of course, Jim thought. Everything - anything is more important than your son´s health, or wellbeing. The Business, appearances, power play.

„And who would that be?“, he asked cooly.

„That freaking Polish spawn! Gerald Padalecki´s younger son!“

„What?“ It had caught Jim by surprise. A Padalecki? What the hell has gotten into Jensen? Did he only come back to bring open war back to former glory?

„I´ll send you the pictures. Jim, this is unacceptable. Whatever the boy is up to, you have to stop
“.I´ll do what I can“, Jim said, staring at the photo tucked to his refrigerator: Three kids in bathing clothes, standing on the roof of one of his rusty cars, grinning widely, looking like little savages with their dirty knees and faces, the tangled hair.

“.Good“, Alan Ackles answered. „Cause if you don´t, I will."

He hung up on him; Jim sat in his quiet kitchen, the clock on the wall ticking away the time; staring at his phone´s screen, the grainy picture of two men leaning against each other over a tiny table inside a small café, lips almost touching. He wondered if there´d ever been a chance to save any of them – Mary, Josh, Jensen ... Mack.

*Even if there isn´t – I´ll happily die trying.*

---

**Chad**

Chad watched his best friend´s back vanish between the flock of student´s on their way into one of the bigger classrooms. His long strides and brooding face made them clear a path for Jared. Chad noticed the curious looks they shot him, anxious to get out of his way.

He sighed. Jared had been right, he had felt a pang of jealousy when he´d connected with that stranger so easily; it was hard not to notice Jensen´s exceptional looks, not to mention he seemed like a considerate, private guy, someone who´d ground Jared. Chad knew well enough he wasn´t always the best company for Jay; he´d felt himself lacking in more than one way. Ever since his best friend´s accident, and his promise to Sherri Padalecki, he´d tried to keep him safe – by spying on him, true – while not giving himself away; a balancing act that started to take its toll. Chad loved to live his life laid back, enjoy the good times while they lasted, and have as much fun as possible. He was smart enough to pass his exams, if not the first time, then the second; he didn´t have plans beyond the final one, it wasn´t his style; besides, he probably could count on the Padaleckis to have something in stall for him, to keep him close to Jared, and the information on their son flowing.

There were times when he felt bad about lying to Jared. Or, well, lying was a harsh word, right? He just wasn´t telling the whole truth. It was exactly how Jared handled his relationships with his other friends, he told himself, so he couldn´t really blame Chad for doing the same. Still, it didn´t mean he had to like it. And Chad knew Jared well – he wasn´t too sure anymore Jared would forgive him everything, anything. Jared had changed ... or started to allow the parts of himself he used to hide, or suppress, to come out and show. Chad had noticed Jared´s reluctance to hit the parties they used to go to; once they were there, and with the right amount of alcohol in his system, he´d be his usual sunny and entertaining self, but his heart wasn´t in it anymore.

Maybe it had never been.
Chad turned the phone in his hand. He should call Sherri, of course. The new ... development ... it sure was worth telling.

*Maybe they already know ... I bet one of the hidden guards has already taken pics of those two in the café, and Sherri won´t need to ask face recognition who the handsome young man on Jared´s side is.*

He stared down at the phone without pressing any button, though. He might have had a fit of jealousy at seeing Jared happy with someone else; but, well, at the same time, he was glad to see him smile, laugh even, in the way not many of his friends ever did. To see the Real Jared come out ... to be honest, he didn’t know what to do anymore. His loyalty lay with Jared, of course; but Sherri had made it clear to him time and again that sometimes, Jared had to be saved from himself, for his own good. Yet, Jared had seemed so .... full of light, when he walked away with Jensen, the way Chad remembered him from their childhood: eyes sparkling, smile wide and warm, and sincere.

The revelation that Jensen was the son of one of the Padaleckis´ oldest and most hated rivals had come as a shock to him just like it had to Jared.

*Ackles - they don´t even say the name out loud inside their house.*

*Even if Jensen is as innocent as Jared believes ... what chance do they have.... down to zero.*

*Nada. Niente. They are like poison to each other – deadly. Or, rather, their families are.*

Chad sighed again, deeply.

He could have lived with the fact that his best friend had a lover, even if it was against his parents´ wishes (iron rules, rather). He was cool with Jared´s sexuality, and didn´t really get why the Padaleckis made such an issue out of it – it was the 21st century, after all; it had something to do with the ongoing fusion with the Russian Mob, as far as he knew, the Russians being extremely ...sensitive...where gay love was concerned. Sherri had told him about the planned marriage between Jared and the daughter of the Russian Mob boss, a girl named Bela he´d only ever seen in the society gossip shows, and at one memorable party during winter break, but, as Sherri informed him, also had a degree in economics and languages, and was as smart as she was good-looking. He appreciated Sherri´s confidence (he´d known about Bela before, of course, from Jared himself). It was, on the other hand, another nail in his coffin, so to speak ... he knew the more he let himself be instrumentalized by Jared´s mother, the more he jeopardized his relationship with his best friend.

*Somehow, you don´t seem to be able to win that one...*

Well, maybe it would cost him his best and oldest friend; but if it kept him alive, at least, he was willing to take that risk.

His phone rang, jerking him out of his thoughts. When he saw the name on the display, he rolled his eyes, and sighed once more.

*There you go.*

He swiped over his phone´s screen to take the call.

„Hello, Sherri...“

*Misha*
Misha Collins was what in mafia related movies was usually referred to as „a cleaner“. In addition, and because he was too smart and too well educated for being only a sophisticated killer, he also worked as personal adviser to the Russian Mob bosses´ family, uniting the roles of killer and consigliere in one person.

He liked it that way.

There was something pure in killing people. As complex as the preparation and planning might sometimes be, the act itself – it was simple. Someone was brought from life to death, and ceased to exist. It calmed him down, gave him peace of mind: he reinstated some kind of order by taking out elements that created chaos and confusion. It was his role in the universe, and he accepted it, without remorse ... he was good at what he did, exceptionally good.

The advisory role he´d taken on over the years was a whole different story. Dealing with problems without having the possibility of elimination...it was complex, and messy, and exhausting. And, many times, he still ended up using his other skills to come to a solution.

When the Russian and Polish Families decided to tighten their relationships to have a stand against the South-American, the Chinese, and even the old European mob families, his schedule started to get busier and busier. Official meetings with the lawyers of both sides, less official ones with those who had similar jobs as himself, smoothing things for those on top; and, although that part was so unofficial it was practically his own secret mission, even talks with his counterparts on the mob branches led by descendants of the old European families, Italians and Irish – they were, so to say, the lesser evil. In fact, while his Italian-American colleague was a painted peacock too full of himself, he’d rather enjoyed his meeting with Jim Beaver, the former right hand of Alan Ackles, head of the Irish Mob; he considered the grumpy, taciturn man a relic of olden times, following a moral code (albeit a twisted one) no longer valued by the criminal fraternity. Misha missed the sense of order those old rules had given to the criminal world: They might have been cruel, and bloody, and inhuman – but they were rules. Even the worst rules were better than none. Misha hated chaos.

He´d been sceptical about the whole fusion of his Russians with the Polish sector. From an economic point of view, it made sense, of course; and the impact on the balance of power in the game would be enormous. What Misha feared, or looked at with a worried eye, at least, was the personal side of it, the emotional outfall – mob bosses weren´t exactly the sharing and caring type, their egos were as tall as the Empire State Building, and they had an unhealthily oversized sense of protectiveness where their possessions were concerned – „possessions“ including the people who their families consisted of.

Misha saw a lot of difficulties ahead. But it was all well planned, and perfectly arranged; if both parties managed to stick to the plan, they´d soon find themselves on a new level of success inside the criminal world.

That´s a big IF.

He´d been the one to negotiate terms for the connection between the Russian Princess AKA Bela (a spoiled, preposterous brat if he ever saw one, but smart) and the younger Padalecki boy, this gangly, floppy-haired party king who hid a brilliant brain behind the only seemingly shallow surface.
Misha liked the kid. He’d met him in person only once, but knew probably more about him than the boy himself did. He lacked his older brother’s ruthlessness; in fact Misha found a kind soul and a head full of idealistic ideas in the young man who would either have to be broken and trained to fit into his family’s world, or fail completely – and failing, inside their world, usually meant an early grave.

He knew, of course, of the trips into the special clubs, where sexual orientation was not reduced to what the majority of people deemed their right to determine. Out of sentimentality, maybe, he’d always tried to keep those trips from his boss, or the loons working for him. The fact remained that Jared would have to restrain himself – live whatever glossy fake life/marriage his parents were forcing him into, for the sake of the family. No more boys in bars for the Prince...

And now, THAT.

Misha frowned at the pictures on his laptop.

There was the grainy shot of Jared, leaning over a table in his favorite café, lips brushing those of the beautiful young man opposite him.

*What a waste,* he thought. *A bright young man, and with a face to die for...*

Maybe he was getting tired. It didn’t use to bother him who the target was, until recently. But those two men...kids, really...they touched something inside him he hadn’t felt in years.

*Seems you still have some sort of soul left in there. How inconvenient.*

As soon as he’d seen the picture, he’d opened the files he’d collected over the years... he liked to be well prepared, and research was the first step to reach that goal. He had elaborate files on every single crime related family in town; the one simply labelled „Ackles“ was vast. It hadn’t been long since the older heir’s death in a car crash; Misha had been careful not to leave any trace the police could use to interpret it as a hit crime (they suspected it, anyway), but at the same time make it clear the message found those it was meant for. He was too young to have been on the job back when Alan’s wife was killed – murdered; but he’d studied the crime scene reports meticulously, and decided that putting a little rubber duck in Josh Ackles’ fancy sports car wouldn’t raise suspicions with the police, but show his father the connection. Donna Ackles had had a big beach bag in the back of her car when she died, filled with colorful towels, kids’ bathing suits and floaties sticky with sun cream and sand. And a little yellow rubber duck.

Nowadays, rubber ducks came in many shapes, sporting everything between punk haircuts to porn star equipment. He’d chosen one with a little silver crown sitting slightly askew on the yellow head. *A deranged prince.*

He wasn’t sure if starting the first roll of open warfare right before the fusion was complete was a good idea – in fact, he had advised against it time and again. War meant losses, on every side involved; even the winner, if there even was one, would suffer from them. To be honest, he redeemed it archaic to go back to the methods of 20, 30 years ago – but his boss was traditional that way, he wanted blood, and, well, Misha provided it. Royal blood, so to say.

They had pushed the fight to a whole new level with the hit on Josh Ackles, and everyone knew what it meant. From now on, everyone was a target. The mutual, if only implicit, agreement that the families themselves were untouchable – it had been broken. On purpose.

*The seal has been broken,* Misha thought. *From now on, it’s The Apocalypse.*
Jared stormed out of the building, ignoring the weird looks his fellow students were throwing him. Chad’s words were running wild in a loop inside his head, „you don’t even know him, you don’t even know him, you don’t ...“

He’s right, and he’s not.

He couldn’t tell what made him so sure Jensen was not what Chad had suggested...a spy, a bait, a scapegoat for his father. But what little he’d seen of him – it had created a sense of familiarity, like Jensen was someone he’d known as a kid, and just not met since...the sense of finally meeting someone who completed him. A kindred spirit.

Maybe we shared a bond in a former life. That’s what Megan would say.

He huffed. He’d always made fun of his sister, when she’d read books about soul travel and former life retreats and stuff like that in her late teen years. But now ... how could one fall for someone without any true reason? Was it really only a matter of chemistry, scent and hormones and physical, sexual attraction? A scientific procedure, like an experiment carried out following an exact plan of nature?

It can’t be. There’s more to it. I can feel it...

But if he was so sure about Jensen, why did he feel so angry?

I’m not angry at him. I’m angry at ...at everyone else.

He stopped, glancing around. He’d walked over to his flat, feet finding the way on their own, while his mind was spinning with thoughts. The wind had already smoothed the snow in front of the entrance again, there was no trace of his footsteps. He hadn’t planned on coming here, but holing up inside the four walls of the flat for a while was as good as hiding anywhere else. He couldn’t avoid Chad forever; and he’d have to get back to Gen, anyway. He opened the entrance door, shoving the powdery snow aside with it, and stomped up the stairs. Once inside his flat, he slipped out of his shoes, leaving them just where they fell down, and sank into the old leather sofa. Finally, his thoughts seemed to slow down, find a direction.

Ok, Padalecki. Situation assessment. It was what they’d learned at the summer camps he and Josh had attended: Find out where you stand, what you’re dealing with, then find a solution.

So: He’d met an incredible guy who seemed to have some mysterious spell over him (he huffed at himself ... already turning into that Nicholas Sparks character, are we?).

He’d found out that this same guy was, unfortunately, the son of a mob boss rivalling the ‘business’ of his own parents ... they were at opposite sides in a war. Arch-enemies, as Chad had put it. Jared thought about it a while, and came to the conclusion that it didn’t bother him in the least. He didn’t fucking care where Jensen came from. He cared who he was. Period.

If Jensen had been as clueless as Jared himself about their respective ... heritage... then it meant that they both were probably in danger: He might not care, Jensen might not either – but their
families? No way. No fucking way would they even allow a friendship, much less a relationship ... Jared laughed mirthlessly.

A homosexual relationship with the son of your father’s worst enemy. You’d really hit the jackpot with that, Padalecki.

They’d never let it happen. Never. They’d rather .... rather ....

Cold fear crept up his spine. He felt goosebumps rub against the soft material of his sweater.

No...they wouldn’t. They’d stop there ... would they? His parents might be ruthless business magnats ... even keep the competition at bay using drastic methods ... but: murder?

They wouldn’t.

Maybe they already have....

He sat up abruptly. What did Mack say at the hospital? Their older brother ... Jack ...John... Josh. Josh had been killed in a car accident only a few months ago ...

He scrambled to his feet and got his laptop from the desk at the window, and typed Josh’s name into the search engine.

„Josh Ackles“ brought hundreds of hits: Party snapshots, social events, charity. And pics of a car so pretzel’d it was hard to determine what type it had once been.

„...lost control due to excessive speed. Police say no brake marks have been found, which might be an indication for alcohol abuse or even intoxication. Josh, heir to successful businessman Alan Ackles’ imperium, has been known for his excessive lifestyle and rich social life ...“

He enlarged the pictures. His stomach cringed ... suddenly he was back in the wrecked car again, smelled the gasoline, the burnt rubber. Heard the weird sound of moving, screeching metal, sighs and moans of a dying vehicle .... he’d been half out of it already when his mysterious saviour had appeared, the other car´s headlights had stung his eyes, and his head...chest..legs, everything hurt...but there had been this voice, gentle but firm, he’d heard it all the time, even when his vision started to grey out and finally was gone for good...even in the blackness, he’d heard the voice.

Jared shivered. When his father had told him about the accident ... about the attempted assassination ... he´d decided to not let it taint his life. There hadn’t been any attack on him or his family ever since – none that he knew of, at least, and it had been easier than expected.

He had lulled himself into thinking that the mob families had found some sort of agreement – a permanent ceasefire, as in the long run, they´d all gain more than they´d loose by not wasting energy, resources and manpower on eliminating each other. Well, that´s how Jared had seen it. Obviously, others hadn’t.

He scrolled down the pages, looked into a face that seemed familiar, green eyes, fair hair, he could see the similarities between the brothers, the laugh was different, though, wide and open and daring. As different as the rest, probably....

Out of a sudden idea, he googled „Ackles, accidents“. The same pics appeared, the red sportscar reduced to an unidentifiable heap of bent metal. He scrolled down, and different pictures showed up, most of them black and white, grainy, taken out of a newspaper: another crashed car. Articles accompanied the pictures, different headlines, only the surname was the same, „Donna Ackles killed in car accident. Mother of three dies on site“.
Jared froze. He read the date at the head of the newspaper page again.

*It can’t be ... no. It’s a coincidence. It must be.*

But deep down, he knew he was kidding himself. How coincidental could it be ...

Donna Ackles had been killed in February, only just having returned from a holiday at her parents’ place in Texas with the kids.

It was the same day Jared had been pushed from the road by some crazy driver, and had almost died, ten years later.

---

*Jim*

„Uncle Jim?“

Jim Beaver´s heart made a little sommersault when he saw his youngest godchild´s face brighten up at seeing him in the doorway. *At least someone’s still happy to see you. Ain’t many people left who are.*

Mack got out of the cheap plastic chair, careful not to make any noise, and tiptoed over to meet him, throwing her arms around his neck. He held her close for a moment, *she still uses that shampoo... peach, I remember that scent,* and murmured soothing nonsense while she had her face buried at his chest.

Looking at the sleeping Jensen on the hospital bed, his heart cringed. He looked so fragile, and young, ... *so vulnerable.* His first instinct was to hover over the bed and let no one ever come near it.

„Let´s go outside“, Mackenzie whispered, tugging at his shirt. „I don´t want to wake him, the doctor said he needs as much rest as he can get.“

Jim nodded, and followed her to the small sitting area right across the room, pulling the door of Jensen´s room almost closed.

„Did Dad send you?“

He looked down into her face. *Too pale, too worried, too tired. She should be having fun with her friends ... bicker with her brother, not watch over him while he´s in a hospital bed. This life makes them grow up way too fast.*

„He called me.“

Mack rolled her eyes. „I bet.“

„He´s worried, Mack.“

„Yeah, whatever. I´m surprised we aren´t already surrounded by bodyguards. Didn´t he even send
someone? I mean, doesn’t he even care enough for Jenny to keep him safe?"

Jim opened his mouth to give a sharp reply, but when he saw the tears shimmering in her eyes, the red blotches that had appeared on her cheeks, the words died on his lips.

*She´s scared out of her mind, and keeps up the brave face for her brother...and me...everyone.*

So instead of scolding her, telling her not to talk about her father like that (besides, Alan had it covered, of course, all the hospital’s entrances were secured), he pulled her to his chest again, twisting a little awkward in his chair. She started to cry, then, and he tried to give as much comfort as he could, stroking her hair and back, humming and murmuring all the time. He missed the years when they’d come to him, crying because of a scratched knee, a broken toy ... remembered how he used to cradle them in his lap, skinny knees and elbows pinching his ribs, holding them until they’d have calmed down ... the one time when Jensen had found that little dead bird in the yard, one of those he used to feed and watch from the attic’s round window – a robin? Bluetit? He’d stood there in front of him, lifeless bird in his cupped hands, those huge eyes full of questions and a dawning knowledge. They’d buried the bird, with little cross and all, the first of many similar graves, and Jensen had vanished after that for hours, probably hidden in one of the old trucks or up in the tree house. When the light had started to fade, he’d worried, but then Jensen came inside, just at dinner time, ate his mack’n cheese and didn’t seem bothered any more. They waited for Donna to fetch the kids, later, sitting on the wooden steps in front of the entrance, Josh was throwing balls for Rufus, Jim’s big clumsy dog; but Jensen had leaned against Jim’s side, tugging at the frayed rims of his jeans’ ripped knees.

„Do you think birdies have a heaven of their own?“

*Jim hadn´t been surprised, he´d expected something along the line all day.*

„I think so, yes. I guess it´s just like here, just without the cats and hunters and dangerous windows they can bump against.“

*Jensen had mulled this over for a while.*

„Do you think one can choose which heaven they can go to?“

„I don’t know, kid ... why, which heaven would you choose?“

*Jensen considered the question for a while. „I think I’d like the bird heaven, cause I could fly and see everything and sit in trees, and have fun with the other birds. I think flying would be cool.“*

„Which bird would you be, then? A falcon? Or an eagle?“

*Jensen frowned, worrying his lower lip. „No....I’d like to be a barn swallow.“*

„A barn swallow? You sure?“

*The boy nodded. „Yeah...they are small, you know, but they are one of the best flyers. And they look tiny and weak, but they are really strong...they can fly sooo many miles...thousands, I think! And they build these little mud nests, with their beaks only!“*

*Jim smiled. „How do you get to know so much about barn swallows, Jensen?“*

*Jensen shrugged. „Mum lets me watch nature shows. And I have a book with all the birds of America. It’s huge.“*
"But you haven’t even started school yet, Jensen, how can you read it?“

The shrug again. "Learned it with Josh. And Mum helps me with the difficult words, like... pr-pre-predators."

"Oh...do you know what predators are, then?“

"The ones that eat the smaller birds."

"Yeah, that’s true ...you still want to be a swallow, though? Although the predators could get you? Wouldn´t it be better to be a predator yourself?“

He shook his head, slowly. "No...I don’t wanna scare the others."

"You´d rather be scared yourself, then? Being such a small birdie?“

He pondered the question for a while. It had always been like this with Jensen: He thought things over, even at three, four years of age, he’d not just cry out like Josh, decide within a split second, or out of the moment.

"I dont think I´d be scared, Uncle Jim. I´d just have to be smart, right? So they don´t get me.“

Jim couldn´t help smiling.

"Yeah, Jensen...you´re right. And you´d probably be the smartest barn swallow ever known amongst the birds. “

The smile he´d gotten from the boy at that.

Mack had stopped crying, and the sudden silence ripped him out of the past. She sat up, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Sorry, Uncle Jim, I – I don’t know what got into me. I feel stupid for crying like a baby, I mean, Jensen´s alive, and...“

"Mack.“ When he grabbed her shoulders, she stopped babbling, and looked up.

"It´s OK to cry, it´s Ok to be scared, you have every right to be, I mean, you´ve lost your Mom, your brother – of course you would fear the worst. It´s not stupid, it´s your experience of life so far, and it´s actually clever and maybe life-saving. So stop giving yourself a hard time about it.“

She snivelled, blew her nose, and straightened her shoulders.

"OK.“

"So, Jensen – what happened? What do the doctors say?“

She filled him in, regaining her self-control again while doing so. Jim listened carefully. She even mentioned that Jensen had been with someone in that café.

The Padalecki kid. I wonder if she knows...

When she´d finished, he nodded slowly. "Guess we need to get some meat on the boy´s ribs again“, he said. "He´s way too skinny for my liking.“

She smiled a little crooked.
„I already told him Grandma would force feed him if she saw him."

He grinned back at her. „Bet she would."

„Shall we go in? I don´t want Jensen to wake up without someone there."

„Oh yes, of course. Don´t like him being alone there, either.“ They got up, and were already halfway to the door, when Mackenzie´s phone rang. She looked at the screen, and smiled.

„I gotta get this – I´ll be right with you in a minute!“

„´K, Mack. Take your time."

Jared

„Hello?“

Mack´s tinny voice sounded a little thick.

*Has she been crying?* Jared felt like an intruder.

„Hi, Mack...this is Jay...Jared. The guy with Jensen´s phone."

„Oh...hi.“

„Is everything allright? Is Jensen OK?“

„Uhm, yeah, yeah, he´s Ok, he´s sleeping... “

Jared sighed with relief. „Are you? Ok, I mean? You sound a little...shaken.“

A noise somewhere between a sigh and a huff came through the phone.

„I am Ok, Jay. Just ... well. It´s all a little...too much...sometimes."

*Loosing a mother, a brother, and now having another brother in hospital? I bet it is.*

„I can only imagine...listen, Mack, we gotta talk. I – I gotta tell you something.“

„Uhm...Ok? We still have the appointment on Tuesday though, right?“ She sounded a little doubtful.

„Yeah, I – I guess. Uhm...“

God, how did you tell someone you´ve only just met, and found very likeable (not to mention the much adored sister of someone you had a deep interest in), that you were practically The Devil, as far as your parents were concerned?

„Jay, what is it? You´re scaring me. And honestly, I´ve had enough scary moments lately.“

„Sorry, I´m sorry, I – well, I´ll just spit it out, then.“ Jared took a deep breath, picking at his artfully ripped jeans.
„I, uhm – I take it you don´t really know who I am ...“

She was quiet for a while. „No....I don´t even know your surname, now I come to think of it....“

She sounds worried... can you blame her?

„I told you my name is Jay, but it´s really Jared. Jared Padalecki.“

„And that should – oh.“ He heard her breathe in sharply.

„Shit“, she whispered.

„Yeah. I´m ... I´m sorry. I only found out ... about Jensen...right now. Didn´t know his surname either. It, uhm ...it didn´t seem to matter.“

She still didn´t say anything. Jared started to feel uneasy.

„Listen, Mack, I – this is - my friend tells me it´s absolutely impossible that Jensen and I – that we – that we -“ He couldn´t even say it out loud, for God´s sake! – „but I want you to know, I don´t care what our families think, and if they are at war, or whatever. Everything I told you earlier ..I still think the same way about Jensen.“

When she kept quiet, he babbled on. „And I know it´s crazy ... and dangerous, probably, but ... I really would like to know Jensen better, nevertheless.“

She huffed. „Crazy doesn´t even come close, Jay... but...“

He waited, anxious what she´d say. The verdict.

„... if Jensen pushed you away, it means that he actually cares for you. I´ll explain it to you when ...if we can meet. And, obviously, you care for him. So, screw our families. Screw their stupid competition. ... or war, however you want to call it. I´m tired of it. I´m tired of having to hate someone I´ve never met in my life only because they come from the wrong side of the river, much less someone I already have met and found likeable.“ She paused for a moment, and Jared involuntarily held his breath.

„It might be dangerous – and ... I´ve already lost two people close to me, Jay, I´m not gonna lose Jensen, too. I´m just – that´s not going to happen. I´m not gonna LET it happen.“

Jared´s throat constringed. „I understand“, he croaked. Shit. SHIT.

„But“, she went on, and her voice sounded determined now, firm. „I also want my brother to be happy. I want him to have a life. And you – you seemed like the one that could give him both.“

A spark of hope ignited in Jared´s chest. He knew he didn´t have a chance without Jensen´s sister´s consent – if their relationship was anything like the one between himself and Megan, and it seemed even closer – and he wanted to have her blessing, so to speak. Plus he´d need any ally he could find, if they were really trying to go through with this madness.

„I´ll still help you, If you are serious. You are serious, aren´t you?“

„I´ve never been more serious in my life, Mack.“

„Good. Cause if you aren´t ...or if this is some trick to get to our family....you´ll be sorry, Jay. Seriously sorry.“
„I know. Same situation, remember? Just the other side of the river.“

She laughed at that, in a sad way.

„Living the happy life of the rich and powerful, right? Or so they say.“

Jared huffed. „More like, collateral damage on legs.“

„Don´t get sappy, young man. It doesn´t suit you.“

He felt a grin tug at the corners of his mouth. He really liked Jensen´s sister.

„I´ll try, Mack. But be warned, there´s a big old romantic hidden inside this gorgeous body.“

She giggled – *you´ve made her laugh, that´s a good sign, isn´t it!*

When she talked, she was serious again though. „Jay, you do know that Jensen will be even more reluctant to give you a chance now? Not because of who you are“, she hastily went on, „but because this means even more danger for both of you. He´s had – he´s had some pretty crappy experience already. I wanted to tell you on Tuesday, but I guess it´s better if you know everything before... before you decide on how to go on. I was still a girl back then, but – when he was in California, he had a boyfriend. Matt ... they were very much in love, I think, he was a great guy as far as I can tell. Funny, and full of energy, kind of... sparkling, you know what I mean?“

Jared nodded. *Like Gen, he thought. She´s sparkling, too, and every room lightens up when she enters it.* Then he remembered Mack couldn´t see him.

„I know what you mean“, he murmured. „What happened?“

She sighed. „One day, he just disappeared. He was gone for a few days, then they found a body on the shore... Jensen had to go identify him, there was no next of kin. It was Matt, or... what was left of him.“ She paused for a moment. „Jensen didn´t tell me much, but I got it out of our Uncle Jim.“

„Was Matt – did he...“ He didn´t even want to think about it. The pictures of deformed cars reappeared in his mind. All of a sudden, he could smell gasoline again.

„It was an accident. He used to climb at the shore. Seems like one of the hooks had loosened. It was a fall no one could survive.“

„Jesus ...“ Jared felt relief, *it was an accident... only an accident... and at the same time, guilt (he ended up dead all the same, didn´t he?) – and ... suspicion. An accident, just like yours? Like the ones Jensen´s mother and brother died in? This kind of ´accident´?*

„When was this?“, he croaked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

„The accident... wait, it was winter here. February, I think. Actually... wait... it seems like it actually happened on the same day our mom died. A day before Valentine´s. I remember Jensen calling... he was freaked out, and Dad was shouting at him cause he... you know. We were just heading down to church, for my Mum´s memorial mass. “ She sighed. „They never got along much... but after that... after Matt... it got really bad. Well, he left soon after that anyway.“

Her voice sounded so sad, it made Jared´s heart cringe, through the coldness that had started to fill his chest.

A day before Valentine´s. Just Like Jensen´s Mum.
The same day you were supposed to die. Same day, different year again.

It seemed like February 13th wasn´t a lucky day for any member of the Ackles or Padalecki families.

Jared said good bye to Mack after that, promising to be in touch („You do have a secure phone, do you Jared? If your father is anything like mine, you better have a burner phone from now on“). He sank back into the well worn leather couch.

What the hell have you gotten yourself into. Strange accidents and drama aplenty.

Sometimes he wished his father were some unimportant tax accountant, his mum worked as a high school teacher, and their major problem was to decide whether to spend summer holidays at the lake or with his grandparents in the south (Josh would vote for the lake, Megan for Texas. He could almost hear them bicker in his head).

Sometimes he wished he wasn´t born into a rich family with doubtful morals and fixed plans for his life.

Sometimes he wished he wasn´t gay. It would be so much easier.

But no djinns or fairies ever crossed his path. He´d have to struggle out of this all by himself.

Suck it, Padalecki.

Finally, you´ve found someone who seems worth it.
Chapter 10

Gerald

Gerald Padalecki watched his wife put on the earrings he´d gotten her for their 20th anniversary. They had cost a fortune, but were designed to look „elegantly understated“, or so the guy at Cartier´s in Paris had called it. They fit Sherri well that way – she knew how to look stunning in her clothes in a reserved way, be it a perfectly tailored evening dress or a pair of jeans with a simple white shirt.

Actually, he´d fallen in love with her when she was wearing nothing more glamorous than sunbleached jeans, a plaid shirt and cowboy boots, her southern heritage she sometimes needed as an armour, as she´d told him later, when she felt homesick or spring took too long to come for her taste.

She met his eyes in the mirror, raising her eyebrows. „We still got time, right? The auction doesn´t start before 5pm?“

He nodded. „No need to hurry. The good pieces won´t be sold before we´re there.“

He watched her check herself in the mirror once more, turning her head left and right, eyebrows raised critically. She still had the lean, long-limbed body of almost 30 years ago, due to genes and an impressive sports program she´d only ever stopped during the last months of each pregnancy.

When she turned around on the swivel chair, obviously satisfied with her looks, her eyebrows were now drawn together in a frown though.

„I talked to Jared´s friend earlier“, she said. „Chad."

Gerald huffed, and walked over to the window, staring down at the snow covered grounds leading to the stables. The black and white landscape always reminded him of the old photographs his grandparents had brought from Europe: endless plains, woods in the background, a dirt road in some godforsaken town in the middle of nowhere. A cluster of decrepit buildings going for a farm where they came from, six children in a row between two tired looking adults, long skirts and weird hats everywhere. The houses, the clothes, the faces, all spelled poorness; but they held their heads high, their backs straight. Proud people, even when they lost everything and had to start from scratch in a new country later on. And sparing the money to get their picture taken for their descendants to remember where they came from.

He used to look at those old pictures from time to time, now hung in frames in his study: A constant reminder of what you could lose, and gain again; and never to let the one destroy your pride, or the other get to your head and become lazy and careless.

„Gerald?“

His wife´s voice had a sharp edge to it, which probably meant she´d asked him something and he had been too wrapped up in his own mind to hear her.

He turned around to face her.

„Sorry, what did you say?“
“I talked to Chad. He’ll do what he can … but, Gerald, I don’t think he’ll be able to rein Jared in this time. You know how stubborn he can be…“

“Yeah, and I know where he’s got it from”, Gerald murmured, shrugging at the piercing look it earned him from Sherri. „Nothing wrong with determination, honey. You’re the living proof. But that damn kid seems to use it only on the wrong kind of things. Jeff is as strong-headed as any of us, and look where it’s gotten him already. Jared … does he do it to rub me – us – the wrong way? If he sees this as a challenge, he sure must know he can’t win on the long run?“

Sherri got up and went into the built-in cupboard holding her impressive shoe collection, taking a pair off the rack without hesitation.

„Part of it sure is his usual rebellion against us. But I don’t know, Gerald…Chad says he met that – that -“ she seemed at a loss of deprecating words to give to her son’s most recent flame, so Gerald helpfully provided, „Irish pansy ass?“

She shrugged, and went on, „Chad is sure they haven’t met but the two times we know of, and Jared was – different. Seems like there is more to it than with his usual one night flings. “

Gerald frowned. If Jared was anything like his mother, or himself, that couldn’t be good. Gerald had decided he would marry Sherri the first time he’d seen her on campus, and 3 years later he’d led her to the altar, having fought against his parents’ strong objections for at least two of them. He’d not regretted it one day so far.

But this is wrong in so many ways, all the stubbornness of our anchestors put together won’t get Jared his will this time.

„We can’t have that, Sherri. These are the very people who…“ His voice caught. That cold february night years ago had been the worst of his life so far: The fight with his son, and then, later, the call from a hospital. The two days of waiting, fearing. Praying, even.

He cleared his throat. „It has to stop now. I don’t care what it takes. “

„I agree, Gerald.“ She’d come back, high heels in hand, warm boots on her feet, a silky stola around her shoulders.

„And I’d say, we are going through with it this time. No more playing around, no stalling, no exceptions. Jared has had his chance to get his life straight; obviously, he isn’t willing to respect his responsibilities against his family. “

They left the room, went down the broad staircase to the entrance. Gerald helped his wife into her black fur coat.

„I already spoke to Andrej. He said Bela’s on board; as soon as we are ready, they are good to go.“

Sherri wrapped a silvery foulard around her head. She hated the cold wind, always had.

„You know I wanted to wait with Jared’s engagement until after Jeff’s party, but – I think it would be best to make it official as soon as possible. Just a little gathering of friends, and an announcement in the papers. Have you talked to Andrej about the job in St. Petersburg again?“

He waited for their driver to open the limousine’s door, and helped her inside gallantly. He liked doing it as much for show as for keeping a certain amount of respectful formality to their marriage – it was a personal relationship as much as a business agreement after all.
When he sat at her side in the dark car, he finally answered her question.

„We can send Jared anytime. They are ready to take him into their custody within an hour´s notice; he can finish his studies in Russia, and work his ass off in one of Andrej´s companies. There won´t be a problem with approbation or working visa.“

Sherri looked at him for a moment, then at the brightly lit windows passing by in a blur.

„We should have reacted earlier. Now we will have to force him into it, and it won´t be pretty.“

„Well, he brought it on himself. He´s had enough warnings.“

She stayed quiet for a while. When she turned back to him, she seemed determined.

„It´s the best way, especially for him, and one day he will appreciate it. Look at how well Jeff´s life and career are turning out right now. Jared will have all that too.“ She picked at her soft leather gloves. „Jared has got the best brain, but he isn´t always the smartest of our kids. But we will help him reach his goals, even if it is by throwing him into the Russian shark pond. He´ll learn to use his teeth.“

Gerald nodded slowly. „True. He will. He´s a Padalecki, and he will remember that, in time to get his ducks in a row.“

„What about the – other – kid?“

„The Ackles spawn?“ Gerald shrugged coolly. „We´ll eliminate him. No need to keep someone alive who´s a risk. And it will be the perfect retaliation for what Alan did to Jared. Eye for an eye...only we´ll take it out for good.“

„You´ll call Misha then?“

„Of course ... no risks. He´s the best.“

„When?“

He laughed. It sounded cold and cruel, even to himself; he didn´t mind. He was a ruthless businessman, and an even less conciliant Family boss. The only difference between him and the Russian patriarch and soon-to-be partner in crime (literally) was that Gerald considered his wife an equal in business and family matters. His tolerance definitely ended at homosexual relationships though. They were wrong, disgusting, and a mistake of nature, period. People were supposed to fight against homosexuality, it was an illness of body and mind; and Gerald would never, NEVER, let his son become one of those faggots who were swinging their rainbow-colored flags and singing kumbajah all day, acting like the world belonged to them. No way. He´d rather – he paused for a moment. You´d rather see him dead than turned into an abomination.

*Jensen*

Faint beeping noises, and footsteps outside. Muffled voices from the next room. Someone breathing in the room.

Jensen took the noises in, eyes still closed; there was a scent mixed into the usual tangle of
disinfectants and stale food, one he immediately connected to summer holidays and the taste of French Toast on his tongue.

„Uncle Jim?“, he murmured, still dizzy from sleeping, before drowsily turning his head in search of the only man he knew would evoke such memories in him.

*Bad idea.*

A wave of nausea swept over him, together with a pain at the back of his head that would have been searing – it still was – had he not felt somewhat detached from it, probably due to the pain medication he’d got earlier. The buzz in his ears drowned out the other noises for a few moments; then the urge to vomit subsided, the pounding in his head fainted away, and he finally dared to open his eyes. Only then he noticed someone looming over him, a blurred dark shadow even against the dim late afternoon light in the room.

„Jensen? You OK? Jensen?“

The gruff voice was one of the things he’d been looking forward to hearing again .... together with the scent – a hint of motor oil over Vitalis Hair Cream. It was genuinely Jim Beaver.

„Hey, Uncle Jim.“ The words sounded slurred. *Jesus, what did they give me? Feels like speaking around a mouthful of honey.*

„Oh, thank God.“ The sigh was deep, and heartfelt. „For a moment, you looked so pale I thought -“ The older man stopped. „But you´re good? Bummed your head pretty bad, huh!“

„Yeah...“

Jensen closed his eyes. The light hurt. His thoughts drifted inside his head like the sunbleached wood he and Josh had thrown into the river during summer holidays, whirling in slow circles forever, moving, but still caught in one place....

„You falling asleep on me again, boy?“ There was a smile in the voice.

He blinked up into the well-known face. The scruffy beard had more grey in it than he remembered; the lines around the eyes were deeper. But the eyes themselves were as sharp, and as kind, as ever ... no trace of the merciless hunter in them. Yet Jensen knew he was hidden somewhere inside the friendly person sitting at his bed´s side.

„It´s the meds.... make me dizzy...“

„They give you the good stuff, huh!“

„Guess so...“

There was a moment of silence, and Jensen´s eyes started to close again, then the voice was back, a little croaky this time.

„It´s good to see ya, boy. You´ve been gone quite some time.“

„Ah...missed your favorite godson, didn´t you..“

Jim huffed. „Damn right I missed you! So did Mack! And I don´t have a favorite, just so you know. Mack and J -“ He stopped dead, literally biting his tongue. „Mack is far less troublesome than you, young man.“He
He grinned up at his godfather, but felt his face grow serious again.

„You knew I would be gone“, he murmured. „You knew I didn’t plan on coming back. But...I dunno...it was time. I guess I’d have come back soon anyway, even without ... without Josh. I only wish ...“ Suddenly, he felt too tired to talk about it.

**No use anyway. Josh is gone, you missed your chance to set things right between you two.**

„Jensen?“

Jim’s voice was full of concern, so Jensen opened his eyes for his godfather’s sake.

„Sorry...I’m so damn tired. –and I can’t think straight.“

When the older man looked guilty, and made an attempt to get up, he hastily reached out for his hand.

„Don’t go – I didn’t mean – I’m good, Jim. Really.“

His godfather looked sceptical, but he sat down again.

„You don’t look so great, though“, he grumbled. „Honestly, didn’t you eat for the last five years? And you need some color in that pretty face of yours. I thought you were down south where the sun is shining!“

„I feel a little nauseous“, Jensen admitted. „It’s the concussion.“

„Yeah, about that.“

When Jensen heard the serious undertone, he shivered.

**No way can he...can they know about it already...**

„What...“

His godfather cleared his throat. „What the fuck were you thinking, Jensen!“

Jensen felt confused.

„What – what are you talking about?“

Jim shook his head. He looked sad, and concerned. „That young man you met, Jen. You can’t just – you -“

„How do you – did my father spy on me? Again?“ Within an instant, he felt his hackles rise. „Jesus, I knew he’s paranoid when it comes to controlling us, but – I’ve been home less than a week, for God’s sake. I haven’t even talked to him yet!“

„He’s not spying, Jen. He’s...concerned. Can you blame him, after what happened to Josh? To your Mom?“

Jensen pressed his lips together. **Yeah, I do blame him. It’s his freaking ‘business’ that causes all this... chaos, and pain. And what for....what for?**

Jim saw the hardened lines on his godson’s face, the usually full lips pressed into an almost bluish line. He sighed.
„I know you blame your father for what´s happened to your family. And you´re right, in a way, it´s his responsibility. “

„In a way? Tell me in what way it ISN´T his decisions that make our lives hell?“

He saw anger flare up in Jim´s eyes too. His Godfather rarely showed his temper when he was with his adopted family; but the few occasions Jensen remembered had been scary enough.

„Your father isn´t a saint, he´s far from it, believe me, no one knows better than me! Hell, we haven´t even talked for years ´cause I accused him of the same things you are throwing at him, Jensen! But I´ve learned a few things, and one of them is, your father is not the biggest monster out there. He´s at least got a rest of decency left, compared to the soulless sharks who lead the other families these days. And don´t believe he doesn´t care for you or your sister, Jensen. I know you hate him for the surveillance and everything, but well, it´s his way of showing his love, as twisted as it may be. “

Jensen looked away, at the empty bed in the room.

„I know“, he murmured at last. „But not being the worst of all – that´s not really ...“ something his Godfather had said finally registered.

„What do you mean, you didn´t talk to him in years – do you now? Have you two made peace, or what?“

He saw the answer in Jim´s face before his godfather even opened his mouth.

„We found... we found a new agreement, Jensen“, he finally said, obviously not happy with the topic.

„An agreement, huh. I wonder how he got you to accept his terms. Is he blackmailing you? Threatening you?“

Jensen searched the older man´s face; for a moment, he saw guilt in it, loads of it, but then it closed down and became unreadable.

„It´s none of your business, boy. I have my reasons. And, like I said. Your Dad´s not that bad.“

**Guilt. Why is he guilty? What did he do ... what did my father make him do?**

Jensen couldn´t help it. Once his mind started spinning, there was no stopping it: it had always been like that, a crazy carousel of thoughts running and running and running...

And then, the right question appeared in his mind. He´s guilty....because it´s not about himself ...

**Who did he threaten, Jim? Who is important enough to you you´d sell your soul for... who –**

His Godfather stared down at his hands, face a mask, and the answer sprang right into Jensen´s face.

„It´s us“, he whispered, voice suddenly gone, swallowed by the enormity of what this would mean. „It´s – it´s Mack and me, isn´t it?“

He glanced over at his godfather, still unsure if it could be true, *he wouldn´t – he wouldn´t – not Jim. Not the only one besides Mack I only ever trusted. Not him.*

But the older man´s face betrayed everything, the stony mask that only made it clear the man...
behind it was crumbling, the eyes that could barely look at Jensen for a second before drifting away.

„You – did you – did you report to our father on us, Jim?“ *There´s still a possibility that I´m wrong. He didn´t do it. He conned Dad. He –*

But when had he ever been wrong where the dark depth of his messed up family had been concerned.

„It was the only way he´d let me – the only way I could stay in contact with you.‟

Jim´s voice was soundless, broken. „Jensen, I – it was the only way. He – I couldn´t – I couldn´t just leave you to -“

A coldness crept up Jensen´s legs and arms, settled inside his chest. He felt as if his insides were shrinking, shrivelling in this icy wave, cringing and protesting against the pain.

„You spied on us“, he croaked, voice a colorless rasp only. „And I – I – I trusted you – you were the only one I -“

Something constricted his throat. His head started pounding again, violent and cruel stabs of pain seemed to explode behind his eyes. There was no air. The buzzing in his ears was back, only louder, droning out everything, his heart went crazy, *whum-whum-whum-whum*, there was a face above his own, a mouth, moving, but no sound came out, wild, scared eyes, he didn´t feel the hands on his shoulders, didn´t even register them shaking him, *whum-whum-whum-whum*, no air, only this pressure crashing in on him from all sides, pressing, pressing, pressing, until finally blackness swallowed everything away.

*Mack*

Mack was on her way back from the vending machine to Jensen´s room, coffee in each hand (it smelled disgusting, but it was still caffeine, right?), when she heard the muffled shouts.

Her life´s experience so far had taught her one thing: Always expect the worst. Especially for the wellbeing of your beloved ones.

So it was only natural that she would let the coffees fall down and storm to the door of her brother ´s room, barely registering the nurse hasting down the corridor, a doctor coming around the far corner with long strides.

*Jensen. Trouble. Jensen.*


It was all her mind was capable of, a mantra repeating itself again and again and again, this was a nightmare, she was fighting against a current, a force keeping her from reaching the one person she ´d left, her feet were made of lead, body of stone, *it´s a nightmare, only a nightmare*, she finally reached the door, heard her Godfather´s shouts, „Help! We need help here!“*, please, not Jensen, please, not him too.*

She ripped the door open and stormed inside, saw her godfather bowed over the bed, but when he
looked up, the terrified, desperate expression on his face made her stop dead. It was only a moment, then she moved on, was at her brother´s side without knowing how she´d got there.

She had only a second to glance down at the slack face, *too pale, he´s far too pale, he can´t be – can´t be- not Jensen too* - before firm hands took her arms and pulled her away, and she watched the nurse and the doctor who´d entered the room behind her check her brother´s vitals, the monitors, murmuring numbers between them she didnt understand.

*He´s not numbers, he´s Jensen. My brother. He´s my brother, dammit, and you –*

She was just about to start shouting or punching the wall when other arms wrapped around her, pulled her into a corner. The familiar scent of motor oil and her godfather´s old-fashioned hair cream encased her, and it calmed her finally down, made her racing mind stop.

„Uncle Jim...he´s...he´s not...“

„He´ll be OK, Mack...shhhh....he´ll be Ok....“

For the second time, she was pressed against his broad chest, the shirt still damp from her earlier tears. She looked up when someone spoke, turned so she could see her brother again.

„Mr. Ackles, can you hear me? Mr. Ackles? Jensen?“

„Yeah ...I... yeah.“

When she heard the croaking voice, she started to cry.

Later, after they´d taken Jensen down to do another head scan, and who knew what else, the doctor had sat down with them on the shitty sofas outside Jensen´s room; had talked about possible reasons, possible complications.

Her godfather had stared at the man for a few seconds, brows drawn together, and Mack had felt the tension filling him behind the seemingly calm outside.

„So you´re practically telling us you know shit.“

She´d have laughed at the look on the doctor´s face – guilt, embarrassment, indignation – had it not been her brother´s health they were talking about; additionally, the poor man looked exhausted, overworked and ready to sleep for 36 hours, so she lay her hand on Jim´s arm, for once being the one calming him, not the other way round.

The doctor raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

„The new scans can probably give us an idea...and then we ordered additional blood tests. Mr. Ackles has been in tropical regions lately, I understand?“

Mack hadn´t even thought about the possibility of tropical deseases...the doctor droned on, parasites, bacteria, viruses, the whole freaking nature seemed intent on invading peoples´ bodies and cause harm.

„If there is any chance that Mr. Ackles is suffering from any of the deseases I just mentioned, I highly recommend transferring him to one of the hospitals specialized in their treatment.“
„So you honestly think it could be something like that?“

The helpless gesture again. „Right now, without the bloodwork, I really can’t say. For all we know, he just has a pretty extreme case of panic attacks, and maybe hurt his head worse than we thought. We’ll know soon, though.“

The man rubbed his tired eyes, a gesture that reminded Mack so much of her brother she felt tears sting at the corners of her eyes.

„Mr. Ackles will need to rest for now, but... if you want to transfer him to a more... a better equipped clinic ...“ His voice trailed away, but he seemed to pull himself together with some effort. „We are only a small public hospital, our resources are restricted. We should be sure about the state of his head before further moving him, though.“

Jim nodded at her side, his face unusually grave.

„I’ll have to talk to his father“, he said.

Mack bristled. „Uncle Jim, you know Jensen doesn’t want to -“

„Mack“, he interrupted her, a rare thing for him to do. „It’s time to play with open cards. You know your father is informed, I do, Jensen does, so what’s the point.“

„We still have to talk to Jensen about it!“

He took her hand, looked into her eyes sincerely. „Mack, do you really think I’d do anything without asking your brother? Or let your father go over Jensen’s will?“

She felt the blush warm her cheeks. „No – no, I don’t. I’m sorry.“

„Don’t be. There’s something I haven’t told you ...“

He looked so uncomfortable and guilt-ridden it raised her alert.

„Does it have to do with Jensen’s ...whatever it was? Panic attack?“

Her godfather glanced over at the doctor. She understood. Not in front of strangers, Mack.

„When can we go see Jensen?“, she asked the man instead.

„We gave him a sedative. When he’s back from the scans, he’ll be asleep for quite some time I suppose. But you can stay with him of course.“

Jim cleared his throat. „If it really is some sort of...tropical desease ... is there any danger of infection to others? To us?“

The doctor nodded in acknowledgement of the question. „There are some deseases which are highly infectious, but most would need direct blood contact. And as I said, we rushed the bloodwork, we’ll have a result soon.“

He excused himself when his pager went off, and left them alone. Mack watched a woman clean the floor where she’d lost the coffee cups. She looked down at her legs then, just remembering what had happened, and found her jeans stained with coffee.

Picking at the fabric, she didn’t look up at her godfather when she asked, „What happened in there, Uncle Jim?“
When he sighed, and leaned forward, elbows resting on his legs, face almost buried in his hands, she knew she wouldn’t like what she’d hear; which reminded her of Jay’s ... Jared’s ... call.

„Is it because of...Jared?“, she asked. „Jared Padalecki?“

He sat up abruptly. „You – you know?“

„He was the one who called me earlier. He told me ... he told me his name. I didn´t know, Uncle Jim. Neither did Jensen.“

Her godfather massaged his temples. „That´s one hell of a mess, Mack“, he muttered. „Do you have any idea what those two could have gotten themselves into?“

Mack straightened at that. „Could have? So – you think – you don´t approve?“

„Approve?“ Jim huffed, and shook his head. „Mack, this is beyond my approval. Anyone´s, at that. It´s impossible.“

„Why?“

„Why?“ He looked at her incredulously. „Why can´t the sons of two families who´ve been fighting each other for the last 35 years be together? Mack, do you have any idea how bad things are between your father and the Padaleckis?“

„I know Dad doesn´t like them, and competes against them wherever possible, but -“

„It´s war, Mack. A dirty, bloody, unsavoury war. This goes beyond business competition. Far beyond.“

Cold crept up Mack´s spine. „What do you mean?“, she asked. Do you even want to know?

Jim stared down at his feet. Seconds ticked by; finally, he seemed to come to a decision, and looked up.

„What exactly do you know about your Mom´s and Josh´s accidents, Mack?“
Chapter 11

Alan

Alan Ackles got out of the car, immediately flanked by the two men who’d been in the car in front of his. They were his bodyguards, but didn’t look like the cliché everyone had in mind: no black suits, no sunglasses, no visible earpieces. They just looked like construction workers in their flannel plaids and worn jeans, the weapons and modern communication systems well hidden from anyone who wouldn’t look too closely. It was the disguise they always used whenever Alan had to leave his business world and came down to the places where his life, and career, had started. His own business partners, maybe not even all of his employees, would’ve had a hard time recognizing him: In his worn hunting jacket, the knitted scarf and cap, and the baggy cord trousers he looked like any inhabitant of the small, mostly worn down houses of the area: a blue collar worker or small shop owner coming home to his family after a hard day’s work.

It was a family visit allright; just not the kind of family other people had in mind. His Family was an extended, large network of relations, dependencies, favors owed and given, be it indebtment, the search for a job during tough times, or other reasons why anyone would come to The Boss for help. As the leader of this vast and dissimilar group, he was surprisingly well informed about the ongoings in it, thanks to a net of reliable informants and a loyal „commander”, not to mention a real interest from his side – a maybe old-fashioned sense of responsibility for „his“ people.

The house whose door he was knocking on was as small as the others in the long row following the downhill street, but well kempt, woodwork neatly painted, window frames free of the black soot that covered most of the other buildings. The door opened, revealing a whip-thin figure in the doorway, and Alan Ackles stepped forward in between his bodyguards, the smile on his lips a hint warmer than the professional one he usually gave everyone else.

„DJ“, he said, nodding at the young man whose eyes had gone wide at seeing who stood on his doorstep.

„Mr. Ackles“, he stammered, taking a step back involuntarily, eyes flying back and forth from the broad shouldered men to Alan’s face. Licking his lips nervously, he added, „Please, come in...“

He stepped back, and Alan followed him into the dark hallway, nodding at his guards to stay outside. „Relax, DJ“, he said, trying to calm the obviously skittery man. „I’m here on a personal matter.“

„Oh ...uhm...Ok. Would you like some tea? I just brewed -“

„That’s very friendly of you, Garth“, he answered, inadvertently using the nickname that had followed the kid since his first day at summer camp (no one remembered where it had come from) and glanced around the small living room the young man lead him into. Alan had taken DJ under his wings when the boy’s mother had died of cancer during his early teenage years, no father anywhere to be seen, and was proud to see him graduate, find a job, and take law and criminology classes at the local university, granting him a loan at much better conditions than any bank would have ever given the guy; only asking for information now and then in exchange, and paying for special training courses that would boost DJ’s career once he was planted inside the police force. Alan knew every penny he spent on DJ was well invested: He was smart, loyal, and looked extremely unsuspicious; he had a slightly quirky way, somehow old-fashioned good manners, and
liked hugging people (even against their will). He was, all in all, the perfect future inside man.

„So, Ga- I mean, DJ“, Alan finally said, feeling the young man´s nervous eyes on him, and turned to face him.

„How are things at university? Are you doing well?“

Small talk was an unusual gesture for Alan, who normally didn´t waste any time with anyone. DJ had always been something like a special project for him, though: a piece of mould he intended to form into exactly the figure he needed – something he hadn´t been too successful in with his own children. They were too headstrong, and he´d been too lenient maybe, something he wasn´t proud of, but wouldn´t know how to change ... Mackenzie, the only one still within his direct reach, might seem easier to handle than her brother Jensen, but hid a steely mind behind her seemingly amiable and pliant behavior. Alan knew she often pulled him over, charming him into changing decisions, but he was still unable to resist her. Of course, it was only small things ... he wasn´t a fool, and Mack knew where there was room for negotiations. He was looking forward to having her at his side – she´d be a stunning Family leader, as well as business boss.

„Very good, Sir. Everything´s going according to my planned schedule ... and I finally found a job directly on campus, which saves me a lot of time actually. Plus it pays better than the job at the book shop.“

„I can imagine“, Alan murmured drily. Of course it did – he´d pulled a few strings to put DJ inside the small coffee shop where one of his informants had taken the picture of Jensen and the son of that despicable son of a bitch, Padalecki.

„That´s good to hear, DJ. Now, listen...“

He watched the young man straighten his shoulders, eyes attentive. He liked that – the boy knew where his loyalties lay, and he was capable of showing gratitude without being one of those slimy ass-kissers he´d met enough of already.

„I don´t know if you´re aware that my son Jensen is back home.“

There was real surprise in the other man´s face. „Jensen? He´s back? When did he come home? Is he -“

„DJ.“ Alan raised his hand, and the young man fell silent immediately.

„I´m sorry, Mr. Ackles. I was – was – carried away.“

Alan had sent DJ to the same (expensive) summer camps his own sons had partecipated in, and the boys knew each other from those weeks spent hunting, fishing, running, competing, learning to survive nature and puberty. He´d always suspected DJ to have a crush on Jensen, a feeling probably enforced by Jensen´s way of treating him not as the outsider he sure was, but as an equal, judging him by who he was, not where he came from. Jensen had always been that way. Hard to impress, even harder to win; and unwavering in his love and loyalty for those he adored, and cared for. He might often have given the impression of being soft, shy even, too kind-hearted to be able to survive the world he had been born into; and yet he could be harsh, even cold, and so stubborn it had always managed to infuriate Alan more than any of the shenanigans Josh used to pull, or Mack´s rare fits of temper.

Maybe you´ve always expected too much of him....or the wrong things? Maybe you´ve seen too much of yourself in him, and didn´t see how much he always resembled his mother....
DJ’s careful question pulled him out of his musings. He snapped back to present times, looking at the young man in front of him.

“I need you to watch out for him.”

DJ’s mouth fell open. Before he could utter anything, Alan went on.

“You know what happened to my oldest son?” He waited for DJ to nod, and added, “I cant lose Jensen, too. I need him to be safe ...he’s going to study law again, so you´ll probably share a few classes. I know you haven´t seen him in years – no one has. But he liked you when you were kids, he´ll trust you.”

DJ looked as if his eyes might pop out any second. His mouth opened and closed without any sound coming out. Alan took pity on the young man.

“Yes, Garth?” This time, he used the nickname on purpose.

“Sir, I - how can I – Im sure you´ve better trained people than me – how would I be of any use? I´m only -“

“You´re perfect“, Alan unterrupted him. „As I said, he’ll trust you...and that´s more important than anything one of my professional guards can offer. I want you to befriend Jensen again, if possible, or at least be a presence at the seams of his life again. I need you to get any information about him to me ASAP, especially...“ He hesitated.

„Especially everything concerning his personal relationships. “

He saw DJ´s eyes widen.

„But, Sir...“, he murmured timidly. „That woud be – would be -“

„It will probably save his life, Garth“, Alan brutally went on. „I can´t afford romanticism, not for me, not for my children, DJ. I need Jensen to survive, and I won´t have him killed over some pretty Polish piece of meat. You can be the one to keep him alive, Garth. Can you do that for me? For Jensen?“

He knew he´d won when he watched the young man´s face change. Alan was well aware he was good like that... manipulating people was one of the skills that had brought him where he stood now after all.

„Of course, Sir. I´d do anything for Jensen. “

Don´t I know that, boy....dont I know it. That´s why you are perfect for the job.

„Good. I´m glad to hear that, Garth. Try to keep my boy safe. Please.“

Ok...maybe that was too much?

It wasn´t.

„Mr. Ackles, Sir, I´ll not gonna let anything happen to Jensen. I promise. I promise!“

Alan had the strong impression the young man was going to hug him any second, and deemed the
moment right to retreat.

„Well, that´s settled, then. Thank you, DJ.“ He pulled the knitted cap over his head again.

„You´ll recieve information as to what your job will be exactly...I´ll be in touch.“

He went to the entrance door, but stopped once more, his hand already on the doorknob.

„And, Garth...“, he said, turning his head to the skinny figure standing in the doorway to the living room, a little dazed by the turn of events.

„Sir?“

„Don´t mess this up.“

He was out of the house before DJ could stammer an answer.

Jensen

The world was moving. Corridors, elevators, inspection rooms´ doors rattling by under the wheels of the gurney he was lying on, sharp turns and stops that made his head swim. The pounding inside never stopped, it was just dimmed down a little by the meds that dangled from the IV attched to his bed. He must have fallen asleep then, somewhere on the way back, cause when he woke up, he found himself in the small room again, voices quietly murmuring in a corner.

He listened for a while, still in a limbo between sleep and being awake... feeling strangely safe, like when he was a little kid, and heard his parents talk downstairs, or his mom sing while she was folding laundry...back in the old, small house with the green entrance door. He still remembered the sharp smell of the paint.

„Don´t touch it, Jenny! See how the fresh paint still sticks to my fingers? You´ll leave fingerprints on the door .. I´ll go wash up and then we can make some lemonade, how does that sound!“

Of course, he couldn´t resist touching the glossy surface... he wondered if his fingerprints were still visible on the door, or if the people living in the house after them had already chosen a different color for their entrance ... not the vibrant green his Mom had loved, „it´s in all our eyes, boys, can you see? That way, we´ll always carry part of our home with us, even if we are far away“.  

The murmuring ebbed away. He heard footsteps near the bed, the creaking of a plastic chair, then a hand stroked his arm lightly.

„Jensen?“

He opened his eyes, the lids heavy and leaden. Mack´s worried face was near his own. Peach ... this scent will always be Mack...

„Hey, lil´ sis...“ He tried to grin, but wasn´t sure his face was showing it. Everything felt a little fuzzy, brain wrapped in cotton wool. He heard an intake of breath, but it wasn´t Mack ... his eyes found the other person, still seated in the corner by the door.

This time, his heartbeat didn´t freak out. He stared at the man´s downcast, guilt-ridden face, the lines around his eyes, deeper than they´d been five years ago, eyes wearier, shoulders slumped. *He´s getting old, Jensen thought. It´s weird how we are getting older ourselves, but somehow expect everyone else to stay the way they were when we were kids.*

He looked at his godfather for a while, eyes hooded. No panic, no cold limbs.

*Maybe it´s the meds they gave you...or you´ve accepted the idea that that´s how your life is, and will always be. You trust someone, and they´ll betray you. Each and every one of them.*

*It´s ... a natural order, in your universe. So, why bother ... just adapt to the planet already, and you´ll be fine, right? Besides...you haven´t got many people left around you... not really the time to be picky.*

„Uncle Jim“, he murmured, words slurred.

The other man looked up, surprised. He got out of the chair, slowly, and stood there at the far corner, uneasiness visible in his posture, embarrassment and guilt written all over his face.

„Jensen...“

It was Mack who spoke. His godfather obviously was at a loss of what to say, and Jensen honestly was too tired to find a way through the mess.

He glanced at his sister, saw the red rimmed eyes, the blotchy face.

„I´m sorry, Mack“, he croaked. „I didn´t mean to -“

„Shhhh....“

She stroked his cheek, fingers gently finding his eyebrows, combing back the short messed up hair.

„Jensen, we need to talk about something. I know you´re mad at Uncle Jim...but ... please ...“ He looked into her eyes, already filling with tears again. And understood.

*If I cast Jim out of my life, she will lose him, too – I´ll rob her of the only real father figure she´s got.*
Chapter 12

Jensen

Jensen looked up when the door of the large classroom opened. He wasn´t the only one; throughout the room, heads turned. Jensen threw a quick glance at Professor Harvelle. She frowned at the door, obviously irritated by the intrusion. Her face seemed to soften though once she recognized the person who´d caused it.

„Mr. Qualls“, she said, voice clipped, but with a smile hidden behind it. „Should I feel honored you could make it to my humble presentation of Civil Rights, and almost in time, too?“

Jensen´s head snapped back to the entrance, where now a skinny – whip-thin, rather – figure had appeared, a young man whose face shone so brightly red it looked like it would be bursting into flames any second.

„I´m s-sorry, Professor Harvelle, I – uhm – Professor Baxter kept me waiting for his comment on my homework and wouldn´t have me leave so I -“

He stopped abruptly, and Jensen noticed the hand Professor Harvelle had raised.

She sighed, very clearly more annoyed by her colleague´s attitude than by the embarrassed student in front of her.

„It´s Ok, Gar- Mr. Qualls. Just find a place to sit down fast, please, so we can go on.“

She turned back to her notes, giving Jensen the opportunity to stare at the young man who now searched the rows of seats for an empty one.

Garth.

The weird boy of their childhood summer camps – well, the other weird guy, so much so it made the other kids forget about Jensen´s weirdness altogether.

Quiet, loyal, shy Garth, with his sudden outbursts of affection, leaving himself and everyone else embarrassed for hours.

Their eyes met. Jensen raised his hand, giving the young man a hesitant little wave. Seeing his face light up, the eyes grow wide, he couldn´t help smiling himself.

Garth - where did he get that strange nickname from? Jensen couldn´t really remember – made a beeline for Jensen´s row, and slipped into the empty seat at his side.

„Jensen!“, he whispered so loud that probably the whole room could hear him. „I haven´t seen you in ages! What are you doing back home!“ Jensen found himself wrapped into skinny arms before he could even open his mouth. „It´s so good to see you! I wondered where -“

„Mr. Qualls, as heart warming as your joy to see Mr. Ackles may be, I´d like to go on with my lesson now, without any more interruptions. Either you reign in your curiosity for the rest of the hour, or you both leave the room to catch up on each others´ social lives, although I would like to remind you that you have a total of three allowed missed lessons, and Mr. Ackles already lost two
due to his late start."

Professor Harvelle’s stare, shot at them over the rim of her reading glasses, froze Garth in place, face redder than ever; Jensen felt his own cheeks burn, and sat up straight.

„Sorry, Professor Harvelle. Our apologies.“

She nodded curtly, eyes squinted, and went on with her lesson. Jensen watched Garth out of the corner of his eye. The other man seemed mortified, fingers nervously picking at the frayed rim of his backpack. Jensen scribbled a note on the corner of his notebook, ripped it off, and shoved it over in front of Garth. „Let’s talk afterwards. Good to see you Garth. “

Garth shot him a bright smile, eyes happy, and for a moment Jensen was afraid he´d hug him again; but the young man seemed to remember Professor Harvelle´s death glare in time, gave Jensen a thumbs up, and fished his laptop, notebook and books out of his bag as silently as possible.

„So, you´re studying law now?“

Garth beamed at Jensen. „Criminal Studies. Prof. Harvelle´s course isn´t mandatory, but I figured it would fit perfectly into my portfolio ... law enforcement can´t be too careful about civil rights, right? What with all the – never mind.“ Jensen didn’t see the sudden movement coming, but he found himself wrapped into the skinny arms once more. If Garth noticed his flinch, the stiffening of his whole body, he didn’t let it show.

„I´m so glad you´re here...right here, and studying law! I´d never have thought we´d meet in college ... when you left for California...and later...“

„Garth...“ Jensen tugged at the other man´s sleeve. „Can you...could you...“

„Oh.“

Garth took a step back, releasing Jensen, keeping his hands on Jensen´s arms though.

„Sorry, it´s – I´m just so happy to see you, I thought....“ He took a deep breath. „I thought you´d never come back. “

He stared into Jensen´s eyes, unblinking, a habit he already had shown back in their teenage days (and one of the things that freaked others out), until Jensen looked down, feeling uncomfortable.

„Yeah, you know... it was time I guess.“

Finally, Garth blinked, and looking up, Jensen could see realization hit him full-on.

„Oh my God, I – Josh. Of course. You – I´m, sorry, Jensen. I´m so sorry! I didn´t – if you need someone to talk to or – I mean – I´m here, you know?“

Jensen managed to get out of Garth´s grip before he could be crushed in another bony hug.

„It´s – yeah. Thank you, Garth. I appreciate it.“

Garth eyed him, obviously trying to read his mind. „Uhm...would you like to have coffee or something? I work at that awesome place now, they´ve got the best coffee, everyone tells me that, although I wouldn´t know, I´m more a tea person, you know? I remember you always were fond of coffee though.“ Jensen couldn’t help smiling at Garth´s babbling.
He’d always liked the guy, felt somehow responsible for him, protective even.

„I’d kill for a good cup of coffee right now, Garth...“ he smiled. His head, still not quite recovered from banging against a wall and the floor, had started pounding again, a dull pain, annoying and tiresome.

Garth´s face lit up. „Great! You´ll love the place, Ava is the best, I´m so happy to wo-“

„Wait, what – did you say Ava? You work at Ava´s cafe?“

„You know the place?“ Garth´s eyes seemed to bulge out of his head. „Already?“

Jay´s lips, his almost closed eyes...his scent - shampoo and something woody and a hint of fruity sweetness, like the candy stuff Mack used to hide everywhere when they were little...

„I´ve been there once.“ He knew his voice sounded gruff.

Garth´s eyes were attentive. Behind the ridiculous outside and the dorky behavior hid a brilliant mind, and a caring, very observant person. Jensen had been one of the few boys, maybe even the only one, who’d taken the time to get to know the misfitting guy at the first camp they’d attended together, not caring about the weird looks and the disparaging comments the other boys were throwing at Garth.

„Did you – did you not like it? We can have coffee at the campus cafeteria...“

Jensen shook his head, sighing inwardly. „No, it´s OK, it´s a great place, and Ava seems like a very nice person. Let´s go there. I have only got an hour until my next class though.“

„Ava´s the nicest boss I ever had, and she´s a genius! Come on, let´s get you the best coffee in town. And some of her delicious pastries“. Garth added the last sentence eying Jensen, while pulling him out of the main building, onto the snowy campus grounds. As soon as they rounded the corner, heading down to the buildings where Ava´s Cafe was situated, the wind hit them both with unexpected force.

„Jeez“, Jensen shivered, pulling his knitted cap deep over his ears and wrapping his arms around his body. Garth buried his nose in his long scarf (a multicolored piece that looked somehow as if a child had made it) and squeezed his eyes almost closed.

„It hasn´t been this cold that late in winter for years“, he said, voice muffled by the knitted fabric. „And the forecast says it’ll stay freezingly cold like that for quite some time. The heating costs´l kill me this year.“

Jensen threw him a glance. „Where do you live now, Garth? Here on campus?“

The other man shook his head. „No, still in my mum´s house. It´s my home, and I like the part of town, and .. well, it´s cheaper.“

„How do you get along? Loans? Odd jobs?“

Garth hunched his shoulders up to his ears. Snow crystals danced through the air, a fine spray of tiny needles against their skin.

„I got two jobs, the one at Ava´s, then I do night shifts at a gas station on Patterson Road... ah, and I help at the Library here on Fridays and Saturdays.“
Jensen frowned. „That can´t be enough to pay the college fees, though.“

Garth seemed a little hesitant before answering. „I got a loan too. Wouldn´t be possible without.“

Jensen got the impression that the topic was a sore spot somehow. He knew where Garth came from, the slightly decrepit part of town where his father had grown up, not too far away from the house with the green door where Jensen´s family had lived before.... before. Students´ loans were the usual way to pay for education, though, everyone needed them; why Garth would be embarrassed by taking one like everyone else, intrigued him. He didn´t push the subject though.

They´d reached the building, finally, and stomped their feet in front of the entrance door. The windows were fogged, obviously the place was crowded despite it being a week day, and not lunch time yet. When Garth pushed the door open, tangled voices were drifting out, laughter and the hissing noises of the huge coffee machine. Jensen saw the cafe was humming, coats and scarfs everywhere, students wrapping their hands around steaming cups. He hesitated for a moment. It had been a while since ... since you went to places like that, squeezing a cup of coffee in between classes, talking and laughing and enjoying other peoples´ company, just like that. It had all stopped when ... after Matt.

„Jensen?“

Garth looked at him expectantly, cheeks flushed from the cold, tip of his nose red.

„Coming“, Jensen murmured, making an effort to smile genuinely.

*What if Jay is here?*

For some reason, the thought hadn´t crossed his mind – *or you´ve willingly pushed it away* – and now he let his eyes wander over the faces, looking for a tall, broad shouldered figure, heartbeat suddenly quickening; but there was no sign of shaggy hair and dimples. A strange feeling washed over Jensen, and after a moment he identified it as – disappointment. *We met one time – and it didn´t exactly go well. So get a grip.*

Still, pictures popped up in his mind, how it would be to come here with Jay, being welcomed as regular customers, sharing the same table each time... *our table .....chatting, stealing pie off each other´s plates, holding hands. Leaning over the table and kissing like ...kissing like ... like we were just a normal couple living a happy life.*

„Come on!“

Garth pulled him to the back of the room, where a table had just been vacated by a very-much-in-love couple practically glued to each other. Jensen felt a little dizzy, the sudden warmth and humidity in the room, together with the thoughts whirling around in his mind, made his head spin.

Garth darted away to get their coffees and find Ava the moment Jensen had fallen into his seat, jacket thrown over the back. He took off his knitted cap, pulled his fingers through his hair, surprised again by its shortness – he still hadn´t got used to it that way. The faint throbbing at the back of his head seemed to grow with the general noise around him, the heat, and the exhaustion of being up and around since the early morning; maybe it hadn´t been such a good idea to leave the hospital, or his room at home at that, against everyone´s advise – the doctor´s, Mack´s, Jim´s. Well, he´d make up for it, be a good boy and go to the scheduled tests at the specialist the doctor at the hospital had recommended, the next afternoon. Mack would be out all day, on campus herself, so it was perfect.
“Are you OK? Jensen?”

Garth slipped onto his chair, all legs and bony elbows, throwing him a concerned glance. „You´re pale. Are you feeling well?”

Jensen smiled. „Just a headache, Garth. I´m fine.“ „Ava´s coffee can do miracles in the headache department“, Garth proudly announced.

„One double black pure as sin, one with everything we have to add!”

The cheerful voice made Jensen jerk. He turned around in his chair to find Ava right in front of him, their coffees on a tray. When she recognized him, her eyes went wide.

„Jensen? Oh my God!”

She hurriedly put their cups on the table and turned to Garth for a moment. „Garth, why didn´t you tell me your friend is Jensen!“ Back to Jensen, she laid a hand on his shoulder. „How are you? Should you even be – you know, on your feet? Jay said you got a concussion...“ She looked genuinely concerned, and Jensen wondered why ... why would someone who´d seen him just once, and exchanged not more than ten words with him – much less KNEW anything about him – even bother to ask.... maybe you´ve been too...closed off, secluded in a world that has almost nothing in common with this one here...

„I´m ...I´m fine“, he murmured. ShoUlDN´T have come here, idiot. A campus is a small world. Too small.

„Jay was – he was so worried. I haven´t seen him that quiet in a long time. Never, actually“, Ava said, frowning. Someone called for her from the bar, and she straightened herself up. Her warm eyes met Jensen´s for a moment.

„Take care, Jensen“, she said, before turning to Garth again. „You too, Garth! Enjoy your coffee!“

Jensen´s smile faltered once she was gone. He stared at the cup in front of him. The scent was delicious, strong and rich with a hint of bitterness. He knew Garth was glancing at him, but he didn´t look up.

„Jensen?” Garth´s voice sounded insecure, doubtful. „What was that about? Did she say – concussion?“

Jensen sighed, but looked up at last. „I told you I came here once. It was last week, actually, on my first day here. Someone told me Ava´s got the best coffee in town, if not in the universe.“ He smiled, remembering Jay´s enthusiasm. The dimples, and the spark in his eyes. His ever moving hands, speaking a language of their own.

„What happened?“ Garth´s look was intent.

Jensen shook his head slowly. „I had...“ He straightened his shoulders. Time to try telling the truth to someone, J. At least part of it. And it´s – well, it´s Garth.

„I had a panic attack, blacked out, and hit my head pretty bad in the process.“

Garth´s eyes, bulging at any normal day, grew even larger. His face looked so comical Jensen felt a smile tug at his lips.

„What?“
His voice sounded a little squealing. But of course, with the next question, he immediately came to the point.

„Why on earth did you have a panic attack?“

It had always been like that with Garth, Jensen remembered.... he looked so goofy and acted weird most of the time – or not like any of the other teenagers around – that most people didn´t ever get to see this side of him, the highly intelligent, sympathetic boy who always tried to make people feel better. And who had an annoying ability to get to the point with his questions, digging out truths of Jensen he´d never told anyone else. Jeez, Garth´s the one that made you confess you´re gay, way back in your early teen years. To say it out loud, first to yourself, then to your family.

That had been a long time ago, though. Jensen hadn´t seen Garth in years, didn´t know anything about him in fact, beyond their late teen years.

„Garth, I ....“ He gnawed at his lower lip. Garth had always been loyal back then, a good friend for the weeks they spent in summer camps, an ally against all the alpha guys. They spent hours hidden in some tree or cave talking or just reading, away from the competitive games, the fighting and bullying and forced camaraderie.

„It´s OK, Jensen. You don´t have to tell me.“ Garth looked disappointed, a little sad even.

It made Jensen´s heart cringe. You´ll push away every last friend with your suspicions.

„I....“ He picked at the skin on the knuckles of his hand, rough and scaly, way too dry.

„Before I left for South America, I had a – a very bad experience. And last week I – something reminded me of that, and I started freaking out.“

When he finally looked up, Garth´s expression was confused, but sympathetic at the same time.

„I´m – I´m sorry, Jensen, whatever it was that made you leave, it must have been something really bad.“

Jensen only nodded tiredly. „The worst“, he murmured.

Suddenly Ava was there, breaking the subdued mood with her cheerful approach. „Aaand there´s the pie you ordered, Garth. Be careful, it´s still pretty hot, fresh from the oven!“ She put two plates in front of them, and immediately a delicious scent filled Jensen´s nose. Ava gave him a stern look.

„And you better eat all of it, Jensen, because last time when you were here with Jay, you only turned your pie into crumbs, and it´s far too good for such a treatment. Plus, you really could need some meat on your ribs.“

Jensen felt himself blush. „Sorry, I -“ He shrugged. Ava squeezed his shoulder. „See to it that he eats, Garth. I count on you.“

„Yes, Madam“, Garth said, straightening up in a mock salute. She gave him a slap on the back of his head for it, saying, „I´ll show you ’Madam““, before she vanished into the back room again to fetch new pastries. Garth grinned after her a little sheepishly.

When he noticed Jensen watching him, he blushed, and took a long swig from his big coffee mug.

„So, who´s Jay!“ he asked, once the cup was on the table again, and a foamy mustache ornated his upper lip.
„W-what?“ Jensen was caught off guard by the unexpected question.

„Ava said something about a Jay. Was he the one to bring you here?“

*No boundaries. Also one of Garth´s qualities, one of those who could be pretty uncomfortale.*

„Just a guy I met in the main building. He showed me Professor Harvelle´s room.“

„Just a guy, huh.“ Garth looked at him, eyes sparkling.

Jensen huffed. „Yeah, just a guy, believe it or not. And there´s no need to grill me about him, ´cause I won´t see him again anyway. So zip it.“ It sounded angrier than intended, even to his own ears.

He immediately regretted it when he saw Garth raise his hands, a hurt expression on his face. „Sorry, Jensen, I – but – wait, was he causing your panic attack? Wait -“ his expression changed to angry within a second, „Did he – did he do something to you? Harass you?“

Garth´s protectiveness was kind of endearing. Jensen wondered if all those times when Garth had pulled the other kid´s attention to himself by being extra goofy or clumsy or just – weird, he´d done it on purpose, just to keep them away from Jensen. Jensen, who always had stuck out as that bookish, too quiet kid who preferred studying some insect or bird to fighting with sticks or playing pranks. The other kids had accepted him in team competitions after a while, noticing that Jensen just KNEW things – a lot of things – that came in handy in the challenges that were organized every year. Garth had been the shadow at Jensen´s side, ready to jump in front of his friend to shield him from any harm – mostly only getting in Josh´s way, who played his big brother role well, at least whenever it really counted, and no distraction was keeping him from it; and even if Garth really hadn´t been of much use – usually, Jensen had to rescue him from the crowd somehow – it gave Jensen a warm feeling of being cared for.

He shook his head tiredly, trying to rub the headache away, and failing.

„Jay didn´t do anything, Garth. It´s just – just good old messed up me. And as I said, it doesn´t matter anymore.“

„But – why?“

Jensen stared at the pie in front of him, still giving off heat, and a faint buttery scent.

*How would it be to have someone to confide in again? To share the secrets with, just like when we were thirteen.*

Uncle Jim´s face appeared in his mind, devastated and twisted by guilt.

*You can´t trust anyone anymore. Mack, yes. Anyone else – just forget about it.*

„Garth! Would you mind watching the counter for a moment? One of my ovens is bitching again, and I don´t want to leave Crissy alone...“

Jensen jerked out of his thoughts at Ava´s voice. Garth scrambled out of his seat, throwing Jensen an apologetic glance.

„Do you mind...?“

„Go ahead, save the damsel in distress“, Jensen smiled at him.
„Sure thing, Ava!“ Garth called back, squeezing Jensen´s shoulder passing by.

Seems like Garth has found a place where he fits in – finally. Where people see what´s to find if you really look.

He picked at the pie, trying a forkful, and almost moaning at the rich taste. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation. Food had lost its appeal to him long ago, he managed to enjoy it on occasion, with the right people around; but mostly it was a necessity he often just forgot. Pie had always been one of his weaknesses though, it was tied to fond memories... he remembered helping his mom, standing on a kitchen chair, one of his father´s old shirts, sleeves cut off, wrapped around himself, hands powdered white or sticky with sugar and cinnamon; remembered how she´d sneaked little slices of fruit – apples, cherries, plums – into his mouth while working on the pastry, her fingers tasting of butter and flour.

A group of people behind him was getting up and leaving, looking for scarves and caps, and making quite an exit, waving at Garth and the curly-haired girl waiting the tables – Crissy, was it? – and a cold gush of air hit Jensen´s back when they opened the door.

Jensen shivered, hunching over. Always cold.... even back in the jungle, he´d never really felt warm inside for the last weeks... months... even when the occasional fevers had kept him shaking at night, drenched in sweat.

Chairs were sliding over the wet floor, producing screeching sounds that made everyone wince.

Jensen hunched deeper over his coffee; the new guests in his back seemed to radiate off the cold they´d brought inside with them. All of a sudden, he felt tired to the bones. Pictures of their old kitchen whirled through his mind, the tiles with the tiny blue flowers on them, gathered into small groups... when Jensen had squinted his eyes, they´d formed blurred pictures, animals or multi-legged monsters, or plants yet unnamed... the huge fridge where his Mom put their drawings, fotos, or the tickets for the next baseball game.

„Hi Crissy ... the usual for me – and – Gen, what are you taking? The pecannut chocolate pie?“

Jensen froze, jerked out of his memories by the voice in his back.

„No, I´ll be a little less unpredictable than you and try the new pastries – you know, the kinda heart shaped ones?“

„Oh, you mean the French puff pastry? Oh man, they´re delicious, you´ll love them, Gen. Actually, they are addictive, so be warned. “

The female voice – Gen – laughed. „Well, name one of your pastries or pies that isn´t, Crissy! I´ll take my chances and get one of those then. And ... a double cappuccino, please. “

„That all? Jay? You still sticking to your routine?“

Jensen flinched at the warm laugh. „Ah, you know me, Crissy – a man of principles and all that. Yeah, I´ll leave the exploration of the unknown to Gen. “

„Ok guys. Be here in a minute!“

Jensen heard Crissy walk over to another table.

What now.... do I just sit here and hide and listen in to their conversation or ...make myself known pretending everything´s normal or...
„Seems to me you´ve been exploring some unknown yourself lately, Jay."

The woman´s dark voice cut through Jensen´s frantic thoughts.

„Anything new on the Mr. Mysterious front?“

„Stop calling him that! His name is Jensen. And no, nothing new, and I´m not sure there ever will be anything new at all."

Jensen flinched, and tried to shrink to invisibility. So much to not listening in.

„So you´re gonna be your new grumpy, frowning, angsty self for the rest of - what, this month? The year? Your life?“

„So?“ Jensen could hear the annoyance in Jay´s voice. Definitely sounds grumpy. And – exhausted? Bitter? He felt like an intruder. Get up, make yourself known, and fucking leave already! But he didn´t move .. couldn´t.

„Jay, you´ve seen the man one time -“ „Two.“, -OK, two times. You felt attracted, and hell I can´t blame you, the guy looks like a freaking Prada model. And I know you told me it was more than that, and that there are some... difficulties regarding both of your families or something, but – Jay, I don´t get it. You haven´t had a real relationship in years – or, ever - although practically the whole campus has been trying to get you to put your ring on their finger. And now this stranger comes along, you have coffee together, he ends up in hospital and refuses to see you again, and you´re – you´re – I don´t even know what you are! It´s like you jump from devastated to hopeful to angrier than I´ve ever seen you three times a minute!“

Wow. This girl – Gen – she´s got some fire. And she seems to know Jay pretty well... he remembered, all of a sudden, that she had to be the artist who designed the lampshades in the cafe. The dancing deep sea creature lamps, he called them by himself.

Why is Jay devastated .... she´s right, we only met once – twice. And what did she mean, family difficulties? A feeling of uncertainty crept up his spine. Mack had been acting weird the last days, but he´d put it to the whole situation, him being in hospital, his fight with Uncle Jim and everything; he´d had the impression she´d been on the verge of saying something a few times, especially after meals or when they cuddled on the couch in the evening. He´d even asked her once or twice, but she´d always just shaken her head, asking if she couldn´t just enjoy looking at him after so many years of not having him around. Which made him feel guilty each time, and he hadn´t prodded her further.

Maybe you should have.

„Gen, I – I can´t explain it myself. But with him, with Jensen – I ...“ Jensen heard Jay´s voice fade out.

„He´s special to you, isn´t he.“ Gen´s voice was so quiet, Jensen barely could hear her words.

„Yes.“

He heard the girl sigh. „Well, I guess then we´ll have to make you two get together again, won´t we? Does Chad know?“

Special...

Jensen´s heart made a strange little movement, a fluttering jump.
It wasn´t only me.

He felt it too.

For a moment, there was joy. Excitement. We could be that couple kissing over the table, lips tasting of cinnamon and coffee. We could.

Then, the image was pushed away by other pictures in his mind.... a broken body, bruises and cuts everywhere, limbs in wrong angles despite it being arranged on the stainless steel surface of the coroner´s lab table. Matt´s face, smashed in on one side, barely recognizable.

The images started to mingle, it wasn´t Matt anymore in that cold functional examination room, but Jay´s face, soft longish hair sticking lifelessly to his skull, skin pastry white, his multi-colored eyes without their spark, staring into nothingness. No cinnamon taste on his lips, only blood and ashes... he felt the cold in his feet, and hands, stared at his shaking fingers, and couldn´t stop, not the images, not the shaking, he knew another attack was on its way, and he desperately tried to remember the exercises the doctor had shown him, breathe in, Jensen, hold - and breathe out, it sounded so easy, but the pictures didn´t go away, and his lungs seemed to have taken over control, spasming, making him gasp for tiny gulps of air, you know once your heart starts going wild you´ll be trapped in here, so get up, get out, out, OUT

He struggled up from his chair, finally getting back some control, out out out, his head was a drum being beat upon, a merciless rhythm in sync with his racing heartbeat, too far, the exit´s too far, so he staggered towards the door closest to him, pushing against it barely able to see through the black spots filling his vision, out, you´re out, an he sank down to the tiled floor in the overly warm room, hot, it was hot, wall in his back, shaking and grabbing his pounding head, you´re out, it´s Ok, you made it out. The pressure in his ears thumped together with his head, his heart, it was all he could feel, and the cold filling him top to bottom now, despite the heat in the room, must be where Ava has her stoves, everything started spinning wildly, and it thumped and thumped and thumped until he sank down to the floor, curling up on himself, cheek pressed against the tiles to know where the ground was, one hand firmly touching the floor to keep a balance that was only tricked into vertigo by his crazy, crazy, crazy mind. Something bumped against his legs, pushed them away... pushed ... and there were footsteps, and a loud bang sending white sparks of pain through his head, and

„Jensen? Oh my God, Jensen, not again, what -“

„What´s going on in there - hey, is everything -“

„Open the damn door! Ava! What´s -“

„Jay, wait a second, he´s -“

Opening his eyes, he found Ava´s face looming over him, oozing concern and fear.

The world had found an equilibrium again, he could tell he was lying on the floor, and that something was still bumping against his legs. The door. Someone wants to get in. Probably Jay.

He scrambled up into a sitting position again, the wall a firm support in his back. The moment his legs were out of the way, the door burst open, Jay and the girl stumbling through. He stared at Ava´s white face, trying to focus on the blurred picture. Black spots were still appearing in his vision, blinking in his heartbeat´s frantic rhythm, a weird staccato of light and darkness that made it difficult to see clearly.
Soft hands took his face.

„Jensen?“

„I´m good“, he croaked. „Just.... I´m good.“ When he tried to get his limbs to stand up though, two large hands were gripping his shoulders, keeping him down.

„No no no, wait. Don´t get up. You´re white as a sheet, and I think bumping your head once a week is enough.“

He turned his head a little, looking directly into Jay´s slanted eyes.

„Jay..... ´m sorry...“

Ava´s hands were gone, he could see her whispering with the dark haired girl he´d seen at the art project the week before; but they were replaced by larger ones, huge ones in fact, a warm and reassuring frame around his face.

„Jensen? What the hell happened?“

„Shouldn´t we call an ambulance? He doesn´t look so great. “

„No ...no ambulance. “ Dammit, your voice sounds like you´ve been screaming it hoarse.

„But Jensen, I think Gen´s right, you just left the hospital -“

„No ambulance!“ Jensen sat up straighter. His heartbeat had slowed down, his breathing almost back to normal - there was something about Jay´s presence that made him calm down again .... the warmth of his hands finally seeping into his shivering body. Ambulance means hospital means your father will know about it within minutes...and Mack....

He couldn´t put Mack through this again. He wouldn´t.

„Is there a back entrance here?“, he asked.

„What?“

Three faces looked down at him, bewildered.

„Why would you need -“

„Can you get me out through it?“

„The back entrance? Sure, but -“

„He doesn´t make any sense. You think he -“

The girls squatted down in front of him now, too, Ava grabbing his arm. „Jensen, you are scaring me. Why -“

But he only looked into Jay´s eyes, and he saw understanding in there.

„Of course I can, Jensen. But – why? Did your family – they didn´t – did you talk to Mack? She told you, right? How did they react, I mean – are you even...“

Something in Jensen´s face made the other man stop.
„My family – Mack hasn´t – what are you talking about?“

Jay´s face in front of him went blank for a moment, before he visibly winced.

„Oh. Shit."

„Jay, what´s going on? How did you – why .... did you talk to Mack?“

And there it was again, the creeping cold, and the pressure, mind whirling whirling whirling why did they talk why didn´t Mack tell me about it Mack´s weird behavior, what is it I don´t get, I don´t know

„Oh God, he´s shaking again, we should -“

„Jay, do something! I think he´s having another fit!“

„Jensen. Jensen! Look at me!“

_I do. I look at you, and all I can see is my Mom´s burned out car and Matt´s ruined face and Josh´s carwreck in the paper clippings and Uncle Jim´s guilt stricken face and_

He felt himself drifting away again, pulled and torn into that black hole that swallowed him away from reality...

But there were those big, warm hands. They cradled his face, firmly but gently, and there was Jay´s voice, and even if Jensen couldn´t process the words, the voice seeped through, calming, soothing ... slowing down the crazy carousel until it finally came to a halt.

Jensen stared into the hazel eyes, exhausted and barely able to stay upright, but strangely comforted.

„You OK?“ Jared´s face was apologetic, of course he knew Jensen was far from Ok, but Jensen knew how the question was intended.

„Yeah“, he mumbled, a leaden tiredness pulling at his lips, and eyes, and every limb.

„Don´t leave“, he whispered, surprising himself as much as the young man squatting in front of him.

„I won´t.“ Jay bent forward, finally kneeling between Jensen´s spread out useless legs, until their fronts touched. His hands were still holding Jensen, and it felt like it was the only thing keeping him there, upright and awake. _And alive._

_Jared_

Jared had had a crappy week.

Harvelle was breathing down his neck - an important paper was due within a fortnight – and although he´d never so far given her any reason to doubt his academic devotion (his scholastic performance was flawless after all, it was his „extra-curricular“ activities that got him into trouble), she always went extra hard on him. Jared was sure she just loved to push him. He had to admit though that it tended to make him work harder and get the best results. In addition, exams weren´t
too far away – well, a few months, actually, but every single one of their teachers seemed to be focused on rubbing it in on them that THESE were the most important/most challenging/most difficult ones EVER (as they did every freaking year), and some members of his study group started to get nervous.

He wasn´t really bothered by it, he´d excelled in every single one so far, without breaking much of a sweat, so to speak; but for the first time, he was seriously distracted.

Distracted by green eyes that stubbornly kept appearing in his mind. By the memory of a rough, melodic voice... I don´t want you to come with me... By lips freckles soft short hair eyelashes strong hands slender hips. By the maddeningly hot mixture of strength and fragility that seemed to be highly addictive. Jensen.

And then, of course, was the whole bunch of larger-than-life problems looming dreadfully everywhere, no matter how much he tried to avoid thinking about them.

Even the thought of you two getting together...being together ... is ridiculous. This isn´t a stage drama, and much less a sappy Hollywood movie, this is reality, and reality hasn´t been too generous with happy endings in both your families so far.

What really bothered him, kept nagging at the back of his mind, wormed its way into his rather unpleasant dreams, was an unsettling feeling of dread. Like in the movies where you know it won´t end well for the protagonists, and you start screaming at them NOT to go there, NOT to do it, NOT to keep this or that secret, ´cause you can already see where the whole story is headed ... betrayal and loss and death... blood, sweat and tears. At least for the tragic heroes, and weren´t those always the eternal ones?

He kept huffing at himself for his thoughts, what are you, a teenager? – but couldn´t shake them off nevertheless. Sometimes he felt like watching his own life from afar, him and Jensen and everyone else characters in a drama mercilessly unfolding, a tragic story of love made impossible by ... life.

He´d been moody and brooding, in between carefully hopeful and scarily angry, and all in all not his usual self, at least not the self he used to show around campus; so much so that Chad gave up bugging him to go out and have fun and „get your damn head out of the dark pit“, and left him at home, not without the advise to „at least jerk off thinking of Pretty Boy“, which got him a nice bump on his head from the book Jared had thrown after him.

So, when Gen showed up – she herself had had a pretty busy week - to drag him out to have coffee at Ava´s, he was actually glad to be rescued from his own none too pleasant company.

Once on the way to Ava´s, with Gen talking animatedly all the time, snow whirling around their heads, he felt better immediately. Wrapped in the familiar scent of coffee, pastries and cinnamon inside the cafe, they settled on their chairs, bickering and teasing like they were used to since the day they´d met. And then, all of a sudden, they were having a serious discussion, and Gen got right to the point as always. And had his back, as always, understanding him better than anyone else he knew.

„Well, I guess then we´ll have to make you two get together again, won´t we? Does Chad know?“

And Jared felt joy wash over him, an unexpected lightness in his chest, I´ve got awesome friends, they sure make up for the crappy family, just knowing they´d be there and do their best to help him – them – made him feel like a weight had been lifted from his heart. Even if the odds were against him and Jensen – he could count on his friends.
He leant over to hug Gen, momentarily overwhelmed by his emotions. A chair screeched over the wet floor nearby, and toppled over with a bang that made him jerk though.

„What the -“, he murmured, releasing his friend, who stared after a man hastily retreating towards the door to Ava’s sanctuary – the bakery room. A man who looked scarily familiar, even from behind.

*Jensen?*

He hadn’t realized he’d said it out loud, but Gen’s head spun over to him.

„What?“

„Jensen?“, Jared called after the figure now pushing through the door, no – rather stumbling, falling, it looked like the man was barely staying on his feet.

„Dammit“, Jared pressed out, getting to his feet; he almost fell over the chair lying on the floor, a familiar jacket buried underneath it. He was at the door in a second, pressing against it, but something was blocking it from the inside. He felt Gen’s hand on his back, the warmth it radiated, while a coldness started to creep up his chest, and there it was again, *dread dread dread*, and fear. Real fear.

He flinched at the loud bang coming from the inside, and heard Ava’s voice, and Gen knocking at the door, asking something...

„Open the damn door! Ava! What´s -“

And then they were inside, Jared frozen to the spot all of a sudden, caught in a dejavu experience ... Jensen leaning against the wall like a lifeless doll, staring at Ava in front of him with wide eyes.

He couldn’t really remember, afterwards, how he’d gotten on his knees, holding the other man’s face in his hands, talking, trying to soothe that expression of horror and desperation away.

When Jensen asked him to get him out through the backdoor, looking at him as if his life depended on it – he understood. *Isn’t it ironic how much you can relate.... it’s like your are made for each other. And still it seems like you’re swimming against a strong current all the time...*

They ended up stumbling through the snow in the direction of Ava’s car, Jensen a dead weight against his shoulder, barely able to coordinate his legs, but still adamant about not calling an ambulance or driving to the hospital. And Jared got it ... oh yes, he did. If Jensen’s father was as paranoid as his own parents, and Mack had already confirmed that ... they were on a dangerous path here. *Highway to Hell....*

Just when Jared got Jensen to sink into the passenger seat, *so frail, he’s too frail, dammit*, something – someone – grabbed him from behind and almost made him stumble and bump his head against the car.

„What are you doing, you asshole! Let him go! Help! HELP! LET JENSEN GO! HELP! AVA!“

„Garth! Stop it – GARTH! Are you crazy? GARTH! STOP!“

Someone finally managed to pull whoever was almost strangling Jared with bony hands from his back. He made sure Jensen was safe in his seat – his eyes were closed, and he was awfully pale, but breathing calmly – and turned around. Ava and Gen were doing their best to hold back a struggling young man, securing his arms, Ava talking to him.
„Garth, it´s me! Ava! We are not abducting Jensen, you hear me? Everything is OK!“

Jared eyed the guy warily.

„What the hell, dude! You almost made me fall on Jensen, and he´s barely recovered from the accident last week!“

„What are you doing with Jensen then! It sure looks like an abduction! Jensen! Are you OK? Jensen!“

„Garth, you are being ridiculous. Stop the drama! We´ve got enough of that without you acting like the knight in shining armor!“

„Why would anyone abduct Jensen anyway“, Gen asked, obviously confused by the whole situation. „I mean, sure, he looks like a God and all, but – abduction? Is he some prince or something? Super rich oil tycoon´s kid? Celebrity in hiding? The governor´s secret lover?“

She looked at Jared, half amused, half serious, eyebrows raised. „Look, Gen, I – I´ll tell you ev-“

„You don´t know?“, the young man asked, eyes bulging. „She doesn´t know?“ The last question was directed at Jared, who inwardly sighed. Guess you´ll have to get everyone in on your story now.

„Look, I don´t know who you are, or -“

„I´m Jensen´s FRIEND. And whatever you are trying to pull here, I´m not gonna let you hurt Jensen. Never!“

Jared couldn´t help rolling his eyes. He caught Ava´s amused smile in the corner of his eye.

„Neither would I, or Gen, or Ava! We are actually trying to -“

„Jay?“

He felt a slight tug at his shirt. Spinning around, he found Jensen´s eyes half open, and squatted down at his side.

„Jensen? Are you alright? We are going to my place, if that´s OK with you?“

„Cold....“

All of a sudden, Jared was aware of the wind biting his ears, the snow crystals piercing his skin.

„Fuck“, he murmured, getting up again.

„Look, friend-of-Jensen, I have to get him someplace warm, so either you let me – us – bring Jensen to my place, or come with us, but we need to get going. NOW.“

Jared knew he could be intimidating – the Padalecki gene, obviously – and Jensen´s fierce defender was easily convinced anyway. Ava reached over the keys to her car, Gen and the young man crept into their seats, and Jared went over to the driver´s door. Ava held him back for a moment.

„His name is Garth. I mean, DJ, but he´s called Garth by everyone. He works at the cafe since last Saturday, had a lot of good recommendations on him. He came with Jensen today, I think they really are friends.“
„Thank you, Ava. I’ll bring by the car when ... as soon as possible.“

„Don´t mention it. I’m stuck here until late anyway, so take your time. Take care of your boy.“

„I will.“ He hugged her briefly, and climbed into the tiny car, folding his long legs behind the steering wheel.

He found Jensen´s friend, Garth, bent over Jensen from the back seat. Gen looked uncomfortable.

„Garth, I´m OK. Just tired, is all....“ Jensen mumbled, eyes closed.

Garth shot Jared an angry look.

„What did you do!“, he hissed. „Were you with him last week too? When he had the anxiety attack?“ Jared´s face must have betrayed him. „Of course it was you! So how come Jensen ends up hurt each time you’re around!“

„Look, I – it wasn´t like that, OK? I didn´t -“

„Maybe you don´t even HAVE to DO -“

„Can you two just leave it and -“

„Jay...please...“

They all stopped fighting at Jensen´s shaking voice. Jared slapped himself inwardly when he saw the shivers running through the other man´s body.

Jared wrapped himself around Jensen, awkwardly twisted in the car´s seat; he felt the tremors through his sweater and shirt. Just when he realized Jensen didn´t wear his warm jacket – of course, it was still lying on the floor inside the cafe -, someone knocked at the passenger side window. Ava stood there, panting, the blue plume jacket in her hand, and gave them a wave, and opening the door.

„Guess he´ll need all the warmth he can get“, she said, handing it over. Jared made sure the jacket covered Jensen´s upper body, tucking it safely around him; he thanked Ava, turned the ignition, and pulled away from the small parking lot at the back of the building without losing any more time. He took a deep breath.

„So here´s the deal – we get Jensen into my flat ASAP, and once he´s safe and warm, we can do a proper Q&A. That OK with you, Garth?“

The young man seemed a little embarrassed for his earlier outbreak.

„Yeah...sounds good to me. Just – yeah.“

Jared saw Gen roll her eyes in the rearview mirror, and gave her a half smile.

What have I gotten us all into...
“I this normal? I mean, for a panic attack?” Gen whispered, leaning against Jared’s side in the doorframe of his bedroom.

“He´s got a concussion, I´m not even sure he should have been out of bed already. Guess it multiplies the effect or something?”

Jared was glancing down at Jensen’s sleeping form on his bed, wrapped into Jared’s duvet and two extra blankets. He couldn’t make out much more than a patch of light brown hair and part of Jensen’s front and nose; the long lashes of his left eye a stark contrast to the pale skin.

He’s more beautiful than ever .... fragile and vulnerable and strangely peaceful.

Gen nudged his side with her pointed elbow.

„Come on, it´s creepy to watch people in their sleep.“

He sighed. „I know, it´s just ...“ He didn’t finish his sentence, too embarrassed to admit to his stupid fears.

Gen searched his face, and nodded. „I know.“ She tugged at his arm. „He won´t dissapear while we are in the next room. And you’ll be there within a second if he needs you. Come on, we need to have this serious conversation you promised to Jensen´s knight.“

She knows me so well...

„Ok...“

With an effort, he pulled his eyes away. He´d practically carried Jensen up to his flat, assisted by Garth, while Gen held all the doors for them; it seemed like all energy had left the man for good. Jared had steered him to his bedroom immediately, and sent everyone to bring blankets or hot water bottles...but in the end, he pulled Jensen´s shoes off his feet, got rid of his jacket and boots, and climbed into bed with the shaking man, wrapping himself around him and just holding on. Jensen didn´t object, and Jared briefly wondered if that was a good or a bad sign...

By the time Gen and Garth came in with whatever they had found, Jared could tell that Jensen was asleep already, his breathing calm and slow.

Misha’s Man

The young man in the car across the parking lot watched the dark shadows moving behind the closed curtains of the apartment through his binoculars. His hands were reddened from the cold, even with the multiple layers he was wearing under the unsuspicious hoodie/plume jacket combination and dark washed jeans he´d donned to fit into the crowd on campus. Since the Padalecki brat had found – and crushed – most of the bugs they´d so carefully planted within the flat, the Boss had them on permanent surveillance – good old Cold War style, as he called it ( as if he´d been alive back then already: the guy was barely older than the seniors walking the sacred grounds of knowledge here). He was – and the young man wasn´t ashamed of admitting to it – much scarier than the harmless students though. Behind those stunningly blue eyes and the friendly, wide smile hid a deadly mind, and the seemingly skinny body was a perfectly trained killing machine ....he´d seen the vids, admired the hit score. Misha never missed a shot. Never. Or anything else: the man had more killing methods up his sleeve than the mayor bribes in his
He set down the heavy binoculars, rubbing his hands. He hadn’t really expected the Padalecki boy to show up before the early afternoon – the kid stuck to his schedule, after all; so when the café’s owner’s tiny car drifted around the corner, spilling out not only Padalecki, but also his best friend (and wasn’t she a hottie!), a scarely skinny guy in a ridiculous knitted scarf, and an obviously half unconscious Enemy Number One – he’d been taken by surprise, almost forgetting to hide in time. He watched the procession walk inside, the girl holding the doors, Padalecki more or less carrying the Ackles spawn towards the entrance, Twigman making the rear, hoovering behind them like a living shield. What the hell!

After a little bit of commotion inside – he’d have died to have the bugs back right now – the situation seemed to calm down, the lights in the bedroom were turned off, and he finally allowed himself a moment to lean back and have a cup of the strong black coffee he’d brought this morning. He’d need it. Probably more than what he had.

He sighed, rubbing his sore eyes.

Time to call the Boss.

_Misha_

Misha put the phone back in his pocket, a frown on his face. He tapped the silver pen against the legal pad in front of him a few times, staring at nothing in particular; then he felt a smile tug at his lips. This was unexpected...and he liked unexpected. It was a welcome disruption to his routine, to the perfectly planned schedule everyone under his guidance followed, the meticulously collected information on each of his proteges...or victims.

He allowed the smile to form on his face. He’d liked Jared from the start ...had already suspected he might be more interesting than most of the high-rollers or low-lives (and everything in between) he usually had on his target list. When the other kid literally stumbled into Jared’s life – and not any kid, but the competition’s only left son – his heart had made a sommersault. He might give the impression of someone whipping his „employees“ to anticipate any possible change or be prepared for any deviation from the plans they had worked out, based on the accumulated knowledge of another person’s life; but, if he was honest, he loved a challenge. People would probably consider the life of a high-end (top of the mountain, rather) hitman exciting, seeing it as one big action movie... but in reality, it was mostly scrupulous work, tiny bits and pieces put together like a huge puzzle. The hits themselves...that was the cherry on top of a pile of crappily boring footwork. And he didn’t really enjoy that part, either. Never had had regrets so far...but he wasn’t a psychopathic killer who cackled his maniac laughter into the night after dissolving his victims’ bodies in acid .. this was reality, after all, not a Marvel movie. If he was honest to himself – he had started to feel bored.

Distraction was very welcome... and those two kids, they were bound to give it to him.

A challenge. Finally.

It didn’t hurt that both the boys weren’t exactly hard to look at. In fact they were so good-looking they could have starred in their own movie: a drama, of course, cause there wouldn’t be a happy end here. Tissues very much recommended.
You could sell the story to Hollywood. Make it the usual normative sexual relationship between a man and a woman, and it might become a blockbuster ... love, loss, crime, family drama, a past catching up with its innocent victims ... betrayal and lies, faith and hope, all set in a raging clan war like in the olden times. People would love it.

Maybe it would even work with a gay couple. The times, they were a-changing...
Chapter 13

Jared

Jared closed the entrance door behind Gen´s and Garth´s backs, and leaned against it for a moment, closing his eyes. He´d noticed the car, of course, back in the shadow of the building across the street, not because it was suspicious in any way; but he´d seen the tiny movement inside the dark vehicle, a reflexion on glass – binoculars, probably -, and he knew. Surveillance. So it has come down to that... my own parents are having me followed. Aren´t we just the perfect family.

A cold fear crept up his spine.

*You shouldn´t have brought Jensen here....it´s too dangerous...seeing him, meeting him is bad enough, but now....they´ll know...*

He rubbed his front, massaged his aching sculp. Suddenly, he longed for his little sister. Her kind eyes, the sweet smile she always had for him. The way she made decisions look easy: „What do YOU want, Jared? If you were free, absolutely free, what would you do?“

Yeah, it would be easy. He´d study arts and come out officially and date a mysterious green eyed man...fall in love with him, marry him, and live a life as far away from his family as possible.

If it was easy.

„It´s not the decisions that are hard, Jared, it´s living with their consequences...“

His wise little sister. How much he missed their talks.

He started climbing the stairs, feet leaden, mind heavy.

*Jensen was right to run. To shut me out. We´re both doomed.... they´ll never let it happen, let US happen.*

*Never.*

His optimistic side sprang to life, a spark against the darkness that threatened to engulf him entirely, out of exhaustion and hopelessness. He had his friends...he could count on them, trusted them. And Jensen, obviously, had his own troup, well, an army-of-one, but – seriously, Garth had been a surprise.

Jared couldn´t help smiling. The whip-thin guy with the bulging eyes had turned out to be fiercely protective of Jensen, so much so that he was willing to cut his loyalty to Jensen´s family, to Alan Ackles who had mentored him half of his life. Jared had been impressed. And...touched. He didn´t want to dive too deep into Garth´s motivation for betraying his mentor/fatherly boss in order to protect his friend from his own family, and the dangers that very probably came from Jared´s.

It had been a good talk. He´d even called Mack at some point, on one of the new burner phones he´d bought, feeling ridiculously like being in a spy movie. She´d talked to Garth, which seemed to calm the young man down enormously. It had been a bit of a blow when Garth had revealed to them that Alan had sent him to „look after“ Jensen (or rather, spy on him, Jared thought, although
he didn’t say it out loud – Garth had a weirdly touching innocence and naivety to him that Jared wasn’t eager to try). It was after a few minutes of silence, all of them brooding on the elaborate number of problems they were facing, when Garth had straightened his shoulders, sitting up.

„To hell with loyalty to the Family. Jensen´s my friend, he was the only one talking to me like I was a normal human being when no one else really did. I owe everything to his father, and I probably will regret this, but.... If this is what Jensen wants...if you are what he wants...who he....“ – he had swallowed, visibly, but gone on, „If that´ what he wants, I´ll have his back. He´s where my loyalties are, first and forever. So.“

He´d gone quiet, lips a tight line. After a while, Jared had asked, a little confused: „Uhm...so - what?”

Garth had looked up, face a picture of resolution and eagerness.

„So, what´s the plan, of course!“

Jared huffed.

*The plan. It was easy, wasn´t it? Don´t get caught – already too late. Don´t get killed, either by your own family or the other one – well, they´d see about that, right? Odds weren´t too high on his or Jensen´s side, though.*

He slipped out of his boots again, tiptoeing to his bedroom´s door. Jensen was tangled in the blankets, his sleep had turned fitful, he tossed his arms as if fighting off something...someone.

Jared bit his lower lip. The urge to keep, hold, protect, it washed over him again, watching the man in his bed, tormented by his dreams, or memories.

„Screw it“, he murmured after a few seconds. „I´m going to Hell anyway...“

He got rid of his jeans and sweater, and climbed into his bed.

*I hope this works, and I don´t trigger another panic attack.*

He slid under the sheets, carefully tugging them out from under Jensen´s limbs, and inched closer to the now hot, sweaty body.

*Fever...he´s got a fever. Great.*

Guilt nagged at the back of his head, *you should have kept him warm earlier, dumbass, and shame .... you´re taking advantage here, Jay, there´s a sleeping man in your bed, probably sick, too...classy, really!* But nevertheless, he went on, closed in on the body, lining himself up against the back, wrapping his arms around the bony side. His hand came to rest over the other man´s heart, and he felt it, *thump thump thump*, the slightest fluttering movement against his palm, too fast, like a frightened bird´s wings against the bars of a cage. Felt the tremors running through the man´s skin. Felt the tension in the muscles of his arms, his legs. Heard the whimpering sound that barely was a sound at all, more a painful vibration resonating in his own body.

„Shhhh...it´s Ok. It´s all good....shhhh...I´m here....Jensen....I´m here....“

He remembered the dog he´d held once, the one his brother had hit when they were on their way back from some stupid party, Jared the only one sober in the car, but still too young to drive... the
shivers that ran through the dog´s flanks, the labored breathing. The frightened eyes gazing at him, glazed over by pain, death already lurking in their depths. It had been some street dog, nothing worth saving, or so his brother had said, but Jared had stayed there, stubbornly, talking in his gentlest voice, until the animal calmed down, and licked his hands, grateful for a kindness it wasn´t used to, but was still remembering from a happier past...and while the others had gotten out of the car to take a piss and finish the bottle of vodka someone had found in one of the door´s compartments, he´d sat there, stroking the muddy fur, murmuring soothing words until the breathing slowed down, and stopped eventually.

Of course, his brother had refused to soil his precious car´s trunk with a street dog´s body, so Jared had come back the next day, on his bike, a shovel and an old bedsheets in his backpack. He´d given the animal a proper burial, and even put a name on the makeshift grave, using little stones ... Bones, he´d called him, not one of the fancy names his mother´s greyhounds wore, just Bones, like he´d have called a dog maybe, if he´d ever been allowed to have one of his own. One to love and cuddle and play with.

Jensen moved in his arms, turning, nestling against Jared´s chest. He held his breath, not daring to wake the other man, *he could be freaking out, you know, waking up in the arms of someone who´s practically a stranger, and his enemy as far as his family is concerned.*

Jensen murmured something, words slurred in his sleep.

„Matt...you home...thought you´re dead....“

„Shhh...I´m here...“ Jared stroked over the short, soft hair, kept his big hands on the other man´s head, and felt Jensen relax against his collar bone, finally.

He listened to the breathing slowing down again, felt the light pulse against his skin, Jensen´s scent filling his nose, woody and a little sweaty and strangely familiar, until exhaustion got the best of him, and he finally gave in to sleep.
Chapter 14

Jensen

When Jensen cracked his eyes open, mind still back in the dream he´d just woken up to – he´d been at Uncle Jim´s salvage yard, he remembered as much, could still smell the motor oil and old leather and rusty iron of the car wrecks accumulated there – grey light filtered through the curtains, the kind of light that somehow told you it was afternoon. It´d been a pleasant dream, sunny and warm, Matt had been there, funny enough, although he´d never even made it to visit Jensen´s family up here, or meet Jim....in his dream, they´d sat on Jim´s porch, snuggled against each other, Matt´s arms wrapped tightly around Jensen, warm, and reassuring, having a beer with Uncle Jim, talking cars. Just the end of a good day in a normal everyday life.

It would have been nice that way. They´d have gotten along fine, Matt and Jim.

Only then did he notice that the window he was blinking at wasn´t the one in his room, that the bed he was lying on wasn´t the one he´d slept in for the past days after coming home from the hospital; and that there were the distinct sounds of someone else breathing in the room, and a body warmth near to his own he sure as hell wasn´t used to.

What the....

He jerked away from the body in his back, rolling around and sitting up at the same time, and scrambled back against the headboard of the – pretty huge – bed; only then did he feel safe enough to have a look at the other person. Longish chestnut colored hair fanned out around a face that was partially hidden against a pillow, while the long stretch of a perfect back and broad shoulders were all splayed out in naked glory, lower parts of the body tangled in the same sheets Jensen had been wrapped into.

Jay.

Jensen stared. Weirdly enough, his first instinct – run run run – had eased the moment he´d recognized the hair and face. For what reason ever, he didn´t feel threatened with the young man – on the contrary. If anything, you are a threat to him... although...

Letting his eyes wander over the smooth skin, the well defined muscles – someone was working out regularly, he thought, a smile tugging at his lips -, he tried to recollect how the hell he´d gotten here.

Garth. Cafe. Jay and his friend....and then?

Bits and pieces. He remembered the hot room... Ava.... Jay came after him.... and then he was outside and in a car, it was freezing, so cold, it crept into his limbs, or maybe only spread out from the inside, where it had settled permanently... and his head had been pounding, heart doing these weird rhythms, thump-thump-a-thump, and there was some blurry recollection of being led upstairs, legs wobbly and head so heavy it felt like it would roll off his shoulders any moment, vision reduced to blurry specks of light that stung his eyes.

So tired it hurt. So damn, damn tired...wiped out. Every muscle, every bone, even his skin...every damn fiber in his body, all of it just weighing him down, pulling at his mind.
Jay must have gotten him into this bed – his bed.

And found it, for some reason, necessary to climb under the sheets with you?

He frowned down at the sleeping figure, easing a little further back.

Did anything...did he... you were out of it, practically, he could have...

Jay’s light snoring sounds filled the room. Still, the thought of being more or less unconscious in an unknown flat, at the mercy of someone he barely knew (in his freaking BED, for Christ’s sake!), didn’t really bother him.

Just the right moment to hold back on your paranoia, right? To stow away your fears?

He took in the rest of the room. Blankets. Lots of them. And an assembly of hot water bottles, from one of those old fashioned metal ones to rubber models in various shapes...all of them strewn somewhere on the floor, or the bed.

Did he bring all those for me?

Where’s Garth? And Jay’s friend? They were with us in the car...I think.

He slipped out of bed, careful not to move the matrass too much. Jay obviously was as exhausted as Jensen had been, and he didn’t want to wake him, no matter how much he was looking for answers.

The flat seemed to be empty; remnants of people having coffee at the low table in the living room/kitchen showed that he hadn’t been dreaming about Garth and the girl...Gen! being with them. Used cups, an open package of cookies, a half empty glass of water. Jensen listened for a minute, but couldn’t hear anyone. The flat gave the impression of being lived-in by more than one person, though, and was in a general state of disorder that made him cringe.

What now? Do I just leave? Wouldn’t be very polite, would it? Plus, I’d really like to know what happened after...the attack at the cafe...

He huffed.

Don’t fool yourself. You know damn well what makes you stay, and want to run at the same time.

Some blurry memories of his dream wafted through his mind, gone before he could truly grab them. The feeling of safety stayed, of the calm happiness that came with being with someone without fear.... or caution.... or suspicions.

I thought we were being smart...moving that far away, cutting the ropes. It was stupid. Hybris. Matt paid the price for it.

And Jay... would he pay, too? Fall down a cliff... die in a car accident?

He turned back to the bedroom. The door was ajar, and Jensen leaned against the doorframe, watching the still knocked out young man, sleeping so peacefully amidst tangled sheets and blankets.

He looks so damn young. He IS so damn young.

Jensen rubbed his eyes. He looked for his shoes, and found them at the foot of Jay’s bed. He tiptoed into the room, picked them up from the floor, and left, closing the bedroom’s door behind
him. He glanced over the mess on the table, put down the boots, and started cleaning away the
cups and spoons, putting them into the sink (where a frying pan was sadly drowning in murky
water). He wiped the table surface with a wet towel – it was sticky – collecting all the crumbs in
one hand. Then he went to pick clothes from the floor, hanging them neatly over the couch´s back;
put the shoes he found in a niche behind the entrance door in the hall which seemed to be made for
exactly that purpose (although no shoes actually had been in it). Sure, it looked a little less messy
now. He considered washing the dishes (although that pan did look disgusting) – and yes, you are
stalling, J, and you know it... and you can tell yourself you are only „paying“ for however Jay has
cared for you, but it will only be part of the truth – when a key turned in the lock, and the entrance
door opened.

„Jesus fucking Christ, I HATE that cold! Jay, you in here? Let´s move to somewhere nice and
warm, what say about your father´s- oh.“

A blonde young man had appeared in the doorway to the tiny hall, and stopped dead when he
noticed Jensen standing in the living room, dirty cup and the wet cloth in his hands. Jensen
recognized him as the one he´d met on his first day on campus. Jay´s friend. And, obviously,
roommate.

„What are YOU doing -“ The other guy´s eyes darted back and forth between the closed bedroom
door and Jensen. For the first time, Jensen became aware of how he had to look: hair probably
standing in all directions (it always did after he´d slept), clothes rumpled and sweaty, socked feet.

Jeez, it must look like you...

Obviously, Jay´s friend leapt to exactly that conclusion. Weirdly enough, his face seemed to relax.
He clearly looked relieved. He leaned against the wall, staring Jensen up and down in a way it
made his skin crawl, and smirked at him.

„So....you´ve already gotten to the endgame? The Big Bang! And so soon! Wow! Guess Jay is
sleeping it off in there, like always?“ He gestured to the bedroom door, chuckling. „I must admit,
you got me worried for a moment here, what with Jay all fussing over you and gloomy as hell, I
almost thought he´d go all boyfriend on you, but – well, I´m glad it was just his usual -“ He caught
himself before going on, an almost comical expression on his face. „Uhm... I mean... I hope you
had fun and all.“ Jensen stared at him, something cold creeping up his spine, icy needles clawing
into his skin, ugly bugs with barbed little legs crawling over his back.

„Yeah...“, he said, slowly, as if his lips didn´t know how to form words any more. „Tons...“

He looked down at the cup in his hand, and put it down into the sink again, folding the cloth
neatly, and leaving it on the counter´s now clean surface.

„Well, I gotta go now. Guess the Big Bang is as much as I can expect to get, right?“

Something in his voice seemed to alert the other guy.

„You, uhm...you don´t have to leave, you know....I mean, Jay is usually out for a few hours
after....you know. But you can stay until he wakes up.‟

„That´s very ... considerate of you, but no, thanks. I´ve had my ...uhm... fun. So .. tell Jay I said
good bye, please?“ He bent over his boots, tying the laces, hiding his face.

„Uhm...sure...“ The young man seemed unsure, though. „Hey, did you – did you clean up in here?
You didn´t have to – you know. DO anything for...“ „Jensen got up from the floor, and watched the
other man make a 360 degree turn. „Wow, it hasn´t been that tidy for- hey, is that my favorite shirt?“ He grabbed one of the clothes Jensen had folded over the couch. „I´ve been looking for that for ages! Where did you find it!“

Jensen rolled his eyes. „On the floor“, he answered, voice dry as sand paper. He walked past the blonde man. „Wasn´t that hard to find. But I´m glad I could be of some ... use...after all."

He picked his jacket from the rack behind the entrance door. „Nice to meet you, uhm...“

„Chad. I´m Chad. Sorry, I – usually I don´t meet Jay´s... uhm...friends.“

„I see. Well, see you around, Chad...or not.“

He stepped out, and pulled the door firmly closed behind him.

The little bugs with the spiky feet had reached his chest, and were clawing their way all through his skin, through muscle and bone and every fiber, looking for the thing he was used to think of as his soul.

But they wouldn´t find it....he´d been careless, for a moment, yes. But his crumbling walls, they were rebuilt within seconds, and, well – they stood tall and firm again, shielding him from dimpled smiles and slanted eyes and long stretches of skin over toned muscles. He shook his shoulders into the thick jacket, rolling his head, still pounding, still so heavy ... and walked down the stairs, and out of the door, almost glad to be hit right in the face by the icy wind once he stepped away from the sheltering wall.

Misha´s man

The young man in the surveillance car sat up carefully. Finally... Padalecki´s roommate had stumbled into the house barely five minutes earlier, and he had wondered what he would find up there – man, some hidden camera up there in the flat, now THAT would make for some nice extra money for sure, if the rumors he´d heard about Padalecki were true – and, sure thing, a few minutes later, the Irish trash walked out the entrance, huddled into his worn-looking jacket. He adjusted the binoculars, magnifying the face. Handsome, yeah ... well, you would expect that of a damn fag, wouldn´t you? Weren´t they all pretty? Pale, though .. actually, the guy looked sick. And malnourished, even with the voluminous coat hiding his body.

Maybe the problem solves itself. Enemy Number One looks like he´ll bite the dust without any „help“ from our side.

He considered telling the Boss about it, but decided to stick with the facts. What if the Ackles kid had just pulled a late night, and harbored a giant hangover, having puked all over campus since this morning... he didn´t want to risk losing Misha´s good graces by jumping to conclusions too soon.

He watched the hunched over figure walk down the street between the houses, shoulders pulled up to the ears, hands buried deep in the jeans´ pockets. He noticed the distinct bowlegs for the first time, and huffed.

Looks like a damn cowboy. Bet they had some Brokeback Mountain Behind The Scenes going on
Jared

„I can´t believe I´m saying this, but shouldn´t you be in class in like...thirty minutes?“

Jared rubbed his eyes. He stared at the blurry image of his roommate in his bedroom´s doorframe. Leaning against the headboard, he tried to get back some orientation, but couldn´t quite shake the remnants of his dream out of his mind. The dog had been there, the one that had died in his arms so many years ago...but had turned into Jensen, somehow, staring at him with glassy eyes, vibrant green veiled by death, like the zombies´ on TV... He´d jerked out of sleep with a jolt, drenched in sweat, heartbeat going crazy.

Burnt rubber and motor oil and the screeching sighs of bent metal.

It was then that Chad had opened the door, not bothering to knock (he never did), asking if he was OK.

„I might be wrong, but usually, you look more ...like...blissed out after you´ve had sex. Less like you´ve seen a ghost. Someone walk over your grave or something?“

„What?“ Jared´s voice sounded rough from sleep.

Chad raised his eyebrows. „Man, you overdone it with Mr. Pretty Boy or what? A little too much action in here? He sure looked a little worn out too.“ Chad munched on a chocolate cookie, leaving a trail of crumbs at his feet.

„Wh-what?“

„Dude.“ Chad rolled his eyes. „You stoned? Your latest crush. Pretty Boy. Just met him in the kitchen. He says bye, by the way.“

„Jensen?“

„Unless he has an identical twin, yes! Saint Jensen! Dude, you should remember who you´re fu- I mean, spending quality time in bed with for at least an hour or so!“

Jared stared at his friend. „What?“

Chad narrowed his eyes. „Jay, you´re starting to scare me. Did you have a stroke or something? It happens during sex. Mostly to older dudes, though.“ He squinted at Jared, concern on his face.

Jared´s sluggish mind slowly managed to follow Chad´s trail of thoughts.

„You think I – we – Chad, I didn´t have sex with Jensen! He was sick, and this was the only place I could think of taking him, as he didn´t want to go back to the hospital!“

Chad looked at the tangled sheets on the bed pointedly.

„And you decided to rock him to sleep or what? Come on, Jay, you know I don´t mind where you
stick Little Jared. Actually...“ He picked a crumb from his chin, and stuffed it into his mouth, „I´m
glad you decided to go the `pop and drop´ way. Would have been devilishly unpleasant to explain
to your parents why you´re dating the enemy. And male enemy, too.“

Something cold and unpleasant filled Jared´s stomach, and started to spread inside him.
He watched his friend for a few seconds, feeling like he was seeing someone he didn´t know at all.
„Chad, where´s Jensen?“

Some of the coldness inside him seeped into his voice. Chad noticed. He flinched a little.
„Uhm... he left. Why?“ He sounded defensive.
„What did you – did you say anything to him?“

Chad seemed to relax, and rolled his eyes. „Just said congrats, for getting in your sweet panties
within a week only. Well, not in those exact words. He left, and that was that. Oh, and he cleaned
our living room. Found my Dr. Sexy T-shirt, can you believe that? I haven´t seen it in ages! What!“

Jared had climbed out of his bed, suddenly in a hurry, and put on his clothes haphazardly, all the
while glaring daggers at Chad.
„Chad, you´re my best friend, but sometimes you´re such a dumb shithead I could bang your stupid
mug into the wall!“

„Hey, no need to get all alpha male on me here! I didn´t do anything!“, Chad exclaimed, taking a
step back. He looked slightly alarmed. Jared tried to swallow down the frustration that threatened
to overwhelm him – he was known for his sudden mood swings, if only by his closest friends. To
the rest of the world, he was Mr. Big Smile.

„We didn´t have sex! We just...slept! And I would never ...“ He looked for his second boot, and
slipped into it with some difficulty. „This is different, OK? I want it to be different. I want....“ He
looked up at Chad, whose expression was pained.

„I have to find Jensen“, Jared murmured, suddenly anxious. „I have to tell him...explain. did he say
where...?“

Chad stepped back, letting him pass. „No...he didn´t. But, Jay....you sure it wouldn´t be wiser
to...dunno, let go? You know how your parents...“

„Fuck my parents. Fuck this whole family“, Jared spit out, with more force and venom than he had
intended. „I´m tired of hiding. I´m tired of having to see someone as „The Enemy“ only because
they were born into the „wrong“ family.“ He forced his arms into his still damp jacket.

„You´re still serious about him, huh.“ Chad´s voice sounded somewhere in between wonder and
exasperation.

„Yes. About everything.“ Jared stomped over to the entrance door. „At least I have to try, Chad. I
have to fight for what I want to be. I realized that now...if I don´t wanna be tossed around and
turned into someone I don´t want to be, I have to fight.“

He saw Chad nod slowly at that, out of the corner of his eye, open door already in hand. His friend
´s face was serious all of a sudden.
„I guess then...then we´ll have to talk. There´s something I have to tell you, Jay. “

Chad looked sick, and something crossed his face...Shame? Is he ashamed of something? Or is it guilt?

„Ok“, Jared said. „Later, OK?“

„Ok.“ Chad didn´t sound very enthusiastic. „Go find your Pr- ...Jensen. Sorry I messed up, man.“

Jared shrugged, and rolled his eyes. „Don´t you think that I´m clearly used to that by now?“

Chad flipped him his middle finger.

„Bitch!“

„Jerk!“

With that, Jared thundered down the stairs and ran out into the blinding snow.

---

**Jensen**

**Idiot idiot idiot you freaking idiot**

It was his very own mantra. Had been pretty much the same five years ago, before he´d left for the jungle, after Matt.

*Serves you right, for letting your guard down.*

*And for coming back. Three panic attacks within the first ten days.... way to go. Worse than when Matt died. You´re a wreck, and you know it... a failure on so many levels. How do you even plan on getting Mack out if you can´t get through half a day without breaking down?*

He stomped through the wind-blown snow, not really aware at where he was headed, as long it was leading him away from the flat, the shame, the anger.

**Idiot. Such an idiot.**

It had been nice. Waking up to someone else´s breathing again. To a warm body (and a gorgeous one at that). To dream of kisses and sharing a special table at a cafe.

**Yeah – dreams. That´s what they are. And what they´ll always be.**

The wind had taken up speed between the buildings. Jensen huddled into his jacket. All the warmth left from Jay´s bed – *and his body*...- had been blown away by now, and he felt his legs and hands shake again. He tried to walk faster, but found it nearly impossible to pick up speed. *So damn tired....*

„Jensen!“

He stopped dead.

*Shit.*
„Jensen, wait!“

He heard the footsteps now, muffled by the snow; but a body as huge as Jay´s couldnt move entirely soundless, not even here.

He turned around slowly, arms wrapped around himself. He´d been angry when he´d left the flat, at himself, mostly. But now...it was as if the wind had blown through him, right through, and taken everything with it. All that was left was cold and exhaustion.

The fight had left him before it even had begun.

He watched Jay run at him, panting, small clouds forming in front of his mouth.

He waited.

*Cold. And tired. Freaking idiot.*

*Jared*

*Frail.*

Jensen wasn´t a short man, not at all; but standing there on the deserted street, wind whirling snow around his feet, hunched over... he looked small and vulnerable from afar. Jared came to a halt in front of the other man, breathing hard.

*All I wanna do is hug him, wrap him into my arms....protect, and hold.* It was like an instinct, something he couldn´t control. It was frightening, and at the same time, created a strange sense of calmness inside him.

*As if this all had been long planned ... planned by nature, or fate, or some God who has a good time watching us struggle down here.*

Jensen´s face was closed off, eyes wary.

*His guard´s up again. Shutters down. Dammit.*

„Jensen, I ... I´m sorry. Please, let me explain...“ He was still panting, and felt incredibly stupid; but this was maybe his only chance to set things right.

*It´s worth the try.*

He´d make a complete fool of himself, he´d do any embarrassing thing, or open his most secret thoughts to the other man, if it made him listen.

„Please“, he pleaded.

Jensen gazed back at him. His freckles were a stark contrast to his pale skin; all the color he´d brought from the southern sun gone within so short a time. The icy wind gushed through his short hair. *Where´s his cap? He had a knitted cap....probably still at Ava´s?* When Jensen shivered, Jared had to hold back not to step forward, and encase him in a warming hug.

At last, Jensen sighed. He buried his hands in his jeans´ pockets.
Tired. He looks so tired.

„What do you want from me, Jay?“ The voice sounded drained. Of energy. And emotion.

„I want ... first of all, I wanted... I’m sorry, Jensen. I don’t know what exactly Chad told you, but... God, you must think I’m the campus slut or something.“ He pulled his hand through his hair, tangled from sleep and the wind.

„Can’t say you’re wrong“, Jensen stated, voice cool.

Jared grimaced.

„Well, the thing is...I kinda am. Was. I.... we did a lot of partying. And... you know how it is.“ Jensen didn’t answer, just kept looking at him with those cool, distant eyes.

Dammit. He’s not gonna help me.

„But the thing is....I never enjoyed it. Not really. I mean, the sex was good, mostly, it’s just...first of all, it wasn’t men. I’m gay, I know that since...like, forever. But my family...they don’t approve. They’d never...“ He knew he was blabbering, and his fluttering hands were showing his nervousness. He took a deep breath.

„I tried to get back at them for not – you know. Accepting who I am. Thing is, they don’t care how many - how much I sleep around, as long as it’s girls. Hell, my father even would call it ‘healthy’ or something. But it isn’t, it’s making me feel like a douchebag, to the girls, and to myself.“

He bit his lower lip. „I want more, Jensen. I want to be who I am, and not play a role all my life, be it the party boy or the family’s good son or whatever. That’s not.... it’s not me.“ He stared down at his feet, at the ever moving, curling snow.

When he glanced up again, he felt more serious than ever.

„When I met you at the airport....“ He shrugged his shoulders, feeling vulnerable.

„It was....“ He felt the blush on his cheeks, warming his cold skin.

„God that sounds so...cheesy....but I’d never felt hooked like that. No, not hooked...enchanted.“ He shot Jensen an embarrassed glance. „And I immediately regretted not having asked for your name, or phone number, nothing...“ Jensen’s eyes were on him, so green... the cool green of a mountain stream. His face was still. Almost blank.

„I couldn’t stop thinking about you, and I was furious cause I’d never see you again... mad at myself. And then....when you ran into me on campus.... it was like Christmas morning. No, better.“ An emotion ran over Jensen’s face, Jared couldn’t quite name it; but it softened his features, warmed his eyes, although they still seemed to be hidden behind a veil of caution. Jared rubbed his front.

„At the cafe, I felt like...when we kissed, you know – like...“ He glimpsed at Jensen, trying to read his expression - and failed. Jared took another deep breath, and went on.

Close your eyes and jump.

„It felt like I’d known you all my life. Like I was finally coming home to a place I’d been looking for....for years.“ He stared at his snow-covered boots, not daring to watch Jensen’s reaction.
„Like...forever“, he murmured, voice barely audible.

Jensen

Jensen listened to his heartbeat.

tathump--tathump--tathump--tathump

No weird jumps, no racing. No sudden stops. *No time bomb ticking inside your chest, ready to explode and rip apart what's left of you.*

He watched the young man in front of him, his bowed head, face hidden behind the long bangs.

*Coming home*....

He closed his eyes, and saw a green door, tasted flour on his lips, cinnamon... felt the memory of a warmth long gone, and almost forgotten.

Jared

When Jared looked up, finally finding the courage to do so, he found Jensen’s eyes closed. His face was peaceful and calm like he’d never seen it, almost serene; lips just showing the idea of a smile, but not actually smiling.

*God, he’s so beautiful ... so beautiful it hurts.*

His dream’s last picture flashed through his mind, the beautiful face still like a marble statue, but bloodied and bruised... suddenly, Jensen’s silence creeped him out.

„Jensen?“

The eyes opened, and Jared was surprised how much their color had changed...they were a deep, warm green now, reminding him of the pond near his family’s cabin up in the mountains, summer sun glistening on the still surface.

*Longing ... there’s so much longing in his eyes. And desperation.*

Jensen seemed a little dazed, as if just woken up from a dream. He swayed a little.

Out of instinct, Jared reached out to grab him; when Jensen flinched, and took a step back, his arm fell down as if slapped away.

„I can’t give you what you want from me, Jay.“ The words were a rough whisper only, almost voiceless.

„Why?“ Jared stepped forward, closing the gap between them again. *I’m not giving this up now.*

„Is it because of me? Or because of our families?“
Jensen’s eyes narrowed. „No it’s not you– why would you ask that? What about our families? Did Mack tell you about ... my father?“

Jared plowed on, ignoring the frown on the other man’s face.

„I know about your father, the business, Jensen. I know about...I know what happened to Matt. Mack told me, yes. But it’s not ... that’s not the problem, I mean, it is, but not the only one. Not the main one.“

He watched emotions fly over Jensen’s face, anger, disappointment... confusion.

Jared took another deep breath. „It’s not only your family, Jensen. It’s also my own. Mostly my own, I’d say. They are ... let’s say they are in the same business as yours.“

There. He’d said it. He’d told this man, who he barely knew, what he’d kept even from his best friends for so long. Aside from Chad, of course.

Jensen stared at him, incredulity seeping through the carefully controlled face.

„What?“

„We didn’t even get to ... to make proper introductions. What with the hospital and...you know. It’s ...uhm... you know me just as Jay, but, uhm.... my real name is Jared. Jared Padalecki. My parents are the owners of the so called 'Padalecki Imperium‘” – he used airquotes, and grimaced at the expression – „so, I guess you know what... what that means.“

Jensen looked frozen to the spot. Aghast.

His eyes still betrayed his emotions, though – even if he never opened his mouth again, his eyes would speak volumes – and Jared read alarm in them, sadness, still underlined by anger. And...realization?

„It’s you....“, Jensen whispered. „Jared Padalecki.... it’s you. That’s why you looked familiar...“ His voice trailed away.

It was Jared’s turn to look confused. „What do you mean it’s me? Have we met before? I mean, before you left for South America?“

A frustrated frown crossed Jensen’s face. „Did my sister NOT tell you anything about me?“

Jared blushed.

„I...uhm...sorry about that. I didn’t mean to go behind your back, but...you were in the hospital, and... everything was such a mess, so...“

„So you tried to get into my pants through my little sister? Classy.“

„No!“

Jared flinched at the volume of his own exclamation. „No, Jensen, please – that’s not what I---what we intended. But you - what happened back at Ava’s, it was all so confusing ...and you lost your phone, that’s how I met Mack. I’d never – I told you, that’s not what I want, Jensen. I mean, I do, but ...dammit,“ he muttered, hands furiously gripping his hair.

To his surprise, when he dared looking up into Jensen’s face, a small smile tugged at the corners of the other man’s lips; he looked one step from amused. His face sobered within an instant,
though.

„Let´s leave it at that for the moment. If Mack trusted you ... I guess I can live with it.“

The relief Jared felt was embarrassing. He straightened up, remembering his earlier question.

„So... what did you mean, it´s me?“

Jensen glanced at him for a moment, burying his hands deeper into his pockets.

He sighed.

„There was a night, about... six years ago. February...actually, it was the same date my Mum died. Kind of an anniversary.“ He huffed, mirthlessly.

Jared felt cold puddle somewhere inside his chest. Goosebumps started to rise on his arms and legs.

„I had a terrible row with my father that evening, and – well, I decided I needed some time to think, and drove out of town. Wanted to go up to Uncle Jim´s cabin in the woods. It´s...it´s kind of a safe place whenever...“ He shook his head. Jared was transfixed, staring, listening. *It can´t be. This can’t be....*

„I didn´t get very far, though, just far enough to be in the middle of fucking nowhere. It was cold, I think one of the coldest nights we ever had, streets were slippery, ice everywhere. There was a car...it overtook me, way too fast, even in good driving conditions...I remember that I thought, yeah, come on, break your neck, dumbass.... When I came out of one of those little woods, I saw the accident. Someone had driven off the street.... when I came closer, I realized the car had turned over a few times, and was on its side...partially on the roof, actually. My first thought was...that idiot from before finally managed to get himself killed. But it was a different car.“

Jared shivered.

„Well, I...uhm..long story short: I stopped and tried to get the driver out, a young man...a kid, actually. Wasn´t easy, and all the time I was afraid I´d do more damage than good. There was no reception, of course, so – no ambulance, no nothing. The guy was pretty out of it, and badly injured, so ... I drove him back versus the city, called 911 as soon as I had a signal. The ambulance met us halfway in the outskirts of town. That´s when I ... when I got the name of the guy I´d just ...I ´d brought with me.“

Jared gazed at the other man. „Saved. Who you saved, Jensen. You saved my life back then, that´s what the doctors said, I wouldn´t...there wouldn´t have been a chance for me without my mysterious savior, not in that cold, not with the internal damage.“ He studied Jensen´s face for a moment, turned down now, as if ashamed of something.

He couldn´t hold back, then, not anymore, it was.... that night, with all its horrors, it came back to him, the pain, the fear... helplessness... and the voice, that voice which kept him above the darkness, strong hands, the warmth of a body in all the cold that swallowed him. *The voice that kept my heart beating, my lungs breathing through all the pain. Jensen´s voice.*

Jared reached out, and cupped Jensen´s face with both his hands. They were warm against the other man´s cold skin. Jensen didn´t flinch this time. He just glanced at Jared, still a trace of something in his eyes...*shame? Guilt?*

„You saved my life, Jensen. Back then. And, I guess... now, too, in a way.‘“
With that, he stepped forward, closing in on the other man, and bowed down; and after a short moment, as if waiting for Jensen´s reaction, as if asking for his consent – he pressed his lips on the cold, plush ones, and there it was again. That feeling...

*Home.*

*Misha´s Man*

The young man in the car hidden behind a bunch of waistbins whistled. It had been the right decision to leave his parking spot and drive all the way around the blocks of buildings to find the Ackles kid again; he´d been unsure what to do for a moment when he´d seen Padalecki storm out of the house in his rearview mirror. But that.... that was what he´d been waiting for, right? Something to tell the Boss.

He watched the two men in the lonely street through his camera– no one ever seemed to be outside here, and he couldn´t blame them, what with this fucking cold - watched Padalecki bow down, finally, and take the other man´s face. And then – Halleluja! they kissed.

„About freaking time“, the young man murmured. „I´m not freezing my ass off here for naught. Give me some action, boys. “

He took pictures, lots ... oh, the Boss would be pleased. He had an inkling the Boss liked to stare at them in his lonely nights – but hey, he wasn´t one to judge. Whatever kept him warm at night, and Little Misha happy.

With a triumphant grin on his face, he grabbed for his cellphone on the passenger seat.
"Chad here." The young man’s voice was wary. *Interesting.*

"Well, Chad, as I haven’t heard from you in a few days, I wanted to call for a heads-up on my son."

Sherri was sure to put enough reprimand in her seemingly friendly and unsuspicious words. She could practically see her son’s friend wince on the other end of the line.

"Well, uhm...there hasn’t been happening much...Jared’s pretty wrapped up in his studying groups..."

"Cut the boring stuff, Chad. Anything new on the important things? Party stupidities, new girls in his bed ... any of his special nights?"

"Uhm...no...no parties, Mrs. Padalecki. He ...as I said, he’s studying. He got a paper to finish and...you know. Exams."

"We settled on you calling me Sherri ages ago, Chad. And - well, his studies usually don’t keep my son from having a fun night out. So?"

"I uhm... yeah, there were a few private parties going on, but, uhm...he wouldn’t come." She heard Chad’s nervousness in his voice. He cleared his throat.

"Professor Harvelle is pretty hard on him. She says she won’t except anything but outstanding performances from her top students."

*He’s trying to put me on a false track... Harvelle’s the bait.....he lures me away from something... interesting, indeed.*

"So, what – no fun at all? My son has turned into a model student all of a sudden?"

"Well, uhm...yes?"

"What about girls? Anyone he shared the bed with lately? Or – you know. A restroom, or a table in the back of the library..." She had added the last part to make Chad sweat a little, and it obviously worked.

"No! I mean...no. No one that I know of."

"No one in his bed for what – almost two weeks? Not even one of his special guests in the apartment?"

"No! Sorry, I... uhm..he hasn’t brought anyone home lately. No..uhm...activity."

*Uh-oh, someone’s hiding something, and isn’t very good at it. I wonder what makes Chad protect my son from me... or rather, who. He’s been the perfect little spy for years, and now this change of mind.... fascinating.*

"And you’re sure he didn’t go out to one of his special clubs?"
“Absolutely, Mrs. Padalecki. He´s been living like a hermit.”

The voice sounded more confident now.

“Sherri, Chad! Hmm... that´s... unexpected, but good to hear, I guess. Keep me posted, Chad – you know what I am interested in.”

„Of course, Mrs. Padalecki – I mean, Sherri.“

„You´re doing good, here, Chad, you know that, right? It´s a cruel world, and I have to keep my babies safe. Your help means a lot, and I wanted to thank you.“ The right amount of warmth and sincerity in her voice, and people were hooked – it always worked. „It´s for Jared´s best.“

„Oh, uhm...yeah. You´re welcome, Mrs. – Sherri.“

She chuckled.

„Good – I am not kidding, Chad. I expect reports regularly...we have Jeff´s engagement party coming along, and I don´t need any...surprises, or disturbances.“

„Of course, uhm, Sherri. I´ll be in contact, I promise.“

„I know you will. Ah, and, Chad.“

„Yes?“

„The weekend two weeks from now – whatever you have planned, cancel it. We – Jared – will need you. “

„What? Why? What´s -“

„You will get an official something per mail this week, but I just wanted to give you a heads-up. There will be a private event at our estate – just a family thing, you know?“

„Uhm...Ok..but..what´s it about, I mean...“

She managed a convincingly flirtatious giggle.

„Chad, Chad, let an old woman have her secrets! It´s a surprise for now. Just – have your tuxedo cleaned, that´s all I´ll tell you. “

„I, uhm...Ok. Thank you, Mrs. Padalecki. For the invitation. “

„You´re welcome, Chad. Have a good day. And – call.“

She put her cellphone down, ending the call before Chad could stammer a good bye.

I have to find out what´s going on.... how inconvenient if Chad starts to develop a conscience right when I need his updates the most!

Well, she had other sources, more professional ones.

She picked the phone up again, and had her finger hover over a contact number for a few seconds. It had been the right decision to make Jared´s engagement to the Russian princess a surprise thing – catch the boy off guard, and have him put the diamond ring on the girl´s finger before he even knew what hit him. A private event, just the two families ... that way, it wouldn´t blow up too
much dust. She’d feed a cheesy story to the press – how the two lovebirds had hidden their passion for years, but couldn’t stand being apart any longer, making their families proud and happy with their decision to marry. And Andrej would see to it that Jared stayed in line with the contract they’d so carefully put together. The Russian mob boss could be charming and jovial; but he was one of the most intimidating men Sherri had ever met, with an underlying cruelty and brutality in his methods that he loved to let seep through now and then, just for the fun of making people fear him. No wonder people called him „Lucifer“ behind his back.

There was only one man she considered more dangerous, and more intimidating than the mob boss. His hit man, and consigliere – she smiled at herself at the old-fashioned expression -, the Russian born in America with the heavenly blue eyes and the soul forged in Hell. The man that was known to the rest of the mob world by his pseudonym only... The Angel.

She pressed the call button, annoyed about the slight tremor in her finger.

„Sherri.“

The gravelly voice had shivers run down her spine. Shivers of an embarrassing fear, and others... warmth pooled in her lap, a lust that had sudden pictures of panting, sweating bodies appear in her mind, flashes of naked skin, teeth, brutal thrashing and pushing, ties and ropes and mouths opened in silent screams of ecstasy.

She shook her head, banning the porno movie away.

This voice is a weapon. An A-bomb with a tracking system aimed right at our vaginas.

„Misha. I hope you can help me with some...concerns.“

Jared

Jared only broke the kiss when he ran out of oxygen.

No resistance. No kissing back, either, but ... well. He didn’t push me back or punch my face or anything. That’s a good sign, right?

Jensen had been impassive, hands not leaving the pockets of his jeans; but Jared had felt the tension leave his shoulders, had taken in the miniscule change when the other man leaned into the warm grip of his hands.

Jared straightened up, but didn’t let go of Jensen’s face yet.

He studied the beautiful features, the freckles he wanted to kiss spot per spot, so very much... he stroked over the prominent cheekbones, touched the long lashes ever so lightly with his thumbs. Jensen’s eyelids fluttered, but didn’t open. Jared bent forward until his front met the other man’s, and closed his eyes. He felt the light puffs of warm air hitting his lips. Jensen’s hair tickled the skin at his hairline. Jensen smelled good, even out here in the cold, sweet like old, dry wood warmed by the sun... they breathed, and stood, and it’s enough, it’s good, for now.

The spell was broken when a violent shiver shook Jensen’s body. Jared jerked, surprised by the sudden movement.
“Sorry, I’m sorry, Jensen, you must be freezing .... I’m such an idiot...“

Jensen looked shaken. Jared wondered for a moment if the cold was the real reason for the shivers.

“IT´s OK.“ He looked all but OK, though. „Not used to the temperatures up here yet.“

Jensen talked to Jared’s chest, not making eye contact. Fear crept up Jared’s throat, constricting his voice.

„Jensen, I-“

Finally, Jensen looked up, and the emotion in his green eyes made Jared falter.


Most of all, he read desperation in them, so deep and old it seemed to come from another time. No one can accumulate that much desperation in so short a life? No one should be forced to?

„This isn’t possible, Jay... Jared. WE aren’t. I can’t – you know what happened to Matt. He´s dead, and it´s my fault, Jay. I can´t be responsible for any more harm, to anyone. Especially not to you.“

Jared searched the other man´s face. „But, Jensen, Matt´s death wasn´t your fault at all. He fell down a cliff, right? An accident? I mean, I saw the date, it´s a little....it´s a strange coincidence, but -“

„It was my Dad.“

Jared stopped dead.

„What?“

„My Dad killed Matt. Well, not him personally, he´s far beyond the dirty work now I guess – but he had him killed by one of his goons.“

Jared felt all the blood drain from his face. „He – your own father had your boyfriend killed? But – what – is it because you´re gay? I thought – Mack said your father was Ok with it, and... and how do you know?“

Jensen huffed, wrapping his arms around himself again.

„There were signs...“, he murmured. „Things only I could see...understand. The police wouldn’t notice. But I did. I confronted him, you know.“

Jared stared at the other man. His face was impassive, blank almost.

„What did he ... he admitted to it?“

Another mirthless huff. „My father? No. I told him about the things I´d found, seen on the body... he denied. Lied right to my face. I was ... I´d never been so furious. That night...I could have killed my Dad. Instead, I ran.“

Something dawned on Jared. „That night, was it the night you...“

„The night you had your accident, yes. After I had ...after the ambulance left with you in it, I drove to my Uncle Jim´s cabin ...stayed there for two weeks, got everything sorted out. Left for South America then. I haven´t seen my father since the night we fought.”
„Dammit“, Jared murmured. „That´s... wow. I always thought my parents were bad, but...“

„It´s the `Business´. Everything´s just...Business."

The words were filled with so much bitterness Jared flinched.

„Yeah, I hear you“, he mumbled. „God, this is a mess.“ He rubbed his front.

Jensen shrugged. It looked as if he had the world on his shoulders. So tired....

„I don´t care about myself, it´s – it´s not important anymore. But Mack – Mack still has a chance. I have to get her out. After what happened to Josh...“

„Let me help.“

Jared almost stumbled over the words. „Please, Jensen. I – I have a little sister too, she´s far away, thank God, in France... but I´d do anything to never have her touch this life...the Business.“

Jensen gazed at him, a sad understanding in his eyes. „We´re some pair, aren´t we....“

Jared grimaced. „None of us wanted this life, Jensen. We didn´t choose our families, we didn´t give our consent to any of their... doings. Nobody asked us. So fuck them. We´re not what we are born into, we are what we make of ourselves. And I have no intention, none at all, to follow my big brother´s fooststpes and develop into a first grade douchebag only to please my parents. Fuck their Big Plan and all that crap talk about family tradition and duties and carrying the flame. It´s not my flame, will never be, and I´d rather -“

He stopped his tirade midsentence. Die? You´d rather die than become what your parents want you to be?

„Dammit“, he mumbled, deeply embarrassed by his outburst. „Sorry about that.“

He stared at his feet. He must think I´m a child...a stupid, spoiled brat ranting against the adults.

The touch came so unexpected he flinched; Jensen immediately started to retreat his hands. Jared was fast enough to catch them with his own though, and lead them back to his burning cheeks, pressing both layers of hands against his face. Jensen´s fingers were pure ice on his skin.

„Don´t be sorry“, Jensen croaked, a faint blush ornating his pale cheeks. His eyes were sincere. „You´re right to be angry. You´re right to want to live your own life, make your own decisions. You´re entitled to it, no matter what your family says. Don´t make them destroy who you are, Jay...it´s not too late for you.“

„What about you, Jensen?“

A smile ghosted over the other man´s face. „I haven´t been part of this life for a long time, Jay.“ He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked straight into Jared´s. „But I haven´t done anything to keep Mack away from it. I ran, and I thought...“ He searched Jared´s face. „I thought it would be over...that he´d stop. I was wrong.“ He swallowed.

„I ran, and ...I left them behind. And now Mom´s dead, Josh´s dead...and if anything happens to Mack, I....“

Jared saw tears gather at the corners of Jensen´s misty eyes; one of them rolled down his cheek, slowly; he didn´t make a sound, his face didn´t move, it was just this lonely tear, and the pain in
his eyes; he pressed Jensen´s hands to his cheeks, desperate to help, to ease the pain, and finally he couldn´t hold back anymore, bowed down, releasing the hands on his face, and engulfed Jensen in the hug he´d been longing to give him since they´d carried him away from Ava´s cafe on a gurney. Jensen´s hands slipped down to Jared´s neck, grasping him, holding him close; after a few seconds, he felt more shivers run through the lean body, Jensen was shaking, and it took a while for Jared to understand that he was crying for real now, violent sobs that made his shoulders twitch, but still without any noise. Jensen wept, completely silent.

Jared got the impression that something had opened in front of him, iron gates in a dam that had been built and rebuilt time and again.

*The tears of a lifetime.*

He pressed his lips on the bowed head, gently, giving comfort by just being there, holding, listening, supporting. Jensen´s head sank down against Jared´s shoulder, face nestled into the soft material of his winter jacket. Finally, the soundless sobs turned into hiccups, and died.

*Jensen*

He hadn´t cried when his Mom died.

It had been one big whirl of confusing events, people in their house who he didn´t know, police coming and going, and his father – his father like a stone in the midst of it all, petrified with pain, but with such a dangerous anger seeping through it that Jensen hadn´t dared looking at him, much less talking or seeking comfort.

Mack had cried a lot, she was only a toddler ... and he´d taken care of her, as she wouldn´t go with the women who came to help. They´d cuddle up somewhere, hidden under a table or in the tent Jensen built in her room, using blankets and cushions, and Jensen would tell her stories...endless adventures, starring her most beloved stuffed animals or cartoon characters. Sometimes Josh climbed into their safe castle too, listened for a while, biting the hem of his shirt´s sleeve as he used to when something was bothering him. The sleeve was frayed by the end of the first week. Jensen remembered that Uncle Jim wanted to throw the whole shirt away, but Josh wouldn´t let him.

*Wonder where that shirt has gone...did Josh keep it? As a reminder of those days?*

After the funeral – Jensen couldn´t really remember much about it, only black coats and hats and the icy wind biting his ears – Uncle Jim had taken them with him, for some time. Until he and Josh were sent away, and Mack got that nurse who smelled like candy, and their grandma came to live in their house.

He´d cried for Josh, though.

Back in the jungle, when Mack had told him ... had told him that his brother had died weeks before, killed in a car crash just like their Mom – Jensen had climbed the hill up to the place where the plants left a little clearing, just enough to see the never ending trees cover the hills and valleys, the stream curving through them like a meandering reddish road. He´d cried, then, for a brother who´d been a stranger to him for years, for the loss of someone he once loved and respected and looked up to...
Chiga had found him up there. Of course. She was old and wrinkled and hadn’t many teeth left in her mouth, but her mind was sharp as a knife, and she mysteriously always seemed to know where everybody was, and what they needed most.

He remembered her rough hands on his face. *So different from Jay’s....*

„*Maybe it’s time to go home, Ccovu...“*  

*Ccovu...the moon... „Because you need someone else´s light to make your real beauty visible, and then you will turn the darkness brightly lit and keep people safe on their ways.“*  

Suddenly, he missed Chiga. He missed his Mom, and the brother he’d lost long before he’d died, missed the house with the green door, where things had be easy and good.  

*Cinnamon and apple scent, and fingers powdered with flour.*  

Jay...Jared... he smelled good, too. Earthy and warm, and with a hint of something spicy and green, like freshly mown grass. Jensen buried his face in the cloth, felt the strong arms around his shoulders and sides, and couldn’t stop the tears, once they started flowing, it was just pouring out of him, wrecking his body with violent shakes; until, at last, there was nothing left but a painfully constricted throat and hiccups. Jay’s coat was wet against his front. Only then did he notice the sounds the taller man made, a deep humming, mixed with words or syllables without meaning, like the ones he’d produced to console Mack when she was little; and just like his younger sister, he felt safe and comforted, felt his heartbeat slow down, the shaking ebb away.

„*It’s time to go home and find your sun, Ccovu....the one that makes you shine through the darkness. “*

*Misha*

Misha pocketed his cellphone – the silver one – and buried his hands in the deep pockets of his trench coat. He watched the street below through the half closed shutters, people hurrying along the pavement, eager to get out of the cold, cars slowly weaving their way in between parked vehicles, piles of snow, and ice-slippery spots on the cobbly street.  

He loved this place, the little shops and cafes, the old brick houses with their white doors, the unruly streets, turning and bending in unexpected ways, so different from the boringly straight grid of the newer parts of the city. It was his favorite office, and the most „official“ one; it even came with a small sign at the door, and a doorbell, although no one would ever answer the entrance door. The name was fake, of course, or partially so; he’d borrowed it from one of his grandfathers, just like the profession engraved into the brass sign. *Trade&Deliveries.*  

His other phone hummed inside his breast pocket, the one reserved for his employees.  

On opening, the coded message appeared, leading him to a series of more than 30 pictures, the last of them taken only seconds before.  

He stared down at the brilliantly sharp photos. *Good work, Uri....* they seemed almost like black and whites, only the deep blue and dark green of the jackets an indication that the pictures were, in fact, in color. Everything else seemed painted in shades of white, grey, and black, even the pale faces.
It’s a pity one can’t see the color of their eyes...they both have such stunning ones....

He scrolled through the pics, noticed the gestures, the way their hands and shoulders talked. His gaze faltered when he reached the kiss.

Finally.

His eyes lingered on the way the Padalecki kid held the smaller man’s face in his big hands, the tenderness of the gesture. The stillness of Ackles’ body, visible even on the photo. His finger wiped over the screen again, until it stopped once more.

I’ve never seen someone cry like that. Beautifully, like a piece of art.

The wintery light glistened on the single tear that crossed the pale cheek, and he enlarged the picture, until he could read the emotions in the eyes, a mossy green now, speckled with flecks of gold. He traced the tear with his fingertip, followed the line of the large hand holding the freckled cheek.

They are, truly, a tragic couple, but oh, how beautiful in their pain.

The following pics, scrolled through faster, were almost like watching a film: tiny changes adding up to a full time movement. Padalecki’s arms wrapping themselves around the other body, both of their heads bowing down, until they stood still, statues caught in a moment of touching intimacy, more so than the kiss before.

Comfort. That would be the title of the photograph in an exhibition.

Misha studied the way Jensen’s hands grabbed the fabric of Jared’s jacket, revealing all the desperation inside the young man...the graceful bow of Padalecki’s head, lips touching the top of the smaller man’s head, one hand cradling the neck and back of the head, one supporting the back and shoulder. Scrutinizing the face, he saw the pain of the other man mirrored in it, the torment of seeing someone else suffer; and he wondered what it would be like to be able to feel like that. Pain, and anger, guilt, desperation, and love.

My Arctic Angel.

His Grandmother had called him that, in Russian of course, one of the few people who weren’t offended or frightened by his weirdness. Why doesn’t he cry? He never laughs! Something’s not right with the boy.... He’d seen how the old women in their street crossed themselves, muttering prayers - or spells, who knew – when they saw him. The little fallen angel, that’s what they called him behind his back, or the angel who’s lost his grace.

Alexithymia. That’s what his condition was called; he didn’t know until his early twenties. A neurological failure of some sort, making him incapable of feeling emotions. Or sharing those of others.

He’d studied faces, gestures, the voices of those around him, or actors on TV, as soon as he was aware of how alien his behavior was to other people. He learned to act, to adapt at least externally, to a certain degree. Until he discovered that his ‘disease’ could actually be a huge advantage. It all depended on your line of work...and Misha’s job probably was ideal for him, or he was the ideal candidate for the job he’d created for himself. A maestro in his own way.

But there were the times when he longed for more. For the real thing instead of the second hand version. Rarely, he found human beings who evoked something like emotion in him, for whatever reason: who touched something deep down in him that made him realize what he was missing. It
was addictive... as soon as he knew the difference, he missed the feeling when it was gone.

His thumb inadvertently stroked the two figures again, wrapped around each other as if only standing upright that way. *Why these two? What do they have that others can’t touch inside this strange heart of mine?*

For the first time, he felt something weird inside his chest when he thought about his job. Reluctance ... regret? Was that what they called regret?

*Maybe. You’ll miss watching them. Being part of them, without their knowledge.*

He sent the photos to his printer and watched the prints emerge from the machine. He picked up the one with the beautiful tear, and the tender embrace. He opened his safe, took out a folder, and put the large stack of pics into it; the two special photos went into a black wooden box in a different safe, hidden behind a movable shelf on the wall.

He sighed.

*Such perfection, and so little time left.*
Chapter 16

Chad

When Chad heard the stumbling steps on the stairs, he quickly got up from where he’d sunk down on the floor, back leaning against the kitchen fronts.

_Are you sure you want to go through with this? Cause it might easily cost you not only the protection and welcoming arms of the Padalecki family – hell, you’ll loose their benevolence and favours for sure – but also your best friend. Forever._

He sighed, dusting off his pants, and walked over to the entrance door.

_If you don’t tell Jared the truth – then there’ll be Hell to pay. Not now, but later. And then there’ll be no chance at all to make amends._

He swallowed, and opened the door; and was surprised to see not only Jared, but Jensen outside as well.

„Oh, uhm...hey! You’re back...“

_Very intelligent comment, Chad._

He noticed the way Jared was hoovering over the other man, arm almost touching his shoulder, a deep concern on his face. It stung. _No need to deny it, man. You’re jealous. Jealous of your best friend’s maybe-boyfriend. How pathetic is that..._

„Hey, Chad....“ Jared shot him a quick glance.

„Found him in time I see“, Chad stated. _You sound like a bitch. Stow it, man!_

Jared frowned, but at that moment, Jensen was gripped by violent shivers that didn’t stop anymore, his body seemed to be out of control, and Chad suddenly was aware of how pale the man was, _jeez, he looks almost bluish_, his face contorted into a grimace, and before Chad could react, Jared had wrapped himself around Jensen, leading him to the couch, where he lowered the other man down.

„Chad, blankets!“

He woke up from the weird petrified state he’d been in, watching the two of them – _as if they’d spent all their lives together, like an old couple with forty years of marriage on their backs_ – and dashed into Jared´s bedroom, grabbing a few of the many blankets strewn all over the room. Once he’d given them to Jared, he turned back to pick up two of the hot water bottles, and filled the electric kettle. While the water was heating, he observed the two men on the couch. Jensen was still shaking so badly he couldn’t even lie down properly, hands and feet pulled against his body in a way that looked painful. Jared had wrapped all the blankets around him, and himself on top of them, kneeling in front of the sofa, front touching Jensen´s.

_No way can anyone shake like this from the cold alone. He was out there like – what, fifteen minutes? It’s cold, sure, but – it’s not like the North Pole or anything._

It was the first time the thought hit him.
Something’s seriously wrong with the guy.

Cold fear crept up his throat. Fear for his best friend.

He had known Jared since their very young years, and he knew one thing for sure: His friend had a stupid, big heart, and once he gave it to someone, he gave all of it.

I don’t want his heart to get broken.

Not by Jensen. Not by his family. And not by myself.

Misha

Misha studied the copied, neatly stacked sheets in front of him.

A frown deepened on his face while his eyes wandered down the page. Diagrams, numbers, whole freaking rows of them, short written paragraphs full of strange words. He stared at the pictures sampled on the last page, probably taken from a website.

This looks like .... it looks like my job has been taken over already.

He detected a weird sensation of being bereft of something, being conned by a power above himself – something he wasn’t used to – and... annoyance.

This was his mission. True, it had been the first time ever that he’d felt regret. Reluctance. Had even wondered what would happen if he bent the rules for once...made an exception...

He didn’t like when possibilities he’d held open – if only as a mind game, a fantasy to feed the rare needs of his frozen soul - were stolen away from him. Especially if his opponent was one he couldn’t fight.

With an angry gesture, he threw the sheets into one of his safes. The page with the pictures landed on top.

With an unexpected clarity, he realized that fulfilling his job would be the only possible way left. An unexpected, unplanned act of kindness.

He would not fail.

You won’t take my mission away from me.

Alan
„Are you serious?“

Alan Ackles got up from his leather chair, too agitated to sit still any longer. He listened to the voice on his phone for a while, growing visibly angrier by the minute.

„What? He – you DID offer him the whole package, right?“ He’d barely listened to the response before interrupting again.

„What about the threats? You did explain the urgency –“ The voice at the other end of the line exploded in a rush of angry words. „OK, OK! So you did use all the threats I – I said OK! But then why the Hell didn’t they spill the information, Jim!“

He found himself in front of the family pictures again. His wife’s sweet smile, the sparkling warmth in her eyes that always drew him to her face first. Mack’s wide grin, the proud set of his shoulders. Mack, just a chubby toddler on her Mom’s lap, reaching out for the photographer with short stubby fingers, almost white hair feathery and glowing in the sun. His fingers found the familiar faces, traced the lines of well remembered lips and eyes, and for a moment he could smell the scent, old sundried wood and freshly mown grass. It had been an unusually warm winter down at his parent’s house, so much so that the rest of the family had decided to spend a few days at the gulf coast while he, of course, had to leave for the north already. Business....

You could see the days in the sun on Jensen’s face already, the darker freckles, the sheer number of them, little clouds of cinnamon dusted over his face and arms. Jensen squinted at the camera, head slightly tilted, that hesitant smile of his barely there, his hand buried in the folds of his mother’s dress, gripping a piece of cloth as if to be sure she was really there.

As if he knew....

„What?“ He’d forgotten the phone for a moment, the man on the other end.

„No, I – just lost in thought for a moment. Jim, I need those medical files. You said it yourself, the doctor acted shady. Jensen won’t talk to me, Hell, he doesn’t even want to see me for crying out loud- ...... yes, I know it’s partly my fault! But he’s such a stubborn - ....NO! Dammit, Jim, don’t you start that discussion ag- ...... I FUCKING KNOW I FUCKED THIS FAMILY UP, ALRIGHT? Do you think it makes me happy to have lost a wife, a son, and that I’m going to lose another child?“

He listened to the voice, heart racing.

_Dammit, you haven’t yelled out your anger like that forever. Feels good._

_Doesn’t solve anything though._

„What? Are you freaking - .................... you think I’m just gonna pull back and let those animals decimate my family – ............... NO! We are not even! Not by far, Jim! And I won’t rest until -“

He raked his hand through his thinning hair with a violent gesture, leaving the wall with the photographs, and taking the few strides over to the large window.

„No, Jim. I won’t get into that discussion again. You know how I think about it, and I didn’t change my mind since the last time. Look what ‘laying low’ and ‘holding back’ has gained me! I’ve lost Josh, and now...“ He stopped. Something was choking his throat, and his voice had come dangerously close to breaking.
„I need those files, Jim. And we need to find out what´s happening...........yes. .....what? You think they......it sure as Hell wouldn´t be beyond them! I already had a bad feeling when I saw Josh´s carwreck........“

He listened to his oldest friend´s – he still considered him one, never mind the fights and fallouts they´d gone through – voice, staring down at the streets below his office. He´d always loved winter....the calmness of a monochrome world, the cold that forced people inside. Ice turning ugly everyday objects into beautiful pieces of art.

At his friend´s words, some of the cold seemed to grip his insides. He gulped.

*If he´s right....if they got The Angel on their payroll.... we don´t stand a chance.*

**Jensen**

The pain was new.

He´d gotten used to the shivers, the weird racing of his heart. The exhaustion that never seemed to leave his body. The everlasting cold.

But so far, there hadn´t been any pain.

*Cant´t say I´ve missed it.*

His arms and legs were almost cramping from the violent shakes, drawn to his body in an attempt to keep a rest of warmth he already knew wouldn´t be found inside himself.

But there were blankets, and a warm body. Large, warm hands massaging his limbs, his back. A soothing voice.

New warmth appeared at his feet, and was pressed against his stomach. As it seeped into his skin, he felt his muscles relax, the limbs go slack again. Most of the pain eased away, only the pounding inside his head went on, the never ending rhythmic background to his days.

„Jensen....“

His eyelids were too heavy. Lead was running through his veins again, gluing his body to the sofa, turning every movement into a huge effort. The voice went on, though, murmuring, wrapping him into warm sounds of comfort. The pain lingered after the cold had gone, but eventually, it left, driven away by the tender words whispered against his face, the breath grazing his skin. He felt himself drift away, floating, feeling safe and at ease for the first time since ... long ago.

*Chiga´s hands were paper dry, rough against his own stubbly cheeks. She´d held him a long time, and he had felt the strength hidden in the tiny body, already bowed down by age.*

„Your path is not a long one, Ccovu, but it´s bent and runs up and down steep hills. You´ll find it even when it´s hard to see...“

Her whispers mixed with the stream of mumbled words in his ear.

„The sun, Ccovu, you need to find your sun so you can bring the light into darkness... your path will show you where to go.....“
Maybe it was OK to let go, to listen to the murmurs...

„You will know when it´s time, Ccovu, when Heaven looks at you to take you home into the dark sky where your light belongs.... your sun will follow you there, and together you´ll bring light, day and night.“

Finally, he gave in to the pull of darkness, to the voices and whispers, and let sleep take him.

Jared

Jared felt the exact moment when Jensen fell asleep. He´d managed to get his limbs to relax before, but when the other man´s closed eyes finally weren´t pressed shut painfully any more, the whole body seemed to follow, growing heavy in his arms. He kept holding him for a few more minutes, though, listening to the deep breathing, staring into the calm face. **Peaceful. He looks young and peaceful when he sleeps.**

Wasn´t that what they said about dead people...that they looked peaceful? Goosebumps rose under his shirt, breaking the peace he´d felt. He looked up to find Chad´s worried eyes on him.

He lowered Jensen´s head down onto a cushion, careful not to wake him, and got to his feet, staggering a little. Chad took a mug from the kitchen counter, filled it with coffee from the pot that someone must have prepared earlier, added four spoons of sugar and the last of their milk, and pressed it into Jared´s hands.

He stared down into the liquid as if it held the answers to the questions whirling around inside his head.

„Jared...“

Chad looked concerned. Jared had rarely seen a frown on his friend´s face; but now he definitely showed one. Jared glanced over at him, turning the mug in his hands.

„What´s wrong with him? This isn´t just your usual reaction to low temperatures. Something´s going on here.“ Chad´s urgent whispers cut into him, more than any yelling would have done.

He shrugged, feeling more helpless than ever before.

„I – I don´t know, Chad. But I .... you think he´s serioulsy ill or something?“

Speaking out his fears somehow made them real. His hands started shaking so badly that Chad reached over and took the mug from him again.

„Hey.“ Jared wrapped his arms around himself, tucking his hands under his armpits. All of a sudden, he felt cold, too.

Chad gripped his shoulders, a firm, reassuring hold.

„We´ll find out, Jay. OK? We´ll find out what...if there´s something wrong.“

Jared closed his eyes for a moment.

„I´m not sure I want to know, Chad.“
Gerald

„We need this problem solved before the engagement, Sherri. Jared´s, I mean. By the time Jeff´s party is due, I want a ring on Jared´s finger, and this – this – abomination gone. “

Gerald looked at the photograph in his hands, his face a picture of disgust. His fingers gripped the material so hard it crinkled.

Sherri took it from him and put it back into one of the drawers in front of her.

Jared looks fantastic ... Misha´s guy knows how to use his equipment.

And the Irish boy´s so pretty.... shame he has to go. Such a face could make a ton of money. Or that ass....I know a few Senators who´d pay a fortune for meat like that....

„No need to get yourself in a state, darling. It´s already done. I talked to Misha.“

At his surprised face, she smiled, feeling extraordinarily smug.

„He´s on it already, Gerald. So – don´t waste any energy on the Irish trash any more. When does the exhibition opening start tonight?“

Her husband looked at her with that proud, appreciative spark in his eyes she craved.

„Seven thirty. Let me tell you one thing, Sherri...“

He came over, and bowed down to kiss her neck.

„You´re the best mother any of our kids could ever wish for.“

She smiled at him in the mirror.

„I know.“

Mack

When Mack heard the front door – finally – she dashed out of her room and down the stairs much like she´d done as a girl, eager to see her Dad, or big brothers come home. Of course, back then, her grandma would always meat her at the door, as she used to busy herself in the kitchen or read one of her beloved novels in the living room´s bay window.

Now, gran was merely a shadow of her old self, barely recognizing her family any more.

„Jenny?“

„Hey, Mack.“

His smile will always be the best moment of my day.
“Where’ve you been! I thought we were going to see Granny today!”

He put down his backbag.

“We can still go, can’t we? Is there ... are there any closing hours at the retirement home?”

“Pfff...not in a fancy home like that, no. But traffic will be a bitch now."

“I know. Took forever to get here.”

She followed him into the kitchen and watched him put the kettle on the stove.

“By the way, how did you get here? Don’t tell me you took the bus. Dad’ll kill me if he ever—“

“Jared drove me."

She stopped dead, surprised. Then she felt a big smile growing on her face.

“He did?”

Something in her voice made her brother turn around. For the first time, she got a good view of his face.

So many shadows.

She stepped closer to him without even noticing.

“Jen, are you OK?“

His smile seemed to fight away the darkness on his face.

“I’m good, Mack. Just a little tired. Let me have a cup of tea, and then we can leave, OK?“

She squinted at him, unconvinced, but he’d already turned back to the stove again, busying himself with a teabag and a huge mug.

“Jen, you....you’d tell me if something’s wrong, right?“

His hands stilled for an instant.

“I’d not lie to you, Mack."

But there was this tiny moment of hesitation that came before the words.

Jensen

Jensen stared at the brightly lit windows flying by the car’s window without taking in more than blurred lines of yellow and white.

The picture of his grandma, seated in a comfortable chair in the room she now inhabited in one of the pricey ‘retirement homes’, stuck to his mind, blocking out everything else.

She’s so tiny...so frail.
His grandmother had never been tall. On the contrary, he remembered growing taller than her at only 12 or 13 years old. But she’d always been ... impressive. A force to be considered: strongheaded, outspoken and tough as nails. She´d moved into the family´s house after their Mom had died, and had lived there until two years ago, when her dementia got too dangerous to leave her alone for more than ten minutes.

And again, you weren´t there...

He rubbed his front, and rested his head against the cool glass. The room had been overheated – his grandma had always hated wasting energy on heating - „put on another pair of socks and a sweater, young man“, he could still hear her stern voice – and smelled like artificial lemon scent.

Granny HATED artificial scents....

He remembered the dried blossoms that she used to keep in little bags of thin cloth – lavender mostly – and put into all of their cupboards and drawers. When they had oranges, she always rubbed the fruits before peeling them, and put them in a small bowl afterwards; the scent filled the kitchen and living room for hours.

Lavender and orange peels. That’s what she smelled like.

Now, there was lemon airspray, disinfectants, and old people scent.

He´d talked to her, talked about the jungle. Told her how sorry he was, even if Mack frowned and shook her head at him. She had listened, with a face so blank he could have been reading the telephone book to her for all he knew.

„She´s better sometimes.“

He felt Mack´s nervous gaze on himself. Damn, I drifted away again.

„There are good days, when she remembers things. When she....“

„When she recognizes us?“

He saw Mack bite her lower lip, a gesture well known from her childhood days.

„They are rare now, but they still occur.“

He stared out of the window again. The tiredness seeped back into his body, after the excitement of seeing one of the few people he´d loved and respected all of his life again.

But the person you knew, the one you loved...she´s gone.

He felt strangely betrayed.
Chapter 17

Jared

„Anything on your mind you want to share, Mr. Padalecki?“

Jared´s head jerked up.

_Dammit._

The professor´s cool eyes were already slightly annoyed.

_Did he ask me a question?_

„Sorry, Sir, uhm – no. I was, uhm, distracted.“

„It sure seems like it. Miss Miller, can you help Mr. Padalecki out?“

Zoe Miller shot him an apologetic glance before answering a question Jared clearly hadn´t even heard. He tried to focus, but Zoe´s voice seemed to fade into the background after two minutes already. His head filled with his own voice instead, asking, wondering, running in circles, giving answers he didn´t even want to hear, and soothing ones full of hope.

_How are you so gone for the guy. It´s almost creepy._

The thing that weirded Jared out most was the fact that yes, he did feel a sexual attraction towards Jensen – _how can anyone NOT fall on their knees in front of such beauty, or want to kiss those lips_ –, but that there was something much deeper, pulling, pushing, drawing him to Jensen, like a magnetic force he couldn´t avoid or withstand.

_I´m yearning for him. Like he was my best friend, and brother, and lover, all in one._

_Like he was completing me. The long missed other half, finally found._

It sounded cheesy, even inside his head. But it sounded true all the same.

_My soulmate._

Jensen

The room Jensen was led into by the too blonde, too smiling, too high-heeled secretary looked more like a recreational room at an exclusive Spa than an exam room for patients. He could see, and smell, money, and he also felt it when the secretary had him sit down in one of the comfy leather chairs. The material was soft, smooth, and probably cost a fortune.

„Dr. Milton will be with you in a minute, Mr. Ackles. Can I bring you some refreshment while you´re waiting?“
He declined and watched her leave. Taking his time to study the tasteful paintings on the walls – they seemed to be created by one artist, colorful and expressing a cheerful energy - his eyes finally fell on the more medicinal equipment at the back wall of the large room.

*The doctor at the hospital was right about one thing. This is a whole other league compared to what he has to deal with every day.*

He wondered how the overworked, underpaid doctor knew the obviously well situated specialist. *Maybe Dr. Milton teaches at university?*

He leant back into the soft leather. The morning had been good....no headaches, or almost none, no shivers. No fever at night. He´d had breakfast with Mack, and after eying him a little suspiciously, she seemed to believe his assertions that he was really feeling well. She´d told him more about their grandma, the years he´d missed, the pretty fast decline of her mental state.

„We kept her at home as long as possible, Jen, but ...“

She´d shrugged, looking helpless. He´d gone over to hug her then, needing the comfort of her scent and her body warmth as much as she did.

„I know“, he´d murmured. What else was there to say.

She´d left soon after, having classes all morning; he´d taken his time to look through some of the books he´d gotten for his courses and to make up for the lessons he´d missed because of his hospital stay.

„Ah, Mr. Ackles, I see Dolores has already shown you in.“

Jensen turned at the voice coming from the second door, and got up.

„I´m Dr. Zachariah Milton.“ Jensen shook the hand offered by the tall, balding man in his fifties. The doctor wore an expensive looking polo shirt over slacks – no white coat - and an impressive gold watch on his wrist.

*At least it´s not a Rolex.*

„Please. Lets´sit down first and go through the material I got from my colleague over at the hospital and the results of the exams I did on the blood samples my colleague kindly sent over.“

As soon as they sat, and the files were opened to rows of numbers, columns, diagrams and grafics, the doctor´s jovial tone was gone.

„At first sight, I thought we were dealing with the Chagas parasite. It would be a typical tropical disease in the countries you´ve travelled lately.“ Jensen watched the doctor´s hand on the sheets. It was a large hand, with long, thick fingers. The sigil ring seemed out of place on it.

„We can treat Chagas, even heal it, if the treatment occurs soon after the infection. Chagas effects the heart, the digestive system, finally all organs. Without treatment, it is fatal. The parasite kills its host.“ He looked up, almost apologetic. „I´m not sugar coating things for you, Mr. Ackles. I hope you are not appalled by that. But you are definitly suffering from a vicious form of parasite.“

Jensen wasn´t shocked. He was surprised about the direct approach he hadn´t expected from the doctor. He shook his head.

„I appreciate your honesty“, he said. „Don´t hold back. So – I understand you think it isn´t Chagas
after all?“

The doctor nodded, and looked back at the numbers on the sheets in front of him.

„A few things don´t add up. And even if it were Chagas.... how long have you been experiencing fevers and fits of uncontrollable shivering, Mr. Ackles?“

He frowned. The fevers had started soon after he´d settled down in the village.

„Four, almost five years?“

„Any other symptoms since then already? Arhythmic heartbeats, bowel aches, bloody stool? Fatigue?“

Jensen huffed. Bowel aches...yeah, they were a constant companion down there. Everyone had them.

„No bloody stool. The others...yes. But only for the last year I guess. Maybe two? Time was... it´s not like here.“

The doctor frowned, and nodded slowly.

„I will have to do more specific exams and take tissue samples of your organs, Mr. Ackles. But I´d nevertheless suggest we start treatment now. It´s already – we are already on the clock here. I suggest you check into my private clinic tonight or tomorrow morning so we can monitor your heart and get all the data we need to create the perfect treatment.“

„So –my heart is the main issue?“

„The parasite affects the ventricles of the heart. They enlarge, and it leads to heart failure in the end. Usually, this process takes years, though. In your case ... the parasite seems much more aggressive. Your heart, as far as I can tell, will barely be functional in only short time. It´s kind of a miracle you are still running around without much more problems.“

Jensen frowned. „So, my panic attacks lately....“

„They could easily be a combined symptom with your heart condition. It can be triggered by stressful situations of course. The symptoms would be similar to a severe panic attack. Arhythmies, lack of oxygen, dizzyness.“

Jensen stared at his hands.

„So – the treatment. Does it heal me, or just – procrastinate the inevitable?“

The doctor looked at him for a moment. His face was severe.

„I am afraid, as you seem to be hosting the parasite for quite some time now, and it is an especially aggressive form, that we are beyond healing. Even a heart transplant wouldn´t help...the parasite will take on the new heart, and the suppressants would weaken your immune system too much. You would be easy prey.“

Jensen nodded slowly.

„But – it would buy me some time? The treatment?“

„Absolutely. I need more data to be sure how much damage has already occured, but I´d say you
can have months ahead...maybe years. It depends. It seems the fits haven´t occured too regularly until now. There will be days you won´t feel anything out of place. Even after a violent shaking fit, you can have a perfectly normal day afterwards. The body is fighting as good as it can, on its own. Of course, it will get worse."

Jensen looked at the window. It was snowing again, or maybe it was just the wind whirling the powdery snow around between the buildings.

„You seem to take the news very calmly, Mr. Ackles. “

He glanced at the doctor.

*I am calm. Calmer than I´ve been for years.*

He smiled.

„I only need a little time, doctor. “

*Jared*

Jared was brooding. Chad had left, after trying to get him to come with him.

He stared at the open books on the low table. What he saw, though, were green eyes, almost closed, looking up at him between long lashes. He´d already memorized the pattern of freckles on the nose and cheeks.

*And the scent...Jensen´s scent. I’d recognize it already. Everywhere.*

When Jensen had woken up the day before, after only a half hour of sleep, he´d seemed good. Normal. No shivers. He´d wanted to leave, meet his sister and go see his grandma. Jared had tried to persuade him to stay, get more rest, but Mack had been right about the stubborness... Jensen had only smiled, and said he was perfectly fine.

*Fine. Jared huffed. He´s so far from fine I can´t even....*

He drove Jensen home anyway, getting him to talk about his grandma in the car. He really seemed better, smiling, even laughing when Jared added his own reminiscences of his Polish grandmother and her very much appreciated food orgies. At the end of the ride, Jensen had become quiet again though, lost in thought.

*There´s so many things I dont´know about him.*

When the doorbell rang, it ripped him out of his musings rather brutally.

*Has Chad forgotten something? Wouldn´t be the first time.*

*Dammit, I hope he didn´t bring guests to cheer me up and party.*

He shuffled over to the entrance hall, and opened the door, already looking for the right words to get rid of his friend.

„Chad, I told you I didn´t want t - “
He stopped right there, though. Jensen stood there, in a dark hoody under an old fashioned coat, shoulders hunched. He was incredibly pale.

Jared stared at him, momentarily out of speech. There was something in Jensen´s eyes that made him step forward, though, and reach for him.

„Jensen? What´s wrong?“

The green eyes hit him, *just like that first time.*

„Jared...“

---

*Jensen*

The scent was comfort. Pure, and warm. Jared.

*Why is this so easy....it´s never been like that. Not even with Matt.*

He buried his face in Jared´s neck. It was so good to have those long arms wrapped around him...he felt protected and safe, like as a little child, when his Mom would hold him, or even Dad, back then, or Uncle Jim.

*It´s selfish to come here. To take that comfort from Jared, when all you do is ... bring him down with you.*

He didn´t let go, though. Couldn´t.

---

*Jared*

Jared pressed his lips against the short hair, taking in the scent, the taste of the man who was hanging on to him as if it were ... for sheer life.

His fingers stroked through the short strands, *so soft,* while one hand just held on to Jensen´s arm, tightly wrapped around his back, a firm hold of comfort.

*What the hell happened?*

He, they, lost track of time, standing in the still open doorway, holding on to each other, until the spell was broken by some neighbor slamming his door shut and trampling down the stairs.

Jared moved them away from the door, then, closing it with a push. Jensen pulled away.

„I´m sorry. It ... I shouldn´t have come. I gotta go - “

Jared had Jensen´s face captured in his hands before the other man could turn around.

„Jensen“, he murmured, touching Jensen´s front with his. „Please. Stay.“ And before Jensen could even answer, or react properly, he bowed down and kissed him, just like outside in the cold, a soft
and gentle touch, reverential more than passionate.

And this time, Jensen surprised him by kissing back.

Alan felt restless. It wasn’t the fact that the doctor at the crappy hospital where they’d treated Jensen had downright refused to give him additional information on Jensen´s health – „Your son specifically asked for doctor/patient privacy here, Mr. Ackles, and as he´s an adult in full mental capacity I won´t break this confidence. I advise you to talk to your son if you want more detailed information.“

Confidence, my ass. Privacy. He huffed mirthlessly. Since when was that an impediment to getting exactly the data he wanted? Needed? Of course, Jensen was no fool. He’d allowed them to give out the ‘official´ files to his family, all the blah blah about his panic attacks, the head scans, even the concerned part about his weight, and his general weakened state.

But there was only a rudimental list of bloodwork results in the file, and Alan knew from Jim they ´d done a lot more tests than those numbers suggested.

So why on earth did Jensen feel the necessity to have them hidden from his family?

What let his blood pressure rise immediately, of course, was the fact that obviously, someone else had been more lucky. Jim was 100% sure that one of the nurses or lab technicians had been bribed, and frightened enough to keep their mouth shut.

They probably bribed all of them, just to be sure.

It wasn’t beyond his opponents. It was that knowledge which made him walk back and forth, back and forth again, from desk to window to wall to desk.

The match between the mob families had never been equal. He was well aware of that.

I blame you, Donna....

His wife had held him back, he knew that. She´d managed to keep a rest of humanity and kindness alive in him when the others went beyond any red line to win the tough competition. After she´d died – been killed – he´d not listened to her voice for a long time, although it was there, SHE was there all the time, reminding him of who he was meant to be.... „Not a killer, Alan. You’re not a murderer. You’re a Dad to your kids, and the love of my life. Don’t throw that away for some petty criminal or money.“

I’ve lost my way in the last years... Hell, ever since she was gone. Until Josh....

The doubts had grown. The questions had become louder, more urgent, annoying at night when he tossed around in his bed, sleepless.

He´d closed off this part of himself for a long time. Had been the cold, soulless mob boss to the part of the world who knew his real profession, and had played the ruthless, successful
businessman to the rest.

*And look where it’s gotten you...*

Deep down, he knew it was all his fault. Donna’s death, Josh’s death. *Even Jensen’s illness – if there is any. He only ran away because of you.*

He poured himself another drink.

*And look how that one worked out...you’re probably losing your second son because you felt obligated to an act of kindness. Because you were acting like a Dad, not a boss.*

It was too late to feel regret for that... he knew pretty well that even now, after so many years, he wouldn’t be able to look into his son’s eyes – those stunning, green eyes, always so full of emotions – and tell him the truth about Matt.

„*I love him, Dad. We love each other. Does this mean anything to you? Love? Commitment? Or is this Business all that runs through your veins?“*

Oh, Jensen could be venomous on the phone.

They’d been so... young. Sparkling with energy and love. Jensen looked so happy in the pictures... laughing more than Alan had seen him do for years, that shy grin coming back to his face, the one that had vanished after Donna’s accident.

*How could I tell him that Matt ... who Matt really was?*

*How could I destroy that one good thing he’d built down there in California, and crush his world completely...again?*

Alan downed the rest of his whisky, and went back to get a refill.

It had been the right decision. He still believed that. Even if it had cost him his son’s respect... maybe even his love....

*How could I anticipate that this would be the result... Jensen vanishing for years, and coming back, a shadow of his old self? Sick and pale and so thin...*

He considered drinking from the bottle, but filled his glass another time instead.

Should he have told him the truth? Devastate him?

*Better make him hate me for the rest of his life, than have his heart broken completely.*

*Garth*

„*Hello?“*

Garth rubbed his eyes. He’d fallen asleep, obviously, buried in books and scripts on his battered couch. The watch showed only seven thirty – *thank God, shift only starts in an hour!* - , but he felt disorientated and dizzy as if it was the middle of the night.
„Garth....“

He frowned. He knew the voice, but...

„An´thing new on Jensn?“

*What the hell –

„Mr. Ackles?“

He sat up straight. *Is he ... is the Boss DRUNK?*

Alan Ackles wasn´t drunk. Never. He was a cool, focused, scarilily determined boss to a huge company that, yes, had its shady sides; but he was as effective and set as any big business guy. Ruthless, yes. Brutal, if necessary. But drunk? DRUNK? Never.

„You still ´ere, son?“

„Uhm..yes, Mr, Ackles, I´m still here. Uhm...Sir, are you OK?“

The chuckle on the other end was creepy.

„Peachy...I´m peachy. I´ll lose them all, y´know? One by one, just gone...all o´them...“

*Great. The powerful, dangerous Alan Ackles is wallowing in self-pity.*

„Sir, I – I don´t have any news on Jensen. I met him in class yesterday, and we had coffee – I told you that. I mean, I sent you the information. We didn´t have contact today, our schedules aren´t that close...“

„U-Huh.“ It was more a grunt than a word.

Garth took all the bravery he could muster. „Is – has anything happened, Mr. Ackles? Is Jensen alright? Has there been another-“

*Dammit, shut your mouth, imbecille. Yesterday did never happen. Officially.*

„Everyone´s dying...“ The words were slurred. „Everyone´s leaving... even my sweet Mack will leave me...“

Garth was at a loss. He´d never seen Alan Ackles even slightly tipsy. He´d heard of deal celebrations, yes, of good Whisky crossing the ocean to be spilled at special events. But Alan Ackles never seemed to be one of those being brought home by their security guards, barely able to walk. He was ...above that.

At least, that was what Garth had believed until now.

*What can possibly make him loose his grip like that? Make him phone me, of all people???

Jensen´s sudden exit from the cafe... he looked like he was barely sitting upright, there in the tiny car...so pale, and so tired.

Guilt hit him. *I should have told Mr. Ackles...if Jensen is ill, I should have told him.*

„So he was fine, huh, yesserday...“
Jensen’s kisses had a desperation to them, hidden in the shy touches of his lips, and in the way his hands grabbed for Jared’s hair, his arms, his back, settled on his neck only to wander down his back again. Jared responded to the other man’s hands and lips, let his large hands roam the width of Jensen’s shoulders, down his spine, while his lips where searching, tasting, mapping out Jensen’s face and throat and neck. He couldn’t tell when their soft, comforting embrace had turned into this desperate, hungry make-out, it had just happened, fuelled by emotions both of them had suppressed for too long: anger, pain, guilt. *Longing... so much longing.*

At some point, Jared’s hands worked through all the layers of Jensen’s clothes, searching for more skin, more contact; and when his palms went up the other man’s sides and chest, felt the hipbones over low hanging jeans, the ribs, finally the nipples, little hard nubs, Jensen moaned in a way that made Jared go dizzy for a moment. Jensen broke the contact of their lips, then, stumbling back against the wall, pulled Jared with him, hands on his sides. His eyes were huge.

*Dark green like the forest on a rainy day.*

Jensen’s lips moved, quivered, tried to form words through the insecurity Jared could read in his face. He pulled his hands out under the shirt, sweater, hoodie and coat, and took Jensen’s face into his warm palms.

„What is it, Jensen“, he whispered, nose almost touching the other man’s.

Jensen closed his eyes for a moment, and Jared couldn’t believe how beautiful he was like that, cheeks finally flushed, the long lashes a delicate web of shadows on his otherwise pale skin. And there they were, those freckles he’d been fantasizing about, had dreamt of, perfect patterns that asked to be traced with fingers and lips. He bowed down, pulled forward by a longing that had built over two weeks only, but seemed so much older. His lips ghosted over the cinnamon colored speckles, trailed over the bridge of Jensen’s nose, his cheekbones, until the other man’s hands stopped him.

„Jared...“ A rough wisper only.

He smiled down into the green eyes that seemed more confident now.
„Yes...“

„Make love to me, Jared.“

They took it slow from there. Pulling off layer after layer, while wandering over to Jared´s almost dark bedroom, until they were standing in front of the bed, in their jeans only, finding their way over skin with their hands and lips only. Jared finally broke contact to switch on the nightstand´s lamp´s soft light. When he turned back to Jensen, all golden skin, looking so fragile it hurt, he felt a wave of a warmth run trough his body like nothing he´d ever felt before. It was a mix of emotions, all thrown together, the need to protect, to hold, to touch, the promise of shared laughs and tears, fun and pain, of a future that suddenly wasn´t thinkable anymore without the man standing in front of him, a little lost, but with eyes that reflected Jared´s own feelings.

Is that what love feels like?

He took the two steps over to the half naked man who looked at him ... the way he´d always wanted to be looked at, without knowing, full of trust and vulnerability, insecurity and determination, sadness and joy.... like he was ready to share all of it, every single experience that had formed him, the good and the bad, everything that was his life. and with a sudden clarity Jared understood that it was a gift, the most generous of all, and that the fact of having it offered to him was enough...he didn´t need to unwrap it and explore it to the bottom.

He took Jensen into his arms, trying to reveal through the movements of his hands, in the way his lips worshipped the other man´s body, that he knew, understood...and accepted.

At some point, he pushed Jensen unto the king sized bed, crawling onto the matrass right after him, just continuing to kiss and touch, his never resting fingers finding every ridge and valley, every scar and soft spot and rough patch on the wonderful, unknown landscape of skin, muscle and bones splayed out in front of him.

Jensen´s soft sighs and suppressed moans were almost more encouragement than Jared could muster, and together with the taste, the scent of the man giving himself so trustfully, it made him feel lightheaded, all senses screaming at him, overly alert, Jensen, and he knew no one else would ever make his senses focus like that again, zoomed in on one person, and one person alone.

He ended up lying between Jensen´s still jeans-clad legs, leaning on his lower arms, looking down into the face he never seemed to grow tired observing.

All those emotions ... Jensen´s face had gone from shut down and guarded to an open book in no time....one more gift he gave without being asked.

Jensen gazed up at him with those huge eyes, a smile in them, lips parted, and with his mussed up hair and rosy cheeks he looked so adorable Jared was unable to form any thought beyond Jensen Jensen Jensen.

Then, Jensen arched his hips up against Jared´s groin, in a deliberately slow motion, dragging his sharp hipbone against the already considerably huge bulk in Jared´s trousers; and Jared stopped thinking at all. The rough fabric of their jeans created the most sweetly painful friction Jared had ever felt so far, so filled with teasing promise and desirable torture it made Jared shudder with pleasure and anticipation.
He knelt up, only to bend down and once more let his lips wander over the delicious skin of the man spread out under him; and this time, he didn´t stop at the jeans´ belt, but nibbled at the waistband, before finally fumbling with the button until he´d managed to open it.

He glanced up at Jensen and caught him biting his lower lip in a way it made Jared´s skin tingle; he was asking for permission to go on, raising his eyebrows, and Jensen gave it by simply using his own hands to shove the jeans down over his narrow hips, helped by Jared who pulled them off his legs entirely.

Jensen´s darkened eyes were on Jared, he blinked once, twice, slowly, like a man in trance, and then his hands wandered down once more, and he tore his pants down as well, eyes never leaving Jared´s, until Jared had to break the contact cause he had to look, had to see... Jensen´s freed cock, thick and blunt, had already filled, and sprang up as soon as the pants´ confines were gone; Jared felt a smile form on his face, because of course, it was as beautiful as the rest of the man, and he bent down to leave a trail of reverent kisses along its length; the sounds coming from Jensen made him look up, an almost mewling whine, conveying tension and relief all at once, the noise a man starving for water might make when finding a fresh, cold fountain. When he finally touched the smooth tip, tasted the delicious silkyness of the soft skin, a shudder ran through Jensen´s body, and it made Jared shiver, too, the mutual pleasure running as deep as the shared emotion behind it. This was more than just sex, more than lust, and bodies reacting to each other´s touches. It was...

_Belonging._

---

He was skin. He was hands. He was lips.

He was taste, and scent, sound and textures, a million different impressions at the same time.

_I am me, and I am him._

_One._

_Jensen_

He felt the tears before they even formed, a burning, prickling sensation at the corners of his eyes, finally released into wet trails running down his temple, dripping off the bridge of his nose.

The room was still lit by Jared´s nightstand lamp only, a warm glow softening the edges and shadows in the messy room. Jensen listened to the soft breathing, his own mixing with Jared´s, the contact of their bodies intensifying with each slight rise of his back.

_Warmth._

Not just Jared´s skin, this unique feeling only another human body could give you... his scent, and the way his hair tickled his neck, the sounds the little puffs of air made when they hit Jensen´s back, warm and humid and just... _perfect._

Jared´s arm was wrapped around Jensen´s waist, a heavy, firm safety belt keeping them locked
together, their fingers still entwined, the way they’d finally fallen asleep after...

_Jesus, I’d forgotten how good it felt.... it’s been so long since Matt._

For some reason, it had been different. Without the carefree, joyful levity that had defined sex between Matt and him. With Jared, it was...

_Slower. Deeper. A promise.... a vow._

Intense heat burning down to his bones, his very core ...melting him away until there was nothing left of him. And still, he felt like himself again for the first time in years.

_WHole._
Chapter 18

Chad

Maybe it was the freaking polar air, maybe the news swirling around in his head, but when he climbed out of the late night taxi in front of their students´ apartment building, Chad felt sobered up in a way, no one would have guessed he´d been on the best way to being piss drunk only an hour or two before.

There´d been a decently crazy party going on at the club they´d been headed to, students looking for a bit of relief from the stress that was inevitably building as the teachers constantly loaded them with work. He´d enjoyed himself, needing the break mostly because of all the crap that was going on with Jared´s family; and to forget, for a moment at least, that he´d been betraying his best friend´s trust for so many years, it was, probably, unforgivable ... even if he´d done it for the best of reasons.

He´d never really questioned Sherri´s motives, or her methods, since the day when she´d called him from Jared´s hospital bed, asking him to practically spy on her son „for his own sake and safety“. Jared still was alive and well, wasn´t that proof enough that he´d done the right thing?

It had been an easy decision, really. Jared was his best friend, and you took care of your best friends any way you could, even a little shady ways involving over-protective mothers. Even if you knew all along they wouldn´t approve...if they were aware.

Now, things seemed to become more complicated by the hour.

Sherri´d gone from Hoover-Mom to Paranoid Control Freak Parent lately – or maybe she´d always been like that, and he´d been too dumb to notice; and Chad had been a little freaked out after her last call.

You´re scared of her, man. Admit it.

True. He was scared. Of Sherri and her crazy ideas about what was best for her kids – they themselves didn´t really have a say in it, as far as Chad could tell. Of Jared´s Dad, a seemingly jovial enough guy who could switch from friendly old buddy-mode to hardcore, ice cold businessman within a second. And most of all, of the creepy blue eyed guy he´d met...well, not really met, but seen, for the first time a few months ago, at a weekend during Christmas Break he´d spent at Jared´s home, and they´d been invited to a party by those crazy Russians the Padaleckis obviously were well acquainted with – people who gave Chad the chills, and not the pleasant sort.

When he´d found out who the sexy chick Jared had been dancing with for a while was, he´d almost shitted his pants.


He´d known, with a certainty he rarely felt, that it would mean trouble in the future.

Well, trouble has found us, sure enough.
Jared reached the steaming mug over to Jensen, getting a grateful smile in return. They’d both fallen asleep, after what Chad probably would have called „the first round“, and Jared had woken up later, rather stunned, feeling Jensen´s warm lips on his re-awakened cock. It led, in Chad-talk, to a sweaty round two, prolonged into and ending in the shower; exhausted, they’d fallen into Jared´s bed again, and after Jensen had sent a text message to his sister telling her he wouldn´t come home (getting a text back that made him blush and mutter under his breath in the most adorable way), they´d slept well into the night, huddled up together under the covers, legs and arms entwined, Jensen nuzzling at Jared´s neck, just below his ear.

The third round was painstakingly slow, wonderfully easy, and the most delicious of all.

*We already feel familiar to each other, bodies and scent and movements imprinted on our minds, skin and muscles, flooding all senses...body memory focused on each other...*

It was almost 4am when Jensen stirred, mumbling things in a language Jared didn´t recognize - if it was a language at all – and by the time Jared was fully awake, he was thrashing around, crying, hands warding off something only Jensen could see, or maybe he was trying to hold on to something, Jared wasn´t sure.

He´d pulled the other man close to his chest, enveloping him in his long arms, murmuring soothing words of comfort, and Jensen had finally calmed down enough that Jared dared waking him up fully.

They´d lain there for a long time, wrapped up in each other, Jared absentmindedly stroking Jensen´s hair. He felt the tickle of the other man´s long lashes on his bare chest each time he opened or closed his eyes. It was oddly comforting.

*I could stay like this forever. Just us. No family, no outside world at all.*

But at some point, Jensen had sat up, tiredly rubbing his eyes, and gone to the bathroom; Jared had crawled out of bed, too, a little sore – *hell yes, and in the best of ways* – and had shuffled into the kitchen to make coffee.

Jensen had joined him, and was now sitting on the sofa, with an adorable bedhead and a totally crumpled t-shirt he´d put on inside out. The cushion´s impressions on his right cheek were still visible, and he looked so unusually messy and young Jared couldn´t help but to put his own cup down and slip onto the couch at his side, pecking a kiss at his cheek.

Jensen blushed. Vividly.

*Could he get more adorable?*

Jensen took a few sips of his coffee, then put the mug on the table, and leant against Jared´s shoulder. He rubbed the hem of his shirt between two fingers. Jared could feel he was building up the courage to say something, and waited, fingers carding through the short hair...something that was fast becoming one of his favorite things to do with his hands.

„Jared....“

„U-huh?“
Jensen sat up with a sigh. He stared at his hands for a moment, then he looked right into Jared’s eyes. In the warm kitchen counter lights, his green eyes had a golden hue to them.

„I need your help. With something... big.“

Jared sat up too, pulling his left leg up so he could fully face Jensen.

„OK?“

Jensen stared at him, a slight frown between his eyes, before a hesitant smile wiped it away.

„I ask you for help and you just say OK? Without even knowing what I´m asking for?“

Jared smiled back, shrugging his shoulders.

„It´s you who´s asking.“

„And that´s enough?“

„Yeah.“

Jensen´s eyes were searching his, he could tell, for signs of irony, or mocking. Jared took the other man´s hands in his, trying to sound as serious and reassuring as possible.

„Just tell me what it is, Jensen. If I can help, I will.“

Jensen looked at their intertwined fingers before meeting Jared´s eyes again.

„I want to save my sister. Get her out. And then I want to bring the Family Business down. All of it. “

Jared stared into the green, unblinking eyes.

*Jesus f* Christ. He´s serious.

„Are you – I – you mean – the Business, that´s – you mean your father?“

„Yes.“

„With...everything? Everyone?“


„It´s the only way to make them...him... stop“, he said, croaking voice reduced to a whisper.

Jared frowned. „But...there will be others. Other people, other Families... we won´t be able to – you know. Erase all Evil? You cut off one head, another one grows...something like that?“

Jensen huffed. „I know.... believe me, I know. But it won´t be MY family´s head. It won´t be MY family doing...committing crimes. It won´t be my family falling victim to an invisible war any more. What´s left of my family, anyway.“ Jensen´s fingers wandered up and down in between
Jared’s, a light caress, strangely intimate.

„Mack...“, Jared mumbled.

„Yes.“

„And yourself.“

At that, Jensen looked up. „Me?“ The surprise in his voice was genuine. Jared felt a pang of pain somewhere inside his chest.

*He didn’t even think about it.*

„Yeah, I ... maybe.“

Jared tugged at the other man’s hands, lifted them up, and planted a kiss on the knuckles. *There’s freckles even there. I’ll never get tired of finding new ones. Touching them. Kissing invisible lines in between them...*

„Jensen. I’ll help you. Of course I will. Heck, I’ve no idea if I even can... but there’s one condition.“

„Ok?“ He sounded hesitant.

„You have to include yourself in the rescuing, Jensen. I won’t be part of a suicide mission or ... whatever. If we do this ...we make sure your sister gets out. AND we make sure both of us make it out alive.“

Jensen’s face was unreadable. Jared bowed forward, Jensen’s hands still caught in his own.

„I just found you Jensen. I don’t wanna lose you again. Not now, not...ever.“

They came to lean against each others’ fronts, just like outside in the snow.

Jensen sighed, a puff of warm, coffee scented breath against Jared’s face.

„OK.“

Jared sat up again, not without kissing the top of Jensens’s head first.

„So...what’s the plan?“

Jensen blushed a little. „I uhm... I know someone at the FBI. From back when Matt... when he died. He told me to contact him whenever I...whenever I had something to tell.“

„The FBI? You want to... Jesus, Jensen. They’ll need tons of incriminating material and iron-clad proof and – inside men? Undercover investigators?“

„They already have.“

Jensen’s voice was even scratchier than before.

„What? The FBI is investigating your father? Since when?“ He sounded too ... shocked?

Jensen pulled back his hands, and sat up. The guarded expression crept back over his face.
“A few years already.” Jared waited, but Jensen didn’t elaborate.

“Did you...“

“Yes.“

Jensen’s eyes sought his, challenging him. But Jared could read more in them... defiance. Hurt. Guilt.... always the guilt.

“Wow.“ It wasn’t the most intelligent comment, he was well aware of that. He could feel Jensen bristle, saw him frown, and raised his hands in a soothing gesture.

“Hey, man, I’m not judging you. I... actually, I envy you. It needs a lot of courage to go against one ´s own family...believe me, I know. Cause I sure don’t have it. Heck, I have probably even more reason to fight them than you, and I... I just don’t. Didn’t.

Didn’t have it in me until now. I just... couldn’t.“

He saw Jensen’s face soften again. It was his turn to feel strong hands on his face.

“Hey...“

Jared was still surprised by the roughness of Jensen’s hands. *He looks like someone with soft, smooth fingertips...someone who’s used to turning pages in books, or tap away on a computer keyboard. Not a working man’s hands, full of calluses, the nails partly bitten down.* He wondered what Jensen’s days in the jungle had looked like. What kind of work had given him those signs of hard labour.

*How was he able to do hard bodily work being so skinny? He looks so fragile... yet he’d seen, and felt, Jensen’s body, and as skinny as he was, it was the lean body of a marathon runner. All bones and muscle. A little too much on the bones side, maybe.*

The fingertips followed the lines of his face, traced his eyebrows, stopped at the dimples, wandered down to his lips, pleasantly rough on the soft skin. Jared had closed his eyes, enjoying the feather light touches, the care behind them. The worship.

It hit him then, with force, that no one had touched him like that until that moment. *Not with such tenderness. Such longing beyond sexual attraction.*

Jared hadn’t been a hermite, much less a virgin; he’d liked his sex rough, powerful, and his ever changing partners had better be flexible, what with all the pretty advanced gymnastics he was used to in bed.

There had been rough sex with Jensen, sweaty, an almost desperate pounding and thrusting and grabbing, just this side of painful....but there had been a totally different kind, too: slow and careful and revelling in each other’s tiny movements and noises and reactions.

For the first time, Jared understood what *making love to someone* meant.

He felt tears prickle against his still closed eyes, but opened them nevertheless, because suddenly he needed to see Jensen´s eyes, needed to find something in them to mirror his own battling feelings.

And he saw it.
Confusion. Sadness. Fear.

Love.
Chad

Chad stumbled up the two flights of stairs. Sobered up or not, he´d had his share of alcohol, and it didn´t make his movements any more elegant. Plus, it was five in the morning, and he wasn´t the most coordinated morning person in general. No sleep and a lot of bad ass dancing had taken their toll, and he started to feel it in his legs.... and head.

The prospect of having to talk to Jared, to tell him about what he´d found out, wasn´t making things easier. Much more so, he knew the time had come to reveal his own role in the Padalecki Family Secret Service ... if not today – he didn´t really feel up to it at the moment – then soon.

He´d seen lights on in Jared´s bedroom, and the living room too; but it had only been the soft glow of one of the bedside lamps, something not unusual for Jared: If at home at all, he tended to fall asleep half buried in books, or with his open laptop on his stomach.

He opened the door as quietly as he was able to, got rid of his boots, and shuffled the few steps into the kitchen/living room through the semi-dark entrance `hall´, almost falling over stuff strewn on the floor.

„Whatthefuck!“ Jared wasn´t exactly a tidy person, but usually his bags and clothes made it into his own room to be discarded on the floor there.

Clothes...a jacket.

He caught himself at the doorframe, freezing at the sight.

Two faces turned towards him, surprised enough expressions on them it was clear they hadn´t heard him entering the flat.

He squinted at the two men on the leather couch. They´d been holding each other again, like yesterday, hands cupping each others´ cheeks, fronts touching, eyes closed. It was an intimate, peaceful gesture, and it gave Chad´s heart a little twinge.

That´s not sex or a crush or a flinge. It´s way deeper than that.

He tried not to think the L-word, and failed.

„Chad? What are you doing here?“

Jared had finally found his voice again. Chad noticed how Jensen had immediately let go of him, sitting up straighter, putting a little distance in between him and Jared, if only by the way he held himself.

Chad shrugged nonchalantly. „Party sucked."

Jared looked incredulous. „And since when does this make you leave early? You always end up the last guest, passed out on some pool table, no matter how sucky a party might be."

Chad rolled his eyes. „Well, guess there´s a first for everything. Believe me, you´d have run too."

He followed Jared´s hand with his eyes, saw it wandering over to Jensen´s, and the way he looked
at the other man, questioningly, asking for permission. After a moment of hesitaton, Jensen entwined his hand with Jared’s again. Chad saw his face soften into an almost-smile. Jared seemed to relax immediately.

„What do you mean? Has something happened?“ Chad´s head jerked back to Jared´s face. „What? Uhm ...well. Not really. I mean...“ He threw an uncomfortable glance towards Jensen. „I, uhm... Jay, we gotta talk.“ His eyes darted to Jensen again.

Jensen got the hint before Jared understood, and started to pull away from the other man, trying to get up. „I, uhm...I’ll call a cab. Thanks for – for everything, Jared. I -“

„Hey."

Jared didn´t let go of Jensen´s hand, holding him in place halfway between sitting and standing. He tugged at it, shaking his head slightly, until Jensen sat down again, a doubtful expression on his face. „Jensen, please – wait.“ He turned to Chad, who was staring at his almost life-long friend in fascination. It was a different Jared he got to watch right now, one he hadn´t seen so far, maybe only glimpses whenever Jared´s sister was home: caring and gentle and with a warm voice full of admiration.

„What do you wanna talk about, Chad? If it´s my family...Jensen already knows what business we are in, so...“

Chad rubbed his front, still leaning against the doorframe. He felt reluctant to really enter the room... make the decision to drop the bomb.

„It´s more...personal. But, yeah, family is the general theme.“

„Even more reason to have Jensen hear it too, then.“

„Jared...“, Jensen murmured. Chad watched his friend turn back to his...boyfriend?, and touch his face with a tender gesture.

„I want you to be part of my life, Jensen. All of it. And I think you already know a great part of it – or a similar version at least, through personal experience.“ Something seemed to pass his mind, though. He winced, looking up at Chad.

„You think the news would put Jensen in danger somehow?“

Chad finally decided to cross the room, and fell into the extra chair , leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

„No, I ... I don´t think so. I mean...I don´t know. With your families, it´s...“

„Complicated.“ Jensen´s voice was as dry as desert ground.

„Yeah“, Chad huffed. He felt the other men´s eyes on him, and cleared his throat.

„Well, then – just tell us, OK? Let´s get it over with.“

Chad raised his hands in a helpless gesture, and let them fall down heavily again.

Showtime.

„So, uhm...at the party, there was this guy...Andy. You know, Peace and Love and Weed-for-all-Andy? The one with the hippie ride? We, uhm, we... got some stuff from him after Finals last
Jared nodded, a crease between his eyes. Jensen just listened, fingers playing with Jared’s hand in his lap.

„Andy with the painted van, yes. I remember him. Wasn´t he studying psychology or something?“

Chad shrugged his shoulders. „No idea, man, but it´d fit. He´s all crazy talk, you know? But the thing is..he knows people. A lot, actually, from when he used to give away weed.“

„He doesn´t anymore?“

Chad huffed. „Actually, I asked him for some relaxant, what with exams coming up and all, and he told me he didn´t do it anymore. ´Only for myself, buddie....got a pretty scary visit from a few guys who told me to leave the market or I´d be history.´ That´s what he said.“

„He was threatened? By...professional dealers?“

„Go figure.“ Jensen again, his voice a sandpaper growl.

Chad shot him a nervous glance. „Yeah....well, the thing is, Andy has changed his line of work. He is now doing psychic sessions or whatever. Says he has the Third Eye or some bullshit like that. He says at least he can charge people legally for it, without a moral dilemma.“

„Andy got morals? Who´d have thought.“

Chad shrugged again. „He´s an OK guy, I guess. So-,“

„It´s not bullshit.“

Chad´s and Jared´s heads jerked in Jensen´s direction in unison. „What?“

Jensen stared at his knees. „Not everything we don´t understand is bullshit.“

The other two men waited for him to go on, but he seemed reluctant to elaborate. Jared raised his eyebrows. „Jen? What do you mean?“

Wow, so now they are already using nicknames... there is some damn crazy fast relationship building going on here.

Jensen seemed surprised at the abbreviation, too, but he caught himself fast enough. „It´s... I had some pretty weird experiences down where I... in the jungle.“

„Like what?“

Jensen seemed uncomfortable. His face closed off visibly.

He´s got shutters to pull down. Nice protective system.

„The people I stayed with...they had those... rituals. And I had... dreams. Visions.“ Jensen closed his eyes, obviously done explaining. Chad shot Jared a glance, but his friend was focused on the man at his side, a concerned frown on his face. After a moment, he turned to Chad, though.

„Ok, so....Andy is doing psychic sessions.“

„Uhm...yeah. And he told me you can learn a lot about people that way. He told me a lot of stuff,
but, uhm, we were both pretty wasted already, so I don´t remember half of it. Most of the girls had already left, at least the hot ones, otherwise I wouldn´t even have been talking to him. Turns out it was pretty, uhm, enlightening though."

He cleared his throat. Jared glanced at him, eyes narrowed, and even Jensen had opened his eyes again. He took a deep breath.

„So, Andy had this `session´ or whatever with a group of girls, from the Russian part of town. They ´d booked him for some kind of private bachelor party. He said they were all super nervous, and he got the impression they, uhm...they tried to hide the whole thing, like they didn´t want anyone to know about it. Well, he said he got them to relax, after a while – guess we know how, right? – anyway, they put the future bride there, a hot chick with a fancy Brit accent, he said, but she spoke Russian to her friends, too."

He saw Jared sit up straighter, interest peaked. „Oh, but that could be...“

„Bella. Yes. It was her, the way he described her, I was damn sure immediately.“

„Ah.“ Jared turned to Jensen. „I...We met Bella at a Christmas party a few months ago. I, uhm...we danced. She´s...“ he was looking for words.

„A spoiled Russian princess with doubtful morals and a scary bodyguard.“, Chad huffed.

„Bodyguard?“

Chad stared at his friend. „What, you didn´t notice the blue-eyed guy hanging around the party? The one who stared at everyone with this weird expression on his face, like we were a different species or something? Man, the guy creeped me out, and he didn´t even DO anything."

Jared frowned, but shook his head after a moment. „No, I... I can´t remember him."

„Guess you were too wrapped up in Bella´s – I mean“, Chad swallowed down the rest of the sentence at the last moment. „You were dancing most of the time, you´ll have missed him.“ He saw a faint blush on Jared´s cheeks, the apologetic glance he shot Jensen. He got a smile in response, and a murmured, „We both aren´t virgins, Jay, I guess we established that earlier.“ To which Jared´s cheeks took on a deep purple color Chad had rarely seen on his friend. He grinned, and went on.

„Yeah, so... Andy says they want him to do a `reading´ or whatever on the bride and her future husband´s fate, but they can´t tell him the poor sods name, but give him a picture instead. And when he looked at it, he was like, `No freaking way!´- his words.“ Chad fumbled in the breast pocket of his jacket, and pulled out a slighlty crumpled photo. Putting it on the table, he added „He said he remembered we´d come to him together a few times, and seeing us around campus together, and at parties. He wanted to know how the Hell my friend caught himself a Russian princess. And if you knew what you were doing. Obviously, the `reading´ didn´t go too well. He... he wouldn´t elaborate. He seemed a little freaked out, to be honest."

Jared had taken up the picture, and was staring at it. All color had drained from his face. Jensen sat up and leaned over to get a look at it, too. Chad saw the surprise on his face, the following confusion, a hint of anger.

And pain. Shit. I knew it wasn´t right to have him here. Dammit, it was me who took that picture of the two lovebirds, with Bella´s cellphone.

„Jared?“ Jensen´s voice was almost voiceless gravel. Calm, but with underlying emotion, and at
the same time weighed down by a tiredness mirrored in his features.

„Jensen, I – I have no idea what´s going on here.“ Jared turned to the other man, his eyes pleading.
„Please, you have to believe me. I – dammit, I – What´s going on? This can only be a joke, right?“
His helpless gaze found Chad´s. „Chad, please – do you have any idea why they would – this can´t be real, right? They are playing a joke on me or something, right?“ He must have seen something in Chad´s face that made him stop.

„Chad?“

*Here we go.*

He sighed heavily, and straightened his shoulders. *Ready for self-destruction.*

„Your Mom called me, Jay. Yesterday.“

„My Mom? Called you?“ Jared´s voice was pure confusion. „Why would she do that?“

Chad felt Jensen´s narrowed eyes on him, a piercing gaze, unsettling.

„She, uhm...she does that, from time to time. Just to, you know, check in on you. Us.“ He knew his cheeks were burning, even if his hands felt cold all of a sudden.

„Anyway, she told me...she said I should keep the weekend from next free, because there would be an important family celebration of some sort, and you´d want me to be there at any cost. And I should get my tux cleaned.“

Jared paled. His handsome features seemed frozen into a mask, skin too tight and lips pressed together, but still a hint of incredulity in his eyes.

„They said...“, he murmured, slowly, as if the words had to fight their way out through disbelief. „They told me there´d be an important reunion with one of the Families that weekend. A milestone for our family... that it was crucial everyone was there.“ He looked at Chad, then down to the picture in his hand. „Mom was adamant that I be present. She said my future depended on it.“ He huffed, mirthlessly. His voice had a bitter tone when he went on.

„Of course, she forgot to mention it was my own fucking wedding I shouldn´t miss.“

Chad felt more helpless than ever. This wasn´t one of their usual messes. This was The Freaking Atomic Blast kind of mess, and he had no idea how to avoid it to have his friend blown to pieces.

*We clearly underestimated the Padaleckis.*

Jared buried his head in his hands, fingers digging into his scalp.

„We can´t be sure about it yet, Jay. Maybe it was...“

Jared jerked up and glared at him, eyes wild. „What else could it mean Chad? Bella carrying our picture around at bachelorette parties just for fun? My Mom inviting the Russians into our house, the Russians, for God´s sake, with Bella´s creepy father who´s probably had more people killed than The Godfather!“ He pressed his heels against his eyes. It looked painful.

Chad had no response, no solution, not even words of comfort. He glanced over at Jensen, looking for help. The other man had gone eerily still during the last minutes, eyes on Jared.

„Jay...“ The voice was low, soft. Jared reacted to it immediately, though, face turning to Jensen as
if he was his only source of energy.

Jensen reached out to him, touched his face, finally cupped his cheeks with both hands.

„Jay... they can´t make you do that.“ The voice was still soft, but with a firmness beneath, something that seemed to calm Jared down a little, if only to bring back the bitterness.

„Oh hell, they can. You don´t understand, Jensen... this is the Russian mob boss we are talking about, and his precious daughter. If they arranged us to get married, then – it means our Families are bound together, profiting from each other´s ....businesses.“

He shook his head.

„They´d rather see me dead than ruin that arrangement.“

Jensen´s thumbs stroked over the other man´s cheekbones.

„Then we´ll have to die, I guess.“

Jared´s face fell, an almost comical change, had the topic not been such a serious one. They both stared at Jensen.

„What?“

Jensen pulled his hands back, wrapping his arms around his body, as if seeking hold, assurance. A determined expression replaced the softness of a moment before, and Chad suddenly got the impression a stubborn, if not steely, mind hid behind the quiet, almost too pretty surface. It belied the fragile body, the girlish lashes.

It´s way too easy to underestimate him. Guess that´s what he´s gotten from others all his life though.

„It´s the only way to get away from them, Jared. Think about it... with what I´m going to do... and the fact alone that we´re together, against our families - we don´t stand a chance. None of us separately, much less together.“

Jared frowned at him, confusion battling with pain on his face.

„But, Jensen... what are you saying? You just promised me you´d not go on a suicide mission, and now – what, we do the Thelma and Louise ending? Bonny and Clyde?“

Jensen huffed, and reached out to grab Jared´s hands again.

„More like, Romeo and Juliet. Without the tragic ending.“

Jared´s eyes grew wide.

Chad had followed their interaction, the small touches and facial expressions, fascinated by the way they responded to one another, like a couple with years of intimacy in between them.

„Are you serious? You want to fake both your deaths?“, he asked.

Jensen nodded, not breaking eye contact with Jared.

„But – man, how do you wanna pull a stunt like that? And against a bunch of...of professionals, if you know what I mean – I mean, they won´t be conned easily.“
„I know.“

Jensen still stared at Jared, searching for something, some reaction beyond the thunderstruck expression that had frozen on Jared’s face.

„I know it sounds crazy“ - Chad huffed at that, *yeah, buddie, you might say that* – „But think about it. Look at the story like this: Jared and I somehow get wind of the planned wedding. We decide to make a run for it, race out of town, our car tragically sverves in a slippery curve, we crash into a truck loaded with something highly inflammable, we both die in the accident. The car burns out completely, `our´ bodies are reduced to charcoal, unrecognizable even for a dna-test. Or dental recognition.“

Chad nodded slowly. „And meanwhile, the two of you...“

„We let ourselves be transferred into a witness protection program by the FBI. I ...uhm... I already talked to the agent years ago. He said it wouldn´t be a problem.“

Chad whistled lowly.

„I gotta say, it sounds doable. Provided you can arrange for the accident to look realistic, and have two bodies approximately your size and age at hand.“

„That won´t be a problem.“

Jared seemed to wake up from his trance at that. „What?” His voice sounded unusually squeaky.

*For the son of one of the more ruthless mob families, he’s such a baby...*

Jensen blushed a little, but shrugged. „I know someone who works at a morgue. Through the FBI. She knows what I need ... well, I guess I’ll have to give her your data too, now.“

Chad could literally see the change in Jared’s eyes while he kept staring at Jensen.

*Guess he’s just had a revelation. There’s more behind that pretty face than one would expect.*

Jensen seemed to wait for some kind of answer, and finally, Jared shook his head slightly.

„What about... I mean, if we disappear, together, what happens to our siblings? To Chad? Won´t there be... won´t The War turn into one crazy bloodbath?“

His gaze flicked back and forth between Jensen and Chad. „I don´t wanna put any of them in danger, Jensen.“

Jensen rubbed his front. „I know.“ He looked up at Chad. „If we just ran, or disappeared into thin air...yeah, that would definitely be a problem. But.... look, if we die? Shouldn´t that keep them from going at each other´s throats?“

Chad huffed. „You´re an optimist. They don´t need any real reason to do that...“

He turned to Jared. „What we don´t know is...how will the Russians react to the news that you had a lover ...and a male one, too? Aren´t they kind of...“

„Homophobic? Yeah, definitely. At least, Andrej is. Bella´s father.“ He ran his hand through his hair, completely messing it up.

„I’ll have to talk to Bella.“
Chad saw Jensen´s eyes narrow, and Jared´s immediate reaction to it: Reaching out to the other man, in a soothing, apologetic gesture. „She knows, Jen. That I´m gay. We had fun, that evening, but... I dunno, she just guessed it, and called me on it right away. I ... we have to tell her about the plan, that´s our only chance to pull this through.“

Chad watched his friend, surprised by the way he seemed to change with the decision.

**Finally, he stands up for himself...or tries, at least.**

Chad hadn´t really been at odds with his friend´s parents and their family policies, until recently, that is. He´d seen the strain it put on Jared to keep up appearances increase, though; his ´take the fun where you can get it´-attitude had seemed more and more forced, as if he were clinging to a fake version of himself that was a facade at best. Chad might have been the entertaining party animal to most of the people who knew him; but he had a rarely shown protective, caring side to him, and Jared was definitely one of the few people who knew that part of him (and was, willingly or not, its recipient). Now, those sides were clearly struggling inside him ... do I rather put him in danger by helping him get away from a life he doesn´t want, much less deserve; risk his life, his actual life, by trying to make happiness possible? Giving him the chance to be himself? Or do I ensure he stays within his family´s galaxy, follows their rules and ideas and lives a life of misery and false pretences...

He couldn´t do that.

There was still the question what would happen to him once they went through with their plan. The blue-eyed bodyguard came to his mind, and pics of Bella´s father he´d seen – his pale blue eyes, so cold they made you shiver.

**What will they do to me if they find out... or in order to find out the truth, in case they get suspicious?**

He definitely didn´t want to end up as chopped meat for Andrej´s infamous dogs, nor a cold body on the lake´s ground, his pockets filled with stones (he´d heard the other Families were a little more subtle in their methods, making so called suicides/accidents one of the main death causes within their respective hemispheres).

**Still... Jared doesn´t deserve the life they want him to have. If he can nut up, so can you.**

„I think you´re right“, he croaked. „If we get Bella on board, we might all have a chance.“

He saw Jared´s surprise, and Jensen´s appreciative glance.

„You sure? Chad, if anything goes wrong...you know what they´ll -“

„Guess in that case I´ll have to disappear too.“ He sounded more sure of himself than he actually felt.

„Thank you.“ Jensen´s voice was sincere. Grateful. They looked at each other, and Chad had the impression of making a silent agreement. *For Jared.*

He sat up straighter, and felt the same new energy run through the other two men.

„So – what´s the plan, exactly?“

His eyes were still on Jensen. The other man looked worn out, and at the same time wired with a nervous energy.
Pretty much the same way you feel...

I should probably get a coffee before listening to it.
Chapter 20

Jensen

Jensen rubbed his front. His body ached, but for the first time in months, not with exhaustion and pains that wouldn’t ever fully ease away, but with a pleasant soreness... a soreness that reminded him of Jared’s hands, his strong, lean body, muscles firm and defined under that wonderfully smooth skin...so different in color from his own. A soreness that made him feel that moment again, when they’d finally touched each other, without the barrier of clothes ... faces, chests, arms ... with fingers and noses and lips. Jensen had found himself on top of Jared, his lips wandering down all that skin, licking, nibbling, biting...sucking...the sound Jared had made when he reached his crotch, worshipped his gorgeous cock with all the tenderness he could muster, being already achingly hard himself, from only tasting, smelling, feeling Jared under him... he’d never forget that sound. Or those that came after, when he sucked him down, licked and swallowed and swerved his tongue to wring all those dirty moans and gasps out of his...

Your what?

Boyfriend?

He stared out of the window, at the grey buildings flying by the cab he was sitting in, the streets pretty calm in this quiet part of town, especially at this early hour. Clouds were hanging low in the sky, promising more snow again, and the light seemed to be hiding somewhere high above, leaving the world in a semi-darkness unusual for this time of the year.

Try love. Love of your life. Soulmate. One-and-only.

He leaned his head against the cool window glass, closing his eyes. He felt drained all of a sudden, the after-glow of the stupidly perfect sex with Jared slowly leaving his limbs, and the adrenaline that had filled him when they’d discussed the plan, wearing off.

And still, he felt – content.

Has been a while.

The plan wasn’t perfect. It had weak spots, and its success depended on a lot of good luck, and perfect timing, and people standing up to their word.

But, well...there wasn’t really an alternative.

It’s this plan, or it’s ... „...dying slowly, losing each other and then ourselves piece by piece, until there’s nothing left.“

It was Jared who’d put it like that. It was how Jensen felt, too, though.

With one small difference.

You’re probably dying slowly anyway.

„Sir? Are you OK?“

He stirred, opening his eyes. The driver had turned in his seat, watching him, concern in his eyes.
„We are here, sir. You said St. Bartholomew´s Medical Center, right?“

„Yes. Thank you.“

He paid, and got out, staring at the small clinic in front of him, an elegant building that didn´t scream „hospital“ at the passers-by; it looked more like an elegant recreational center from the outside, a spa for the „financially independent“ clientele.

_So you’ve finally landed where your father sure as hell would have put you in the first place: a private clinic so expensive only the really wealthy can afford it. Open to every crazy wish a patient might utter._

He found the high-end security equipment easily, the visible parts at least; there would be a lot more inside, and well hidden from the usual client´s eyes.

_The rich and powerful protect their own well._

He sighed, and crossed the small area in front of the glass sliding doors. A security man stopped him, as soon as he´d entered the small cubicle-like double-door system – _bullet proof glass, I bet_ – leading to the real entrance, while a second one watched him with squinted eyes.

„Good morning, Sir. Mr. Jensen Ackles?“

„Yes.“ His voice sounded as scratchy and sleep deprived as it was.

„Dr. Milton made us aware that you would be coming this morning. I´m sorry for the inconvenience, Sir – but can I see your ID, please?“

_Well-schooled politeness. Classy personnel at the security gates already – Dr. Milton must know what he´s doing._

„Of course.“

He offered his driving licence and the brand new ID card the university had given him.

The security guard ran the cards through a scanner, tapped a few keys on the computer keyboard, and waited for a minute.

„Everything seems to be in order, Sir. Please step through the gate slowly.“

He took the cards back from the smiling man, and stepped through the detector, already feeling uneasy about his decision to come here.

_This is a fortress rather than a clinic..._

„Thank you, Mr. Ackles. Enjoy your stay at St. Bartholomew´s, Sir.“

_He makes it sound like I´m gonna spend a nice weekend at a spa instead of ... _

_Instead of getting a treatment for an illness caused by a mysterious parasite – a treatment that might come too late anyway._

While he followed a professionally friendly clerk to the reception area, his thoughts wandered to Jared. Jared, who´d stood at the door of his apartment building, waving at Jensen in the cab, uncertainty and doubts battling the hope on his face. He´d watched his tall, slim figure through the back window, had noticed the way he wrapped his arms around himself against the cold. Had seen
Chad standing behind him, and stepping forward, putting his arm around the taller man’s shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

He’d told them he was going to get some more medical exams, for his head, just to be sure.

„Good morning, Mr. Ackles. We are happy to have you here at St. Bartholomew’s as our guest. If you would please follow me, I’ll show you to your room. Dr. Milton wants to start with your examination as soon as you’re settled in. “

He nodded absentmindedly.

There’s no going back now.

He thought about Jared’s face. His big, warm hands, the slender fingers exploring his body, gently, yet without hesitation. The care in his eyes. The tenderness in his voice, whispering words of praise and ... love.

He’s worth it.

This... and the plan....he’s worth it.

Jared

Jared stared at the ceiling above his bed. Once Jensen had left, driving away in a cab he’d insisted on calling, he’d dragged himself upstairs, Chad a shadow behind him. They’d cleared away the mugs – Jensen is already rubbing off on you, huh -, and Chad vanished into his room soon after, looking as beat as he probably felt. Jared had sat on the couch for another while, staring at nothing in particular, re-running everything they’d talked about in his head – the plan, as Jensen had called it. With the words came Jensen’s voice, his face, the expressive eyes. The tiny signs Jared could read so well, for what reason ever: a hint of doubt, or worry, a whiff of anger, but also sparks of hope, and a careful optimism. In the end, it came down to the one fact they couldn’t deny: They didn’t have an alternative. So far.

Finally, Jared got up and went back to bed, falling on the tangled sheets fully clothed, taking in the smell filling the room – sex, and sweat ... and, when he buried his face in the cushions, there was more...Jensen. The unique scent started a movie in his head, had him feel those hands on his skin again, that skilled tongue, the lips that seemed to know exactly where to tug or nip or pull to make him go crazy.... The way Jensen’s body felt against his, firm and sinewy, as if all the softness had left the lean limbs, and concentrated in those plush lips...lips he could dream about, their texture, their perfect bow, their touch on his throat, and nipples, and then, finally, on the tip of his cock...tongue teasing the slit, licking up the precome, circling the crown, and those heavenly lips engulfing him fully, warm wet heat so tight around him, so good, so perfect...

Jared hadn’t bottomed often so far, in fact, only two times, and he hadn’t enjoyed it much, but with Jensen, he could imagine it perfectly, as if it came... naturally; the smaller, so much lighter man had ended up on top of him after teasing his penis to an erection so hard Jared was sure he’d explode ... and Jared saw how Jensen himself was achingly hard, too, without even having touched himself or been touched by Jared; they both didn’t need much, a few well placed strokes, both their dicks in Jared’s big hand, and they came, shooting come all over their naked chests, ending up sticky and sweating, their heavy panting the only sound for a while. And yet, it didn’t take them
long to get ready again, Jared pulling Jensen into the shower, his mouth following the drops of hot water on the other man’s body, over the broad shoulders, the way too prominent ribs, the already hard nipples down to the hipbones jutting out in a way it made Jared dizzy with lust; he was down on his knees without recalling how he got there, Jensen’s beautiful cock in front of him; and he returned every caress, every teasing touch he’d received from the other man earlier, lips and tongue learning the texture of his sensitive skin by heart ... revelling in the sounds Jensen made, suppressed moans that drove Jared on, making him hard again, too... it came as a surprise when Jensen suddenly stopped him, pulled him up, and turned him around rather forcefully; Jared hadn’t been manhandled like that so far, and God, he loved it, being pushed against the wet tiles, the other man’s lips on his back, sucking marks into his skin, strong hands gripping him so tight it would probably leave bruises... and when Jensen started to rub his erection up and down the crack between Jared’s butt cheeks, he couldn’t stop himself from arching back against him, increasing the pressure; he didn’t even recognize his own voice the moment Jensen’s finger touched his rim and finally entered his hole, carefully teasing movements soon turning into a steady push and pull that had Jared keening and begging for more... and Jensen gave him more, so much more, his powerful thrusts belying the man’s seemingly frail body... Jared’s moans turned into cries of pleasure, desperate for the climax and at the same time trying to hold it off, pull it out, until he finally DID explode, legs shaking, whole body arching and shivering, a cry escaping him that sure could be heard up to the last storey of the building. He knew Jensen had climaxed too, even when the other man didn’t make any sound behind him, nothing but pants and gasps, and something that sounded suspiciously like sobs ... in the end, they both sank down, crumpled inside the shower stall, in a heap of shaking limbs, spent...

They slept for a while, after that, cuddled together on Jared’s bed, and it was the best thing Jared had experienced with another man so far – that is, until the slow, almost lazy sex they had later. He took his time to open up Jensen, with tongue and fingers, finding the places that left him a whimpering, sobbing mess ... and then, with deliberately slow thrusts, he brought them both to a climax again, not a violent, frantic eruption like before, but a slow build that had them both almost crying in the end, with pleasure and joy and overwhelming emotion ... the realization that this was how it was meant to be, taking and giving not only pleasure, but warmth and strength and acceptance.

*What it meant to make love.*

*What it meant...*

*... to fall in love.*
Chapter 21

Misha

„He went into the clinic about five minutes ago... passed security, was welcomed by some classy nurse. Should I stay?“

Misha went through a stack of files on his desk while talking, his phone on speaker.

„What kind of luggage did he bring?“

His employee´s voice sounded unusually tinny. „Only a shoulder bag...just the one he´s always carrying around.“

„Ah.“ Misha had found the file he´d been looking for. A young man smiled back at someone on the enlarged picture, hair a little shaggy, clothes wide and flowy, under a long woollen coat that looked homemade. He was standing in front of a colorfully painted van, wearing furry slippers.

*Someone´s trying very hard to fit the cliché ...*

„He´ll not stay overnight, then... we´ll hack into the security cameras outside, that should cover everything until noon at least though. In the meantime, I want you to pay a final visit to one Andy Gallagher. Details are on their way. No need to be subtle, he is a free agent. And, Grigory....“

„Yes, Boss?“

„He´s supposed to be a psychic. You can prove him a fake by being successful... Have fun.“

Jensen

The doctor was wearing a white coat this time. Somehow, it made everything more real.

„I´d like to go over the scans and test results with you once again, Jensen. There´s some new ... development you should be aware of.“

*So, we are on a first name basis now.... guess one deserves that once they have passed the security gate down at the entrance.*

„Development? Has something changed since our last meeting?“

The doctor frowned down at the printed sheets in his hand. When he looked up to meet Jensen´s eyes, his face had taken on a serious expression that seemed studied.

„It hasn´t changed per se. But the new, better scans showed a far more evolved state of your cardiomyopathy than the ones that were made at the hospital, due to state of the art technical standards I guess ...“

Jensen gazed down at the huge picture the doctor had reached over.
„What does that mean?“

Dr. Milton sighed, and this time his reaction seemed genuine.

„It means you’ll need, probably within short time, a heart transplant. Your heart actually shows all signs of a long-lasting chronic phase, as does your digestive muscular system. It means you could suffer from a heart failure due to the destruction of heart tissue.“

„Oh."

You’ve read about the possibility in the folder the doctor gave you last time...still didn’t expect it, did you? Not now?

„There is one more problem though...I think I mentioned it last time we spoke. We need to get the parasite out of your system before even thinking about a transplant. Otherwise, the parasite would happily latch onto the new organ. I went over your data with another specialist – I took the liberty of doing so without your consent, but I hope you understand the urgency of the situation – and we agreed on the singularity of your case. We both haven’t seen anything like it yet. It seems your body shows all signs similar to a chronic Chagas disease, while still suffering from acute symptoms of some new version of the virus, carried by the parasite, we haven’t been able to identify yet."

Jensen gazed at the numbers, having a deja-vu-experience.

„Mr. Ackles...Jensen...“

He looked up into the doctor’s pale eyes.

„We don’t know if the treatment will be successful, in your case. And there is still the issue of side-effects, which can be pretty heavy with chronic cases in adults. Still, it’s the best shot we’ve got. I would very much recommend to follow the procedure as planned."

_I only need enough time... and maybe, maybe, just a little more ... if the plan works...

It was borrowed time in the best case, and he knew it.

_Jared trusts you. Mack does, too._

„Mr. Ackles? Jensen?“

He nodded. „Let’s do it. I haven’t got much to lose, have I...“

_But that’s not true, and you know it._

_Jared_

„Call this number, B. URGENT. J.“

Jared knew it sounded pretty melodramatic, but he didn’t know how else to get his new burner phone number to Bela, and make her call him back. Jensen had been almost paranoid about not using their „official“ phones for anything concerning „The Plan“. 
He’d tossed around in his bed for an hour after Jensen had left, too many thoughts whirling around in his head to let him get back to sleep; and finally, had given up, made new coffee, and tried to get some of his workload off his shoulders – with small to no success (partially because of Chad’s sound snoring coming through his friend’s closed bedroom door). In the end, he’d trudged over to the gym, freezing in his sleep-deprived state, and suffered through an hour of workout, before heading home again, dreading the moment he’d have to talk to the woman. Now, mid-morning, he felt safe to call Bela; he wasn’t sure, as they hadn’t talked that much since Christmas, but she didn’t seem like a morning person to him.

When the phone rang, with some pre-installed ringtone, he jerked.

Wow. She actually calls back?

„Hello?“

„This better be some new phone sex game.“

„Uhm... I...Bela?“

Like the last time, Bela managed to make him feel like a complete idiot, a clumsy, silly child, within a few seconds. He wasn’t sure if it was the accent (oh, she’d perfected it well), the cool, always a little teasing, ironic voice, or just the knowledge that behind her waited one of the scariest mob organizations the city had to offer. Her stunning looks and quick intelligence did nothing to ease his discomfort.

On the other hand, you really had fun that night at the party.

It seemed long ago now.

„I’ll look over the fact that you sent me a text message – very cryptic, Jared, really – to call me back, and answer your question: Yes, it’s me, Bela. To what do I owe the pleasure, Jared?“

„We have to talk, Bela...“

„You don’t say. I thought that was what phones were made for, originally...“

„Bela, please...“ He rubbed his front, and further messed up his hair driving his hand through it. Hopefully, Bela wouldn’t catch up on his desperate tone.

„You seem a little...stressed? Something wrong, sweetheart?“

And that was, weirdly enough, when Jared snapped. Everyone who knew him would swear he was the sweetest guy ever, kind and with the biggest heart, a little stubborn on occasion - and ready to make a fool of himself at any party... but almost no one knew he had quite a temper. It rarely showed, and didn’t last for long, but it was there nevertheless.

„Something wrong? Are you fucking kidding me, Bella? Our parents pull this whole medieval marriage thing, without even telling me, you are frequenting a freaking psychic, but don’t bother to call me, although you knew I am gay and I would never... never...“ He almost pulled out a strand of his own hair. The growl escaping him matched his mood perfectly.

„See – I knew there was some fire somewhere inside that gorgeous body.“

„Bela, I’m not - “
„Calm down, big boy.“ Her tingling laughter pulled at Jared´ s nerves.

*God, we´d kill each other within a week, or I´d kill myself. Probably the last.*

Luckily, Bela chose to switch to a more serious tone right then.

„I couldn´t call you, Jay, cause officially, I don´t know myself, OK? And honestly, I was sure you´d find out what they were planning, too – what´s the sense in growing up with parental paranoia if you can´t use it for your own good now and then? Don´t tell me you never made good use of your Family´s technical and personal resources?“

Jared bit his lower lip. „I didn´t. And I don´t intend to“, he growled.

„Such a noble mind.... but see, Jared, nobility doesn´t get you anywhere, not in the world we have been born into. So – while you were wasting your time running through your college life wearing blinders, I watched, and learned – and believe me, I learned from the best. “

Jared felt even more pissed. „So, what – you´re intending to join Daddy´s company? Be the good little girl? Play along with this – this – this travesty?“

Her huff was slightly disdainful.

„And if so? My father´s companies are thriving, the Family Business has never run smoother ... with the joining of our Families, the rest of the competition will be blown to pieces. Why would I not want to be part of this success? And for such a little price... smile at the wedding, wear a pretty dress, and then get myself a pretty toy to keep me warm at night in case you can´t ... or won´t .. perform, Jared.“

Jared went numb. Her voice had grown cold, with a cruel undertone that made him shudder.

„But...at the Christmas Party, you said – you said you wanted out, Bella! You told me you hated your father, and –“

„Jeez, you´re such a baby. So easy to tease. “

„What? I´m not a...“, Jared spluttered.

„I was kidding, Jared. Just showing you one of my finest talents – acting. Believe me. I´d have earned myself an Oscar by now, had I followed an acting career. “

„Damn, you were convincing“, Jared admitted grumpily.

„Thanks“, she answered haughtily. „But, you know, I wasn´t lying – I sure DID use my father´s resources, and I tried to pick up as much as I could ...sometimes it pays off to play Daddy´s little girl, you know? I want out, Jared – and you will be my way out. This marriage is perfect. We change the rings, give them the romantic kiss, get our own snug little love nest – and then I am finally out from under my father´s thumb. I don´t care who you bang, women, men, sheep, as long as you don´t interfere with my own love life.“ She laughed, voice back to the teasing, lascivious tone.

„You know, Jared... I wouldn´t even mind a threesome with this gorgeous new friend of yours. Hmmm, I can see us having lots of fun ... he seems bendy, doesn´t he ...“

„Bela! Stop it! Jensen isn´t – we wouldn´t –“
„So, Jensen, is it? Cute name for a cute guy. I bet he hides some passion under that model college boy front."

It only occurred to Jared now that Bela obviously had already seen them together.

„Wait, where – how – when did you see Jensen? Or us both?“

„Oh, Jared....“ Her sigh was that of a long suffering mother shaking her head over her silly child. „You do realize my father doesn´t run the Family because he´s a good accountant or has such a charming personality, do you? Jared, I have been trying to profit from the skills of the people he employs for years. As I said - why not learn a little something now and then if you´ve got the best people at hand? And ...“

She hesitated. Which was so unlike the Bela Jared had known so far, it made him straighten up.

„Yes?“

She actually sighed. „I was serious about wanting out of the Family Business, Jared. I can´t deny I love the wealth and yes, playing Princess Pain-In-The-Ass can be fun, but ... it´s not what I want to do for the rest of my life, and it´s not who I want to be either. Not 24/7, at least.“

It was Jared´s time to huff. „You are good at it, though."

„I´ll take that as a compliment, so, thanks, darling.“ Jared could practically see her smug smile.

„Now, to our wedding.“ Her tone had switched to that of a lawyer at tough negotiations. „I know you don´t want to marry me, as well as I sure don´t want to be stuck in a relationship with you sitting in one of the mansions my father has in mind for us, as much as I could appreciate your body and looks .... I appreciate my freedom much more, deary. So."

„So?“

„We have to get married.“

„Bela, I -“

„For Christ´s sake, let me finish, will you?“

Jared´s mouth snapped shut. Sometimes, Bela reminded him of his grandmother in a scary way.

„I said we have to get married, I didn´t say we have to STAY married. I need you to put that ring on my finger, Jared – by the way, it´s got a really nice big diamond on it, and I don´t intend on giving it back – drive into the sunset with me, and – well, what do they say at weddings? Till death do us part? We don´t have to wait that long."

Jared rubbed his front. „But that´s... that´s actually what Jensen wants us to do."

„Drive into the sunset? You can do that later, sweetheart, once we´ve -“

„No, not that“, Jared interrupted her, impatiently. „Die."

„Ah.“ She was quiet for a moment. „Congrats, Jared, you´ve caught yourself a poster boy with brains. I´d feel a little jealous, but, you know me – my big soft heart won´t allow such petty feelings. So – does your pretty Einstein have a plan, too, or did he leave the details for us to fill in?"

„Actually – yes. We´ve got a plan, Bela.“
Jensen

Jensen stared at the plastic tube running between the IV drip and the needle stuck into the back of his left hand. The drops falling from the small bottle attached to the stand had a hypnotizing rhythm to them, steady and soothing after the talk he´d had with the doctor.

So... that´s it, then. Either this works, or –

Or not.

He had to make phone calls, get their plan into motion, alert the few people he trusted to help them. But the confirmation of the worst fears Dr. Milton had uttered the last time he´d met the man, by the data and scans gathered at his private praxis, had left him strangely numb ... the exhaustion, being gone for all of two days, had come back full force; but then it could be due to a sleepness night, or one of the side effects of the medication cocktail dripping into his arm. The doctor had warned him ... sleepiness, nausea, vomiting, extreme weight loss. Muscular pains, hypersensitive skin. Psychic alterations. For a minimum of two months.

You´ll be a total mess. And there´s no guarantee that all that toxic medication will even work.

Mack had left a voice message, wishing him a pleasant morning after a hopefully eventful night – he could practically see the sparkle in her eyes when listening to it.

What do I tell her? And when? She´s already suspicious.

He turned his new cell phone in his hand. He should call his FBI contact, get him to arrange everything...and Charlie, his nerdy computer-genius neighbor from San Francisco, who´d turned into one of his rare friends.... Garth, too. Uncle Jim... there was a time when he´d have gone straight to his surrogate father for help, but now... the way Jim had betrayed his trust still stung, and he just couldn´t go and forget all about it, even if he understood his `uncle´s´ motives.

Not many people left on your list.

In the end, the person he called was Jared.
Chapter 22

Chad

Chad stumbled out of his room, his usual uncoordinated morning self, and straight to the coffee machine, to get his first, absolutely life saving shot of caffeine.

He waved lazily at Jared, finding him slumped on the couch, his hair a total mess, not trusting his voice to get out even a „good morning“ before the first sip of coffee.

Jared made a gesture that could count as a greeting, but seemed too deep in thought – or just too tired – to chat, which was a rare condition for a person usually as energetic as him.

„You OK?“, Chad finally croaked out, cradling the cup in his hands.

Jared shrugged.

„I called Bela.“

Chad´s eyes widened. „What did she -“

Jared´s phone rang.

By the way Jared´s face softened when glancing at the caller ID, and the smile warming his eyes, Chad concluded the caller had to be Jensen.

„Hey....“

Chad had seen his friend bring home quite a number of girls; he could count the young men Jared had taken into his bedroom on the fingers of one of his hands; but he´d never witnessed that kind of change in his best friend´s demeanor when talking to them – if there were any phone calls at all, as Jared had kept his „relationships“ pretty much to one night stands, with very rare exceptions (which all ended soon, and loud, and with drama). But the soft murmurs he heard from his friend´s bedroom – one more indication that this was something „serious“, as Jared had never bothered to seek privacy when chatting with his former acquaintances -, the suddenly deeper, huskier voice... and the new light he´d noticed in Jared´s eyes during the last week: all of it practically worked as a neon sign shouting „LOVE!“ in big fat purple letters. With a blinking outline.

When Jared came out of his room again, a thoughtful expression on his face, and joined Chad at the counter, fishing a cup from the shelf, Chad watched him closely.

„So, what did Jensen say? Everything OK?“

Jared shot him a surprised glance. „How did you know it was...“

Chad huffed, and rolled his eyes. „Dude, you practically had hearts in your eyes the moment you saw who’d called.“

He had the satisfactory experience of seeing his best friend blush. Vividly.

„He said he was good.“ The frown didn´t leave his face, though.
But?“

Jared rubbed his front. „He said he´d have to stay all day.“ “Guess the doctors want to be sure? You know, being extra thorough and everything... young man from a known wealthy family...“

Jared huffed mirthlessly. „Yeah...“

Chad waited for a few more moments. „And?“

He watched his friend shrug. He looked more insecure than he´d ever seen him, outside his family, at least. Sherri always had a special way to make Jared feel like a little boy again, at least that was how Chad saw it, the way Jay behaved when at his parents´ home.

„I asked him if I could come, keep him company, you know... and he said no.“

„Huh.“ Chad frowned at his friend. „And this is bothering you because...?“

Jared raised his hands, and let them fall down again helplessly.

„I – I don´t want... I feel like he´s keeping me out. And I – I dunno, usually I wouldn´t even... with the guys I´ve met so far... we wouldn´t even have come to the point where I´d have cared. But with Jensen, I – I want to be part of his life, I want him to share the good times and the bad ones, you know? And I don´t even understand it fully, but I can´t change how I feel.“

Chad watched his friend card his hands through his already tangled hair forcefully.

„In good times and bad? You´ve come to the wedding vows pretty fast, Jay.“

OK, bad try.

The way Jared glared at him, he´d hit the wrong nerve with his joke.

„I would rather marry Jensen after knowing him only two weeks than someone I don´t even want to know intimately for that long a period!“ Jared´s voice was fierce, his eyes filled with passion. Finally he´s taking his own side against his family. Guess I have to thank Jensen for that.

„Jay.“ He let his hands rest on Jared´s shoulders. „What is it? You know I´m on your side here. I´ve got your back. If Jensen doesn´t want you inside his hospital room, he´ll have his reasons. Maybe he´s shy about being seen in one of those un-sexy hospital gowns. Maybe he thinks you´d come out of obligation only. Maybe he hasn´t finished the last 1000 pages bestseller and dies to do exactly that. Calm down, and have a little faith in the man.“

At that, Jared´s eyes flared again. „I DO have faith in him! It´s not that I – I don´t trust him, it´s only... Chad, you said it yourself, he looks sick. What if... what if he´s really...ill...and wants to keep it to himself? To..I dunno...to protect me or something?“

Chad frowned. „But why would he go through all the pain of planning your escape? Of getting both of you out? He wouldn´t do that, right, if he had cancer or whatever?“

Jared bit his lower lip. It was already split. He´d obviously worried a lot.

„Yeah...guess you´re right“, he admitted after a moment. „Guess it´s just... this whole thing with Bela, it... it freaks me out a little.“

Chad shook the broad shoulders, and clapped them reassuringly.
„Hey. Jensen´s plan might be ... ambitious, but it can work out. We can make it work. By the way...what did Bela say? On the phone?“

He saw his friend pull himself together. He actually smirked.

„She... she´s in, Chad.“

Chad stared at his grinning friend. „She is? Wow, didn´t think it would be that easy to convince her. No tricks, no drama? No `I´ll send my scary blue eyed watchdog after you!´?“ Jared shook his head.

„No ... there´s only one condition – I have to marry her first, for real. Chad, we´ll get out, all of us – this marriage, this wedding – it will get us all out. Bela said we could adapt Jensen´s plan perfectly, and pull it right after the wedding. She said she´d do everything on her side to ensure it works. She... she´s pretty far advanced at her father´s company... practices... so I guess she´ll be able to keep her word.“

„Son of a bitch. So – we´re really doing this.“ Chad grabbed Jared´s shoulders, hard.

„Jay, you – that´s it. You´ll be free. You´ll have the life you wanted, one you chose for yourself.“
He couldn´t help the grin that spread over his face. „I was skeptical, can´t deny it, and I didn´t fully understand until now why you ... why you always had that many issues with your family, but...I get it now. And – I hope it works out, with Bela, and Jensen.“

„You mean, a full-on happy ending with birds and butterflies and fluffy kittens?“

Chad was glad to see the mischievous spark in his friend´s eyes again, the one he´d missed so much during the last weeks.

„And freaking pink unicorns, man. Dancing on rainbows.“

Sherri Padalecki

A small reception. Less than 35 guests, close family only, a few good friends; and the whole entourage, of course, bodyguards and security, plus both Families´ top players.

„I think I can keep it down to 70 people, all in all“, Sherri said, frowning over her list. „Including 25 security hands. Do you think we need more?“

Her husband looked up from his ipad. „70? That´s impressingly few. Did you ditch the idea of inviting the whole Texan branch of the family?“

She shrugged, grinning at him. „Couldn´t miss the chance, Gerald ... it was either everyone or practically no one, and considering the surprise character of it all, I went for the latter.“

Gerald smiled. „Well, I´m relieved not to have to put up with your Aunt Augusta. She is one scary old hag. And I could swear her boots´ tips are spiked!“
Sherri laughed. „Remember when she brought a whip to my father´s birthday? To... how did she put it...“

„To whip that younger boy of yours into the right corral“, her husband assisted.

„Yeah - charming as ever.“ She took a sip of her neglected tea. „Maybe she was right, though. Maybe we shouldn´t have waited so long. Just show Jared from the start to which herd he belongs.“

Gerald huffed. „With force? Good luck with that. He´s so stubborn, it would probably have led to an even more uncomfortable outcome. No , I think – it was right of us to let him have a little fun, test the boundaries, before he´d settle down. And, honestly – the deal with the Russians is the perfect chance to make him do so. He may be stubborn, but he isn´t stupid. He´d probably have gone against us for the rest of his life – but cross the path of Andrej and his Family? He´d be dumb, or suicidal, to try that."

Sherri smiled. „You´re right, darling. He´s smart, our boy.... he´ll do what is expected. If not for himself, than for those he loves.“

„What do you mean?“ Gerald seemed puzzled.

Sherri´s smile was shark-like. „If he chooses to be ... difficult... we might hint at the danger he puts everyone in...especially his beloved little sister. We all don´t want to disappoint the Russians, or give them an excuse for ... getting by force what isn´t given to them as arranged and agreed on.“

Gerald shook his head, gazing at his wife with appreciation.

„You´re scarily good at this, Sherri. I´m glad not to be your enemy. I wouldn´t stand a chance against you.“

She gave him her brightest smile, very similar to that of her younger son.

„No, you wouldn´t, my dear. Now – do we include your mother´s famous pirogi into the menue? The chef had asked for special wishes .... I think it would give the whole dinner a personal touch. And I know Jared loves them. We can sweeten the deal a little, and it would make your mother happy."

„If you can make sure Jared doesn´t eat 28 of them again, sure, why not!“

They both laughed, in memory of an extended family dinner way back that had ended in Jared throwing up right into the huge bowl on the dinner table, while he still had half a pirogi on his fork. It was one of the family stories told at each reunion mercilessly, making Jared blush each time. His brother Jeff – who, of course, had been Jared´s opponent in the eating contest - always teased him that it was a miracle he could still even look at pirogi after that experience.

„He won´t get more than everyone else, promise!“

Jensen
Jensen’s throat felt sore. Dried out, desert-style. He took a sip from the glass of water at his bedside table, relishing the coolness, the soothing liquid running down his throat.

He’d talked a lot.

First, to Jared, needing the reassurance of hearing his voice, for some reason. It had worked; he’d felt focused and filled with new energy again after hanging up on his ... boyfriend, yeah, that’s the term, admit it, even if Jared had sounded subdued – pissed, even – when he’d told him not to come visit. He knew he’d hurt him by doing so, he could well remember the look in his eyes back when he’d been on that gurney after fainting in Ava´s cafe the first time.

Like a kicked puppy.

He’d make it up to him...later. Explain.

Now, he needed to focus on getting the plan in motion. And it looked good.... unexpectedly so. He’d talked to Whitfield, the FBI guy he’d met the first time after Matt had fallen down that cliff in California. They hadn’t gotten along, at first, Jensen sensing the suspicions and somewhat prejudicial opinions of the agent .... while he himself had closed up like an oyster in front of the man, and by doing so, finding himself defending a family he had just managed to get away from.

It had changed. Whitfield was as sharp as a knife; he seemed to be seeing through Jensen´s walls and monosyllabic responses. And while Jensen hadn’t really opened up to the agent, they’d come to an understanding of each other in the weeks that followed Matt´s death. Jensen had kept the card Whitfield had handed him before leaving ever since. He’d called the agent when he’d heard about Josh´s accident from Mack, as soon as he’d found a phone at the first airport inside the US. Whitfield had been surprised, but prepared for his questions nevertheless.

He’d been so angry. Back in California, and after he’d heard from Mack... angry at his father, and even more so at himself, for running, for not doing anything earlier, to stop this whole crazy shit his family was stuck in.

Whitfield knew how to play you. And you knew he knew. And you went with it, on purpose.

He hadn’t been surprised to hear the FBI had an undercover agent inside his father´s Family. They probably had multiple people sneaked into all of the Families, not that it had done them much good for now, as far as he could tell.

„This is our chance, Jensen. You give us the information we need, we can blow up the whole organization. And who knows, we might take a few of the other Families down, too, kind of a domino effect ... you keep your part, we keep ours.“

Even if he trusted the agent to a certain extent, it felt as if he’d made a deal with the devil.

Misha

„Whitfield is making some deal with the Ackles kid.„

Misha’s eyebrows raised. He stared through the windshield of his car, observing the traffic, slowly crawling by in the usual late afternoon jam. Light was fading already, as the clouds had been thickening all day.
More snow...

„Sir?“

Misha sighed. „Any more detailed information on that, agent Fuller?“

He could practically see the man´s sour face on the other side of the line. He sure heard the indignation in the slightly testy undertone in the agent´s voice.

„Whitfield is very careful, sir. It was hard enough to find out who he was talking to. This is one of the biggest coups in town the FBI has planned during the last decade, so you might expect some extra security measures.“

Misha smiled thinly. The agent on his payroll wasn´t contacted often; he kept it that way deliberately, to have more pressure behind his requests when he really needed the insufferable man. Now was such a time, obviously.

„Do you have any idea, an educated guess?“

*Always make them think you value their opinion, their input... makes them lower their guard...*

As expected, it worked. Sometimes Misha wondered how he could look through people so easily... reading them like books opened willingly for him. He deciphered flaws and weak spots, strong sides and long buried emotions...

„My guess is, he uses the kid to bring down the whole freaking Ackles Imperium. They seem to have had contact already...a few years ago. The operation has been going on for years; this is only the final step. It´s huge. But that´s all I know, it´s one of our most secret ops right now.“

„And you´re not part of it? How ... disappointing...“ Misha couldn´t hold back the sarcasm...it always was fun making the agent squirm, a man full of himself in such a self-righteous way he was almost pitiable.

„I do play a vital part in the operations. If others tend to pull all the headlines and bask in the showlights, that´s no indication as to how important a role they are playing.“ Misha almost giggled at the sniff he heard through the phone. The agent was so easy to tease...

„Well, agent Fuller ... as much as your information might be interesting, it isn´t really news to me. So maybe you could sweeten the pot a little and throw in something I actually want to know?“

„I told you I don´t know-“

„Nonsense. You and I know you may not have first hand information, but you are well in a position to get further intel about the Ackles Operation. Files, transscripts, history on the Ackles kid´s connection to Whitfield ... I want it. Yesterday.“

„But if I do that – that could easily cost me my job!“

Misha smiled, his most dangerous, eerily pleasant smile. He was sure that even if the agent couldn´t see it, he could hear it over the phone.

„If you don´t, you might lose more than your job, agent.“

*Jensen*
He’d talked to Whitfield, to Garth, to his sister. He’d even called Charlie already, and it was a real joy to hear her voice again, to feel the surprise and the happiness over the phone – even if his friend’s first squeal almost left him deaf.

Everyone was ready to help them. Well, he hadn’t told Mack, of course, not yet; he needed her to be convincingly clueless, just in case something went wrong.

It was almost too smooth. Too easy.

An uncertain feeling settled in his stomach.

*What if it doesn’t work out the way you planned? You will take down so many people with you... is it really worth it?*

Josh’s wrecked car. His Mom’s. Jared’s car lying on its side in the frozen ground. Matt’s smashed-in head, his broken, bruised body.

*And so many more you don’t even know about...*

*Definitely worth it.*

And they would be careful. He’d see to it that none of those involved would be left behind. Or, rather, he’d make Whitfield help him do so.

The doctor had been right... the meds did make him extremely tired. Even sitting up left him feeling dizzy. He put his phone inside his pillowcase, right under his head, and lay back with a sigh. Closing his eyes, he tried to shut out the thoughts and worries that had kept running in loops inside his head all day. He finally managed to focus on something else ... Mack’s happy face, her sparkling eyes. Garth’s surprising hug, bony, a little awkward, but sincere.

The last thing he thought of before slipping into sleep was Jared’s face though, the wide, open grin, dimples making their boyish appearance, and the warmth in his eyes, radiating joy and energy as well as something deeper, calmer ... *love.*
Jim didn´t bother to straighten his appearance before entering the small town house. He´d probably find Alan in one of his less formal outfits anyway; and he´d never really felt comfortable in a suit and tie, preferring his old jeans and flannels.

He tapped the hood of the car sitting at the curb in front of the entrance, nodding at the two men inside; passed the `security gate´ after greeting the guy leaning casually against the wrought iron fence; and got stared at through the peephole for a whole minute nevertheless.

„Jim“, the hard-faced man who finally opened the heavy wooden door nodded at him.

„Christian“, he answered, a little gruffly. *No need to have me waiting for that long, asshole.*

„He´s up in the library“, the other man told him, waving at the stairs.

„Thanks."

Jim slowly climbed the old wooden staircase. „The library“ was more of an office, one of the former bedrooms looking out the back of the house, a small, quiet room with nice afternoon light. He hadn´t been there for years, but remembered every screech and squeak the stairs moaned out under his feet.

One more guard was walking up and down the narrow corridor, a shotgun in his arms.

He, too, nodded at Jim, but stopped him at the end of the stairs. Jim watched him go to the door at his right, and knock at it.

„Yes“, came the answer from inside, and the man opened the door just wide enough to stick in his head.

„It´s Jim, sir“.

„Good. Let him in. Thank you, Gordon."

*That´s so Alan.... Always the polite gentleman, even to his goons.*

He had been witness to the hard work it took his childhood friend to fit into that glove; it hadn´t only helped Alan to reach what goals he´d set himself, but also to gain the interest and love of the girl he´d chosen to be his wife, practically after he´d seen her for the first time.

„Alan.“

„Jim."

He was surprised when the other man got up and reached out to shake his hand, even clamped the other one down on his shoulder and squeezed it tightly. It hadn´t been that long since their reconciliation – if it was even that much -, and he hadn´t expected Alan to go back to old habits that fast.
Maybe he’s just desperate enough to throw the past years’ stupid grudge out the window?

Alan sure looked as if something was stealing his sleep lately.

„Please, take a seat. Anything new?“

Jim sat heavily in the comfy stuffed chair at the window, one of the few objects truly reminding of a library.

„I finally got some intel from the hospital. Jensen´s seen a specialist, a Dr. Milton on 34th, that´s where our boys followed him to the other day.“
„What kind of specialist?“ Alan´s face was drawn into a frown.

„Tropical diseases. Obviously, Dr. Milton is known to be one of the best in the field, at least around here."

„Tropical diseases?“

Jim watched his old friend´s face pale. „Shit“, the man whispered, and even his voice seemed drained of color.

„Yeah“, he mumbled. „Shit."

„So...any idea what...“

„The technician I finally got to talk only said the bloodwork seemed messed up in a characteristic way. He wasn´t the one to analyze it, he only overheard a colleague discussing it with someone in the lab. When I asked one of the doctors who would be the first choice to turn to, she told me Dr. Milton´s name and address. It was the same Jensen had gone to. But there´s more.“

Alan rubbed his face. „Yeah?“

„Milton obviously owns a private clinic over at Newbury Street. And guess where Jensen went to this morning in a cab."

Alan sighed, and closed his eyes. „Newbury?“

„Bingo.“ Jim watched Alan for a moment before clearing his throat.

„Alan, maybe it´s time you...dunno, made the first step? We both know Jensen is stubborn enough to never, ever talk to you again. But all of this... it´s insane. You´ve already lost -“

„I know exactly what I´ve lost, Jim. Don´t you ever doubt that.“

Jim sighed. Can someone please take those two knuckleheads and bump their heads together!

„Alan... something´s wrong with Jensen, seriously wrong, and he didn´t even tell Mack shit, she already called me and asked if I had any idea what was going on... and you know he never would keep something from her unless it´s really gonna upset her.“
„You don´t understand, Jim.“ Alan´s voice was down to a rough whisper.

„What do you -“

„The fight we had, right before Jensen left. When he accused me of being responsible for his Mom´s death, and ... of having his boyfriend killed.“
Jim frowned. „Yeah, I know about that, he told me, after all. And he wasn´t exactly wrong, was
he?"

„I didn´t tell him everything, Jim. Didn´t tell you, either.“

„What do you mean?“ Jim sat up straighter. „Alan?“

Alan looked years older all of a sudden. Spent, and tired, and...defeated.

„I told him Matt wasn´t who he seemed to be, and it made Jensen so... angry.... he was furious, in this cold, scary way of his, you know.... said that if I didn´t love him, it didn´t mean no one else couldn´t love him for who he was. And that he wouldn´t be part of my paranoia anymore, not if I was the reason that paranoia existed in the first place. Or something like that.“

„I bet he was much more eloquent than that.“, Jim added dryly.

Alan huffed. „You bet.“ He pinched the bridge of his nose, taking off his glasses.

„I told him Matt had been put in his path by one of the other Families, to get close to us. That´s what I let everyone else believe, too; and, well, he´d been on the Polish payroll before, so it was legit. When I told Jensen, he only laughed right into my face, told me he´d long known about that, cause Matt had confessed everything to him, an that they truly loved each other, blah blah blah.“

„But?“ Jim leaned towards the other man. „Alan, what did you not tell him? Or me?“

„Matt did come from the Polish side, but it was... it was only a cover. Well, one of them. It was all planned out long hand ... so that he could confess, and make Jensen trust him even more. They knew how suspicious Jensen would be, and not only him – the whole Family. This confession, it was the perfect strategy to make Jensen lower his guards; and pinning Matt to one of the Families we already had unfinished business with would of course put us all off the scent.“

„Alan, goddammit, who did Matt really work for!“

Alan looked at him with watery, pale eyes.

„He was FBI, Jim.“

„What?“

Alan huffed. „Couldn´t believe it myself when I found out. I don´t think they really planned on sacrificing the guy to get close to Jensen, but – well, by killing him, or having him killed, I played perfectly into their plans. I was so damn stupid.“

„Alan, you ... how did you find out?“

„Just something one of our contacts inside the FBI found in one of the phone transcripts... they called Cohen `agent´, in a notice scribbled somewhere, only once, a mistake, obviously, didn´t even register it until some time after...“

„Dammit.“

„How could I tell him, Jim? How could I tell my son, who already thought I didn´t care about him or my whole family, that the boyfriend he´d trusted and loved was sent by the FBI to get close and sneak into the Family? That he had been used?“

Jim stared into his friend´s anguished eyes.
I was a cold, vengeance-driven asshole for a long time, Jim, but that ... I couldn´t do that." Alan rubbed his eyes, a tired gesture. „And then he wouldn´t have believed me anyway. I had lost any authority, any credibility for him by then."

„The FBI... you know Jensen had a lot of contact back then, do you? They actually won his trust by all of this, planned or not. So they not only got someone inside, they could rely on an actual Family member as an ally.... and one angry enough to...“

„Be of real help, if necessary.“ Alan looked beaten.

„Dammit“, Jim repeated, scratching his neck. „You have to tell him, Alan. You two have to clear the table before...“

„Maybe it´s too late already.“

„What? No! It´s never too late to-“

„Something´s going on, Jim. Something big. The FBI contact I mentioned... she says it´s one of the big hush-hush operations, and that agent Jensen had contact with back in California, Whitfield... he´s the center of it. She couldn´t give me much though."

„So that´s why you´ve pimped up security?“

„Yeah.“ Alan turned his glasses in his hands. They´d left deep red marks on the bridge of his nose. Suddenly Jim remembered how Jensen had insisted on having eye surgery to get rid of his rather thick glasses. Was stubborn enough to get his father to say yes, even back then.

„And I´ll have more men following Mack, too. Can´t take any risks, Jim.“

Jim nodded slowly. „You think... you think Jensen has something to do with... this operation?“

Alan raised his hands and let them fall down again, a rather helpless gesture that defied the strong, energetic man his friend usually represented.

„I´ve got no idea. He´s changing his cellphones like his socks, and my contact at the FBI didn´t have any luck so far in finding out more without risking her cover.“

„Guess if he´s sick, he´s got other things on his plate anyway. And then there´s the thing with the Padalecki boy.“

Alan´s hand slapped down on the desk in front of him with force. Papers lifted and sailed down in graceful bows.

„THAT won´t be a problem for much longer, I can assure you that much. Things are already arranged.“

Ah ... the Alan everyone´s used to is back.

„Alan... do you really think it´s wise to put oil in the fire between the Padaleckis and our side right now when -“

„There´s no other way.“ Alan seemed a different person now. Gone was the defeated, almost broken man; the cold, stony facade was back, and Jim found himself in front of the ruthless businessman Alan Ackles again. „If I let the boy live, Jensen will find a way to.. to...do whatever he can to cause as many problems as possible. Plus, we have a bill to settle with the Padaleckis. I
won´t sit idle and watch them take any more family members away from me.“

Jim sighed. „I can see your point, Alan... it´s only... Mack thinks those boys are really ... I know it sounds crazy, but she thinks they are in love.“

„So?“

„So? So maybe the Polish boy is just an innocent victim to his Family´s policies. And if Jensen really loves him, and you take away another of his boyfriends...“

„This time, it´s different, Jim. If I tell him what the Padalecki family did... he´ll see. He´ll understand.“ Alan got up from his chair and paced the room. „And even if he doesn´t – wouldn´t put it behind him and his damned stubbornness to defend the boy just to make me angry – there´s a limit to what I´ll tolerate, Jim. I´ll not have my son date the offspring of the Family responsible for the death of my wife and older son. If Jensen hates me for the rest of my life – so be it. He already does, anyway. I´ll not have him pulled into that Polish pile of crap.“

Jim scratched his cheek. „Yeah... I know what you mean, Alan. I´m only saying...you might lose Jensen for good this time. And I´m not talking about this mysterious illness, whatever it is. He´ll burn bridges for good this time, and you know him – there won´t be much left on either side of the bridge, either.“

„I know.“ Alan stood at the window now, staring down into the piles of snow in the grey yard. „But there´s no other way.“

Jim got up from his chair, a little clumsily – the thing was too low, dammit – and joined his boss at the window.

„I hope you know what you´re doing, Alan.“

„I do.“

„So – what do you want me to do?“

Andy

Andy Gallagher was, despite all of his more or less shady professional activities, a good-natured guy. It was what had him stick to selling weed when he´d had the opportunity to make much more money selling the variations of little magic pills that flooded the campus every time exam week came nigh (and at the parties that followed suit). It had prevented him from selling to anyone he knew couldn´t really afford it; he´d rather share a smoke with those who had to turn every penny twice, enjoy their company, and write it off as recreational time. It was also what had made him approach Jared Padalecki´s blonde friend with the picture the slightly scary future bride had given him. He liked Jared, just like everyone, and the whole thing had seemed a little off to him – so, well, he felt obligated to help a fellow male human being out and give him a warning.

Afterwards, he wasn´t sure it had been such a good idea. After a rather sleepness night, he´d finally googled the girl – Chad had called her Bela, and after adding a few more search words, the computer found her easily enough on the society pages. What he found on her father didn´t improve his sleep at all. Sure, there were a lot of words like `supposed´, `not confirmed´, `suspected´, `dubious´... nothing concrete, no convictions actually.

Still, it made the hair on his neck stand up. He remembered the visit those two goons had paid him very well, the ones who had `convinced´ him to leave the market to the pros. So he might look like
a coward, or pretty paranoid, but he felt the strong urge to leave town for a while. He had a cousin in California with a nice piece of land behind his slightly decrepit house, shadowed by huge trees – no better way to spend a few weeks, sharing weed and stories and soaking up the cosmic love all around.

Andy had thrown the last two bags into his transporter (his pride and joy, what with the awesome painting job one of his clients had paid him with, and the pretty cozy custom made interior), and was just making his final round through his apartment (you never knew, better be safe than sorry, right?), when someone knocked at the kitchen window.

That´d be Sarah, his neighbor; they used the fire stairs to visit most times, though it was pretty cold right now. She´d told him she´d say good bye and share a smoke before he left.

*I hope she wears the white cap with the fur on top. Always makes her look like a snow princess.*

„I´m coming!“ He shoved the window open and held his head out when he didn´t see her on the stairs. „Sarah?“

Something connected with the side of his head, something big, hard, and cold.

It smashed him against the window frame so hard he got bruises on both sides of his head; but he´d only find that out later, when he´d wake up tied to his own kitchen table (wondering, of all things, where all the stuff that had been piled on it had gone), and his head felt like it´d been squeezed into a hydraulic press. He was glad he woke up at all, what with the blackness that had engulfed him immediately after he´d been hit.

A few minutes later, he wished he hadn´t woken up at all.

*Jared*

Jared had gone to class. He´d tried, really, he did, but his mind just wouldn´t focus... not on the things it was supposed to, at least. His thoughts were spinning like crazy, jumping from topic to topic without any reasonable order, mixing it up with pictures and memories he´d rather not have in front of his inner eye when sitting in a class full of young people and a pretty stuck up professor in front of him. And it wasn´t only images... smells, and scents, and the texture of freckled skin and soft short hair, compared to the more wiry one around...

*OK, that´s enough. You have to get out of here. NOW!*

He stuffed his books and laptop into his bag haphazardly, and left the room, murmuring some undiscernible excuse; running right for the bathroom at the end of the hallway, he finally sank down in one of the stalls and took a deep breath.

*You have to keep your cool, man. Jensen needs you. Megan needs you. And Mack. Chad. Even Bela, dammit.*

He thought of the breathing techniques Gen had shown him when he fell victim to one of his nervous fits before an exam (*again*); Chad had made fun of him, of course, but, well, they´d helped.

*Gen. I need to call Gen.*
Even while he was waiting for her to pick up - _damn, I hope she doesn´t have classes right now_ – something cold and scary crept up his spine.

What if they get to Gen? What if she gets pulled into this, too? Everyone knows we are best friends. What if the Russians... he shuddered. Didn´t want to think it, but it fired up inside his mind all the same.

What if my parents try to get answers?

_Jared_

„You look exhausted, beautiful.“

_How come her voice alone is enough to give me peace... every time, no matter how lost I feel or how deep the shit is._

„Hi, Gen. Thanks for coming.“

She eyed him suspiciously, a frown drawing together her remarkable eyebrows.

„You sounded a little desperate, Jay. Of course I´d come. Besides, everything´s better than suffering through one more hour of Professor Campbell´s class. I swear, one day he´ll kill an entire room full of young people...´Death by boredom´or something like that.‘

Jared watched her fall into a chair. Her exasperated sigh and expressive eyeroll made him chuckle.

„That bad, huh!“

„Worse. I swear, I never thought the artistic history of mythology could be boring, but, well – there you have it. If you try hard enough, you can probably even make the story of the Cuba crisis work as a sleeping pill. God!“ She fake-banged her head on the table.

„Poor Gen....“

She straightened up. „Hell yes, poor Gen! We deserve better than that! I deserve better!“

„That, you do.“

„Right.“

„Right.“

They grinned at each other. Complaining to each other had been one of their regular things, and Jared had to admit it still felt good. Gave them both relief in times of stress.

Gen grimaced. „I´m starving. Boredom always makes me hungry.“

Jared pushed his plate over to her. He´d barely touched the salad he´d ordered.

„Want some?“

„You sure?“, she asked, his fork already in her hand. „Dammit, that´s good“, she went on, mouth
„It´s a new one. Blue cheese dressing and roasted nuts.“

He watched her dig in with gusto. He´d always loved watching her eat. Most girls were shy about it – they rather pretended not to be hungry at all, or ate like little birds, picking at their food. Gen – Gen was different. She could gulp down a burger faster than he – had actually beaten CHAD at a taco eating challenge, which was practically impossible. She ate, and she enjoyed it. Still, she was a 90 pounds lightweight.

„So, what´s up with you? Losing your appetite is never a good sign“, she said, wiping her hands on a paper napkin. „Spill it, Padalecki!“

He smiled, albeit a little forced, and played with the empty can of soda lemon in his hands.

„Trouble in paradise?“ Gen stilled his hands with hers.

He huffed, and it sounded exactly as desperate as he felt, when the whole amount of news that filled his head hit him once more. *What do I tell her? Everything? Parts of it? What about The Plan? She has to know. I can´t just vanish and not tell her...*

Strangely enough, what came out of his mouth, was, „I think I´m in love.“
Chapter 24

Jensen

Jensen woke up disorientated. For a moment, he was back at the hospital, and wondered if they’d transferred him to another room while he was sleeping; then, while his brain slowly caught up with what he saw, the morning’s events came back to him.

Private clinic. Dr. Milton. Treatment.

The dull grey light filtering in through the net curtains did nothing to tell him what time of the day it was; when he looked at his watch, he was surprised to see it was already way past noon.
Someone must have changed the IV bag on the pole, because there was still some liquid slowly dripping into the back of his hand.

You must have slept like the dead .... when was the last time you didn’t wake up even at the slightest sound? Probably before Matt...or even Mom.

He stared at the window, blurring into a grey patch in front of his tired eyes. It felt embarassingly good to just lie there, feel the weight of his own limbs pressing into the mattress, legs, arms, back, all made of lead, his head a huge monstrosity he could barely move. The doctor had told him he’d feel exhausted, especially the first few times .... he’d been exhausted for weeks, months, he was sure it wouldn’t make any difference, but this... this was like someone had sucked all the energy right out of his body and left some sluggish mass instead. Even his mind seemed slowed down, a lazily wobbling pudding where every thought got swallowed before it was even finished.

And yet, he felt strangely content.... to just lie in bed, eyes unfocused, the liquid silently dripping into his blood stream. Not thinking anything in particular. Not even worrying.

I should make some more calls... check The Plan... check on Mack... tell Jared that...

He was asleep again before he even remembered what he wanted to tell him.

Jared

He´d told her. Everything. Well, not exactly every detail, of course, but – the whole thing in general. He’d seen Gen´s eyes grow huge, narrow again, squint at him, only to be opened wide again. Through all of his stumbled words, she remained silent, though, even when he could see it cost her not to interrupt him several times. He´d taken her small hands in his, for strength as much as comfort; and when he finally had finished talking, she slowly pulled them out of his grasp and put hers over his again, squeezing. She stared down on their hands, face a mirror of her battling emotions as much as her confusion; but then, she seemed to visibly pull herself together, and looked up.

„So you´re leaving. For good.“

Jared bit his lower lip. Of all the things he´d told her, his mob family, the russian mafia, suspicious
deaths, the practically forced marriage, Bela, Jensen´s plan... she´d narrowed it down to the one thing that really affected them both most. He´d leave, and they wouldn´t see each other again. Ever.

„Yes“, he croaked.

„Good.“

When he looked up at her, a little surprised, her eyes were determined. There was sadness in them, a hint of anger, even. But it wasn´t directed at him, he could tell as much.

„Your family can´t define who you are, Jared. It´s time you stand up to them.“

He cringed. „Yeah, I ...I know you´re right, but...they´re my family. We are blood.“

She huffed. „They don´t deserve to call themselves your family, Jay. Family doesn´t end with blood, and it sure doesn´t start there either. Being called family... you got to earn that right. And you know we are your family, right? Ava, me, and Chad, Jensen now, too... we have your back.“

„Thanks, Gen.“ His voice was hoarse. He felt his eyes prickling. „I´m sorry I didn´t tell you...about everything ...before. It´s .. I wanted to keep you out of all of this, my family...“

She smiled sadly. „I know. And what you told me about their plans ... jeez, I guess it´s not healthy to meddle with them. Dammit, your Mom had me fooled for good, I´d never have guessed...“ she frowned. „What about Megan? She isn´t -“

„She isn´t part of it. I still hope I can get her out somehow, but ... taking her with us now would most likely destroy any illusion of Jensen and myself `dying´ instead of disappearing. It´ll be hard enough to make Mack´s leaving look coincidental. We´re lucky her studies include far eastern art. Makes her leaving for Japan on short notice not look too suspicious.“

„You realize this plan of yours is pretty ambitious, right? And against not only your family, but two freaking mob organizations?“

Jared ran his hands through his hair in a desperate gesture. „I know, Gen, I know, don´t you think we all do? I mean, what are the odds that we...“ He raised his arms and let them fall down in a helpless gesture. „But it´s our only chance, Gen. I can´t go on like this, I just... I can´t. Now that I know what they... how they think they can manipulate everyone... and the things Jensen told me, how can I even look into their faces! They´re... they are murderers, Gen, on top of everything else, and I´m just done. Done!“

She took his hands again, stroking his white knuckles gently.

„I know you want to keep me out of harms way, Jay, but let me help. You´ll need back up. If nothing else, let me be your confidante.“

He smiled, albeit weakly. „You already are, Gen.“

„Good.“ She smiled back. „Screw them Jay. You and Jensen, you´ll get your happy ending, we´ll see to that.“

He felt the warmth of the blush on his cheeks. „Yeah, well... uhm...yeah.“

She laughed. „Oh dear, you´ve got it really bad, haven´t you!“

He shrugged, grinning sheepishly, face hot.
„God, I´d love to come with you just to see you blush whenever I tease you.‘‘

It wiped the grin off his face in an instant. „You´re sure you can´t come with us?“

She shook her head. „I can´t, Jay. My family´s here, my sis... this is my life, Jay, I can´t just leave everything behind, not without a reason like you do. There´s too many people I´d hurt, and I´d miss.‘‘

„I know...“ He rubbed his face wearily. „It´s just... I don´t wanna lose you, and I don´t wanna leave you here with all the mess. Can you at least leave for a while? I dunno, go somewhere, visit someone for a few weeks, or...“

„I´ll be OK, Jay. Don´t worry about me.‘‘

„I´ll talk to Jensen, he can contact that FBI agent of his, they´ll have to provide some sort of protection for you and your family. It´s the least they can do... I can do.‘‘

She nodded slowly. „That´s OK, I guess. I can live with a little protection, especially knowing that the Russian mob is involved.‘‘

„You sure you´ll be OK?“

She smiled. „Stop it with the puppy eyes, Jay. No, I´ll not be OK, I´ll miss you like crazy ... but as I said, don´t worry about me, I´ll survive. You have others to worry about, your sister, Jensen, Chad... you have to promise me something, Jay.“

„What?“

„Be happy. Promise me you´ll be happy, and I´ll be OK.‘‘

„I´ll try.‘‘

„That´s not enough.‘‘

„OK, I ...I´ll do my best. Everything I´ve got.‘‘

„I can live with that. Take your man and love the crap out of him, you hear me? Make this little family of yours happy, and don´t look back. Don´t you ever look back.‘‘

He smiled, tears stinging in his eyes again.

„Sap.‘‘

„Sap yourself. I´m not the one crying.‘‘

„Yes you are!“

„Shut up.‘‘

They smiled at one another, fingers intertwined in between them, and Jared felt the love for his friend flood him like a wave of warmth.

_I´ll miss you too, Gen. Like crazy._
Chad

Chad had gone back to sleep after Jared had left for his courses. He’d taken a shower, even got dressed, put on some more coffee; but then, somehow he ended up on the sofa, coffee mug on the table, head in his hands; it felt heavier than usual, even for his post-party hangover standards.

Must be all the serious stuff filling my mind. Not used to it... yet.

He still had ten minutes until his class started, and he never was on time (he had his pride, and a reputation to keep). Perfect for a little extra napping time – just to clear his thoughts.

He was woken by the ringing of his cellphone – „The Graduate’s“ title song – later, much later, by the way the crick in his neck hurt when he sat up, looking for his phone.

„Yeah?“ His voice sounded as sleep-filled as his head felt.

„My, my, Chad, if I didn´t know better, I’d think you´ve been sleeping until now.“ He sat up straighter, cleared his throat, even pulled at his crumplet shirt to straighten it.

„Mrs. Padalecki!“

„Chad. It´s Sherri. So – did I wake you up?“

„Uhm, I – I was just napping...“ Dammit, Sherri Padalecki had been impressive before; now that he knew how far she was willing to go for the sake of the Family Business, she was downright scary, even over the phone. He wondered, for a moment, if there were cameras hidden inside the flat. He wouldn´t put it beyond her, not any more.

„Chad, you may be exceptionally talented and have an IQ that surpasses that of us poor `normal´ human beings“ – her tone belied her words, it was clear neither Sherri nor her family fell into that category – „but lazyness can bring down even the gifted ones, you know? You lose your goal, you lose your way – and great minds need bigger aims, higher goals, tougher challenges. That´s why I wouldn´t let Jared ever stray too far ... anyway, Chad, it´s time we met.“

What? Even inside his mind, his voice sounded embarrassingly high pitched.

There was a moment of silence (somehow, it felt icy, although Chad couldn´t tell why).

„Don´t you agree, Chad?“

Dammit, did I say that out aloud?

„No, uhm, sorry, of course we should meet, Mrs. – I mean, Sherri.“

„Good. I´m sorry we kept you in the dark for so long as far as the next weekend is concerned, but you know how it is, one can´t be too careful these days. The walls have eyes and ears... anyway. The event I told you about, it´s all set up and good to go, and I can tell you, it will be absolutely fantastic.“

She seemed to wait for some comment to this – and you can´t just ask her if Jared will consider it as FANTASTIC as she thinks – so he tried to put some enthusiasm into his voice, and got out a „Wow, that sounds great, Sherri, I´m thrilled to hear all about it!“
You should get a freaking Oscar for this performance...

“.I´m glad to hear it, Chad, and believe me, you´ll not be disappointed. So – is tomorrow at noon convenient for you? I thought about meeting at Rudolfo´s, first floor, of course, so make sure to be clothed adequately.”

Chad rolled his eyes, thought of the cameras (dammit, now he was getting paranoid, too!) and stopped immediately.

“.I´m looking forward to it. What time did you have in mind?”

„12.30. And, Chad...“

„Yes, Sherri?“

„Don´t be late. “

Jensen

It was almost dark when Jensen slipped the key into the lock of his family´s town house (one of them, actually; he didn´t even know how many his father had acquired over the years). Lights were on inside, and it gave him an unexpected feeling of being younger again, coming home on a cold winter night, their granny waiting with hot chocolate and cinnamon rolls. It wasn´t an actual memory, but something mixed up by his imaginative mind, things he´d read as a kid, sappy movie scenes and the treasured memories of his Mom he had stuffed somewhere deep down inside his brain. For some reason, his mom was always surrounded by an aureole of golden light in them, and she always smiled with that warm glow in her eyes, the one that shone only for him and Josh and little Mack.

He was well aware that even that memory was tainted, a glorified, mind-photoshopped version of the truth, shadows erased and every color heightened and softened at the same time. His mom hadn´t always smiled, in fact he´d seen her cry, peeping through the banisters, crouched down on the top of the stairway in the house with the green door. He´d been woken by the voices down in the living room – well, not really woken, he´d still been reading under his duvet – angry voices, barely kept down („You´ll wake the kids, Alan! Do you really want them to hear this? Us?“). Another discussion – it never really evolved into a fight, his father tended to leave before that – that ended with his mom standing in the living room in her night gown, her back curved, arms wrapped around herself as if she needed the warmth, or the protection. Only for a moment, though, then she would start cleaning away the toys and Mack´s late evening bottle; and when she turned, one of Mack´s teddy bears pressed to her chest, staring at nothing in particular, he could see her face. She wasn´t angry, not any more, she just looked – scared. Sad. And she had cried, he could see that later, the one time she´d found him there between the banisters, biting his nails down until he almost drew blood.

He realized he´d been standing in front of the entrance door for some time, lost in those memories, the beautiful ones his mind made up for him fading away, leaving him with the real ones. He´d spent that night cuddled against his mother, enveloped in her warmth and her scent and everything that made him feel safe, but it hadn´t been enough to fully shake off the fear and uneasiness that had settled somewhere in his belly.

His dad hadn´t come back that night.
Jensen was surprised how thinking back could still make his anger surface, an anger he’d cultivated on purpose so he couldn’t be swallowed by other feelings instead – grief, and sadness, and dread.

It was cold. He was cold, standing outside hadn’t been such a great idea, snow was still coming down as if it wanted to bury the whole city under a white blanket of pureness.

And wouldn’t that be just how it really is...all the filth tucked away under a glistening surface.

He opened the door, fingers numb already. On shaky legs, he walked down the semi dark hall to the kitchen door, where light spilled out together with a delicious smell.

„Jensen?“

Mack appeared in the door, and she DID have an aureole around her, her blonde hair gleaming golden in the light of the kitchen lamps.

„Hey, Mack...“

She wrapped her arms around him, and for a moment, he let go, head bent down, taking in the scent of her shampoo, of cooking and home.
Chapter 25

Misha

„So he´s home now? The town house?“

„Yup.“

„Who else is there?“

„Only his sister, as far as I can tell. There´s someone in a car down the street though. Ackle´s men I guess.“

„Ok.... I don´t think he´ll leave again tonight. He just had his first treatment after all, and from what our source said, it´s pretty draining. We´ll monitor the house via the camera until tomorrow. The other job went well? No disturbances?“

„Easy as anything, boss. Didn´t take more than five minutes.“

Misha frowned at the blurred reflection of his own face in the car´s window. „Time is essential, but only if coupled with precision. I can´t and won´t tolerate sloppiness, Grigorij.“

He could practically see the man straighten up in the car´s seat, far away. „I´m aware, boss.“

He liked Grigorij. A man of few words, and skilled hands.

„Good. Call back in tomorrow morning. I´ll have Yuri take the night shift at JP´s flat.“

„Thank you, Sir.“

He hung up the phone and put it back into the breast pocket of his elegant black winter coat. He´d melt perfectly into the crowd of the wealthy and self-important tonight, even if he didn´t plan on being actually seen – it was always better to be dressed in a way not to draw attention in case someone stumbled into one of his quiet observation points. He chuckled. Between all those pompous pricks, he´d probably be the only one who actually enjoyed the music.

Jared

The next days went by in a strange routine. Jared would get up, visit the gym as usual, and went to his classes like before; he´d meet with Genevieve for lunch, sometimes joined by Chad, at Ava´s – God, he´d miss the place - , go to some more classes or study groups, and come home in the late afternoon to a dark flat. He´d never realized how unwelcoming their apartment looked when left by two messy guys who had busy schedules (classes or, in Chad´s case, social life, too). He found himself wandering through the flat picking up clothes, shoes, books and electronic stuff from every surface, putting used mugs and glasses in the dishwasher, and turning on the nice lamps Gen had provided for them ages ago. They gave a pleasant warm light and managed to change the whole
atmosphere into something cozy ... a home, waiting for someone. And sure enough, it only felt like a home now when Jensen came over every other day to spend the night, after his classes – he kept visiting his doctor to get some more treatments, although Jared got the impression it made him only worse, tired and nauseous, and on times even pretty unfocused.

They didn´t do much but cuddle on the sofa or in bed, exploring each other´s bodies as much as their past, slow, worshipping sex sometimes followed by lazy talks; but more often, they´d just lie there, limbs tangled, and one of them always seemed to end up with his head on the other´s chest, listening to the heartbeat, the steady rhythm giving them a sense of calm and belonging.

Of course, it was the calm that preceded the storm.

Jensen

„Jensen? JENSEN! OH my God, you gotta see this!!!!“

He stumbled into the hall, quickly closing the heavy entrance door against the wind. The few seconds he´d needed to step inside had been enough to let snow in with the cold; it covered the old tiles like a fine layer of powdery sugar for a moment, before melting away in the warmth inside.

The weather was still crazy. The cold didn´t budge, and the wind had fun blowing into the heaps of snow everywhere, whirling the crystals up and around and gifting every corner with interesting new white piles in various, ever changing shapes.

He´d expected to come back to the first signs of spring; he´d found the city in full winter mode instead, and the weather forecast had promised another few extremely cold days „...before we can all put away the shovels and mittens and feel some springy air on our faces!“. He hated the cheerful voices on television... he had probably lived without them for too long, or it was the fact that he mostly heard them when he was stuck in Dr. Milton´s clinic, getting more of the special cocktail pumped into his veins.

„Mack? What´s...“

„I got it!!! I got it! I got it I got it I got it!!!!“ She almost knocked him over with her enthusiastic hug, but peeled herself off of him and waved a sheet of paper in front of his face.

„The scholarship, Jen!!! In Japan!!! Freaking JAPAN, Jensen! And it starts next week! Next week, Jen! I never expected to get one, not after they had sent out the letters to other students already, but now – I´m going to Japan, Jensen!“

He watched her hop and jump and waltz up and down the hallway like a ballerina on crack, the letter in her hands, face glowing with joy and excitement. It was impossible not to smile and share her overflowing happiness.

I´ll have to thank Agent Whitfield for making this possible...

She stopped and beamed at him. „We need to celebrate! Come on, I was dreaming about that for – forever! Since I started college! Let´s go out! We haven´t been anywhere since you came back, Jen! It´s about time you explored the clubs, there´s so many new ones now, well, that´s what I heard, I wouldn´t know, would I?“
He smiled at her gleaming face, the heightened color of her cheeks. She’s so young. So full of life...

He was glad Whitfield was able to arrange everything as he’d suggested when they were negotiating the terms. And he sure was happy for Mack, although the joy came with a bitter aftertaste. They were two days away from Jared’s wedding... from the execution of their plan. From our death.

A dizzy spell hit him, hard. It was one of the ‘benefits’ of Dr. Milton’s treatment ... sometimes he got the impression it wasn’t only fighting against the parasites inside of him, but against everything else, too, his bones and muscle and skin, even his brain – everything seemed over sensitive and slowed down at the same time.

„It’s similar to the effects of a chemotherapy, Jensen. We’ll try to keep the side effects down with additional medication, but you’ll probably suffer from them nevertheless. Try to get as much rest as possible during the first, intensive phase. It will get better after that. It should, at least. This is a special case, and we don’t have any referential experiences or medical studies.“ No kidding, Dr. Milton.

He barely had done anything but sleep or lie down for the last few days; he’d gone to some of his classes, but often spent them huddled over his desk in the back of the room, trying not to fall asleep, staring at the professor with glassy eyes. It cost him all of his energy to keep up the pretence whenever he was with Mack, or Jared, he had nothing left for college or anything beyond making The Plan happen.

Mack must have seen something in his face, because she suddenly stopped her dancing and babbling and frowned at him.

„Jen, are you OK? God, I’m an idiot. You look beat. I totally forgot, you saw the doctor again today, didn’t you? How did it go? Is everything OK now? You know, all those scans, I dunno, aren’t they bad for you? Radiation and electromagnetic fields and everything? You seem so tired all the time, don’t you think that’s -“

He stopped her by pressing her lips together with his fingers, something he’d done when they were kids and she wouldn’t ever stop talking at night, when they were supposed to sleep. She glared at him, but he smiled back, grinned, even.

„It’s OK, Mack. I’m Ok. Just tired. But if you don’t stop talking, I’ll get a headache, and I’ll be no fun then, you know that.“ He released her mouth, and she smacked her lips together.

„I’m sorry, Jensen, I’m – hell, I’ll go out with my friends tomorrow, it’s your Jared night anyway, we’ll just stay home tonight, open a bottle of champagne, or sake, I still have the bottle uncle Jim gave me. I have been waiting for a special occasion to try it for ages!“

She took his hand and pulled him into the living room. He wanted to protest, tell her no, they’d go out, have some fun... but then he just let her guide him to the sofa, and press him into the soft cushions; he was too exhausted to insist. They ordered in japanese food, sipped Jim’s sake, watched a Kurosawa movie and a few anime shows (Mack insisted they were art, too), Mack made all sorts of plans; and finally they got up and reluctantly trumped up the stairs to their bedrooms. Jensen was already half through his door when Mack suddenly called him back.

„Jen?“ He turned around, and stumbled when he was hit by her full body hug once more.

She buried her face at his chest, and he automatically tugged her closer, and rested his chin on her head.
„Hey, munchkin, what´s up?“ His voice was soft and rough at the same time, tongue a little heavy from the wine – his body didn´t take well to alcohol since the treatment had started. He could feel the huffs of her warm breath through his shirt, and something wet touched his skin. Her shoulders shook. 

„Mack? Hey, you OK?“

She shook her head, still not looking up. He stroked her hair with one hand, gripping her even tighter with the other; he started to rock them back and forth, tiny movements, and after a while started to hum a melody he remembered from their childhood. He wrecked his brain, but the lyrics wouldn´t surface. She calmed down, and so did he, lost in a twilight zone between the past and the present, mixed up like it happens in dreams. 

Finally, she pulled away a little and looked up at him. He found it difficult to focus. 

„So? What was that about?“

She smiled, tears still hanging in her long lashes. „You´ll come visit me, right? In Japan?“

He wiped away the wetness in the corners of her eyes.

„Already miss me, huh?“

She shoved him weakly. „I just got you back, Jen. Of course I´ll miss you like crazy! Even your obnoxious stubborn side.“

„I don´t know what you´re talking about, little sis. I´m wax in your hands, couldn´t say no to you if my life ...“ He stopped abruptly. But that´s exactly it, right? Your life, Jareds life, Mack ´s, they all depend on you. Something cold crept up his spine.

„Jen? Are you OK?“

He shook off the feeling and smiled down at her. „I am. Are you?“

She nodded. „Guess it´s just nerves. The whole thing...it came so fast, I guess I wasn´t as prepared as I thought.“ She leaned against his chest again. „God, this time next week I´ll be on the other side of the world, studying at the Tokyo Institute of Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts.“ She looked up again. „It´s kind of...unreal, you know? Like a dream.“

He kissed the top of her head.

„I know. But you´ll be OK, Mack. You´re smart and beautiful and generally awesome, and you´ll blow them away. Trust me, I´m your big brother, and I know things like that.“

He could feel her grin against his chest. 

„You better do. And you´ll come visit so you can see for yourself, right? I need my big brother to show him off.“

He kissed her hair again. „If you find me a cute little almond-eyed guy, I might be tempted.“

She giggled. „Almond-eyed? Really, Jensen? I wonder what Jared would say to that?“

He grinned. „He´d probably be enthusiastic about the addition to our bedroom?“

„Jensen!“ She shoved him, for real, this time, and he stumbled back, both of them laughing. And
just like that, he could feel the tension fall off her shoulders, her eyes were beaming again, full of mischief and expectation.

„You good, little sis?“

She nodded, and got up on her toes to kiss him. „I am.“ She pressed her lips against his cheek, already stubbly after a long day. „Thank you“, she whispered, hugged him once more, and danced over to her bedroom´s door.

„Night, Jen.“

„Sleep tight, princess.“

„Don´t call me that!“

„Ok, princess.“

She threw her sweater at him. „I´ll find the ugliest male of whole Japan for you and make you kiss him. You´ll see!“

He grinned. „And when I kiss him, he´ll turn into a Prince Charming, and you´ll be jealous for the rest of your life. I´m magical like that."

„You already have your Prince Charming, what would you do with another one? That´s greedy!“

„Always good to have a spare one. Waste not, want not!“

„Oh, you...“ She pulled a face, and showed him her tongue, much like she´d done back when she´d been five years old.

He laughed, feeling better than in days, and made what she´d always called his `fish face´- crossing his eyes and puckering up his lips.

Jared

„This time tomorrow, I´ll be a married man.“

Jared spoke into Jensen´s shoulder, his chest pressed against the other man´s back, both their legs tangled. They always seemed to end up like this. „Sometimes I don´t know where one of you ends and the other one starts“, Chad had called him on it after the third time Jensen had stayed the night.

Sometimes, I don´t know either... and not only in a physical sense.

„Nervous?“ Jensen´s voice was a rough croak, heavy with sleep. Jared loved it that way. It defied Jensen´s delicate features, his seemingly fragile body.

He huffed. It made Jensen´s hair tickle his chin and nose.

„Not because of the wedding... but for all the other reasons – yes, I´m nervous.“ He tucked Jensen closer, took in the scent of his hair, his skin. „To be honest... I´m scared. There´s so much that can go wrong, so many people could get hurt...“
Jensen wriggled in his arms and turned so he could face him. His eyes were huge, dark in the scarcely lit bedroom. He’d already lost most of the tan he’d brought home from the jungle; his freckles stood out against the pale skin. Jared couldn’t help it, he had to kiss the cluster on the bridge of his nose, on his cheekbones. Jensen just closed his eyes and let him, holding still, lashes fluttering. When Jared was done and lay back on his pillow again, Jensen’s eyes opened.

„I know. We can still blow the whole thing off, Jay. We don’t have to take the risk, maybe we can work out something else... later.“ He didn’t sound very convinced, and Jared could hear his own nervous doubts in Jensen’s voice.

He took the other man’s face in his hands.

„No way. This is our one shot, Jen. Our plan is good. We just... just have to hope it works out...“

Jensen’s fingers ran over his face, followed his eyebrows, down the prominent cheekbones, played with the strands of hair curling around his ear. His face seemed softer, younger all of a sudden, the taught lines around his eyes and mouth gone for once.

„We’ll make it work. Against all the odds.“ There was a smile in his eyes.

Jared felt calmer instantly, safe in the arms that held him, lost in the depth of the golden-green gaze.

„I love you“, he murmured.

Jensen’s smile spread over his whole face, it seemed lit from within with a glowing warmth.

„I love you too“, he whispered, exhaustion already tugging at the corners of his mouth again.

It was only when Jared had been listening to Jensen’s deep breathing for a few minutes already, warm huffs tickling at his throat, that he realized they’d said it for the first time.

They’d checked, and double checked every step of THE PLAN – Jared had started to think of it in capital letters –, Chad had given them whatever information he could wriggle out of Sherri, even Bela had been nothing but helpful, providing them with not only a detailed guest list, but also the unofficial time table (it was impressively full) and most of the security detail planned by both of the families. Jared didn’t ask how she’d managed to get her hands on that; he wasn’t sure he even wanted to know. Jensen had left in the middle of the night, having to get things going at his end. They wouldn’t see or hear each other again until they’d come together at the meeting point, a private section of the airport used by the FBI. They had changed their phones once more – hopefully, for the last time – and Jared had accompanied Jensen down the flight of stairs like every time he’d left before. A strange feeling had crept up his spine when he watched Jensen put on his boots and slip into his warm jacket, a foreboding chill that made him grope for Jensen’s long scarf, wrap it around his neck and pull him close, just to have something to do with his hands and keep them from shaking. Jensen smiled up at him, though, his face was calm. He didn’t seem to share Jared’s sudden dreadful premonitions. Once down at the entrance door, they hugged one last time, exchanged a kiss, and then just stood for several minutes, fronts touching, hands gripping unto one another’s faces.

„See you at the airport“, Jensen said when they finally parted.
Jared nodded. He didn’t trust his voice. Jensen squeezed his arm, and turned to open the door. Jared watched him trudge through the snow, hunched over against the wind, and open the door of the waiting cab. Before he got in, Jensen looked up once more, and sent him another smile, his eyes so full of emotions Jared could almost feel them on his skin. He raised his hand in a half wave, and then Jensen was gone in a blur of red tail lights and snow crystals.

Jared shivered; but it wasn’t only the cold wind outside that made him wrap his arms around himself.
Chapter 26

The Plan

Jared

The wedding was, according to Bela´s information, planned as a mixture of a few Polish and Russian traditions; there was a strict „family only“ policy as far as the guestlist was concerned (which, when Jared thought about the list his mother had been putting together for Jeff´s wedding for months, was a miracle and a blessing). There wasn´t even an archbishop or metropolit involved, no cathedral, no line-up of impressive cars; not even an official announcement in the big newspapers – there would be some sort of exclusive story after the wedding, „written by someone trustworthy“, as Bela had put it (meaning on her father´s payroll, most likely), with pictures and everything.

Due to the private, secretive character of the whole act, everything would be held at the Padalecki´s mansion, an „official“ blessing of some sort (after the traditional blessing the parents gave the young couple), bread and salt for the newlyweds, and then food, drinks (lots of them), dance and merriment. The happy newlyweds would leave to enjoy their short honeymoon together, just a few days in a remote mountain lodge (on demand of Bela, who declined her father´s ideas – ranging from his yacht on the Bahamas to their private place in Maoii, much to his surprise – „We only have a weekend, Daddy, and I want Jared and me to be alone, we have to get to know each other after all!“); accompanied to the airport by the best man whose responsibility it was to a) get them there safely and b) see to it that „everything was done right“ (whatever that included, from having their suitcases ready to providing aqua-selzer).

All of it, of course, would take place under the watchful eyes of an impressive number of security personel, which gave them only a minimal time slot to make The Plan happen.

For once, Jared was glad about Bela´s demanding personality; if the bride suddenly felt the urge to make a detour to a drive-in and order burgers on the way to her honeymoon, no one would bat an eyelid; and if said drive-in was the only one serving its greasy food underground, and with a bend in the access drive and one at the exit that made surveillance impossible for about two minutes – well, they served a legendary spicy burger there, and if the bride craved said burger before the big act, she´d get it, right?

Garth would be waiting for them there, hidden in a maintenance corridor, dressed as groom; they´d exchange Jared´s tuxedo jacket and hat, and while he and Bela would be driven to the airport acting their part (at least until they were inside the lodge), Jared would change clothes, too, and leave the huge complex where the drive-in was situated in a different car, left there by Gen, through an exit at the other end of the building, and drive to the airport – always looking out for potential tails. The „accident“ would take place up in the mountains, on one of the slippery roads leading down from the lodge, but not too close, where „Jared“ was supposed to meet „Jensen“ and make a run for it. It was the part that had needed the most preparation – and Jared still was sceptical about the whole thing; but Jensen seemed to have arranged everything smoothly, with the help of Bela, whose criminal skills and resources, as impressive as they were, started to freak Jared out pretty fast.

Bela would play the mourning/angry young wife, their „remains“ would be buried; Mack would leave for Japan – Jensen had prepared a letter for her, explaining everything, hoping she´d
understand – Chad would hopefully be able to survive his collaboration (Jensen´s FBI-man promised he´d have an eye on him, and Gen, of course).

And Jensen and me.....we´re gonna be somewhere far far away, with false identities and protected by a federal agency. Hopefully, with some sand between our toes....

Jared dared to daydream, slipping into his perfectly fitted tuxedo and fidgeting with the bowtie. Jensen in shorts and nothing else, the sun playing on his freckled skin...salt on his shoulders, a fine layer to be licked and tasted and nipped away. His hair bleaching in the sun, and the taught lines on his face smoothed away by warmth and safety and... freedom.

Jensen had met with the agent for hours, in some hush-hush place he wouldn´t tell Jared about; he´d obviously given the FBI some crucial extra information to bring down his father´s organization – wherever and how he got it, Jensen wouldn´t say; all Jared knew was that there was some wunderkind involved, Felicia, who obviously was an old friend.

Jared stared at his reflection in the mirror. He looked... solemn.

He missed Jensen. How have you gotten used to having him over every other day so fast... his sheer presence calming you, centering you, quieting down your restlessness -

„Dude, you done? Your Mom is ready to eat me alive if you aren´t, so your answer better be yes!“ Chad slipped into his room, the same one where they´d spent many a night during summer break as kids (whenever they weren´t in camp or doing some extra courses their parents deemed necessary for their education).

Jared sighed. His Mom. When he´d come to his parents´ house the day before, as requested, feigning ignorance of everything that was going on (and ignoring the dozens of people scurrying around cleaning, decorating, and bringing in food), she´d taken him to her office. They had The Talk, finally: and Jared was informed he was doing what was best for himself and the Family, was being an adult and considerate member of the company, and doing everyone and the whole world a favor, by forgetting about his „experiments“. Plus he was making his parents proud. Oóh so proud.

„You OK?“

Chad looked at him, an unusual worried frown on his face. Jared smiled at him in the mirror. It looked nervous.

„I´m good. Just – you know. Big Day.“

„Yeah, in so many senses...“ Chad walked over, giving his appearance a once-over.

„You´ll be fine, Jay. All of you. One more day, a little acting, and you´ll be out of here. That´s the goal. Focus on the goal.“

Jensen appeared in his mind, his smile, slow and shy in the beginning, but glowing with something Jared had never shared with anyone else. Tomorrow.... tomorrow before dawn, we´ll be gone.

The Plan

Jensen
He had the whole day and most of the night to pass until he’d meet Jared at the airport; everything was planned, all the steps set in motion; Garth, being the loyal friend he was, ready to jump into the car, swapping places with Jared; Felicia had provided enough top secret information on his father’s organization to calm down the FBI’s nerves; the FBI had contributed two matching bodies and had stowed them somewhere in the mountains, while a truck filled to the rim with fuel was waiting nearby (Jensen had the distinct impression Agent Whitfield was keeping the whole operation under the radar; if anything went wrong – it can’t, and it won’t – they’d certainly deny any connection to the whole event...). They had what they wanted, anyway – no matter what happened to Jared, or Mack, or Bela, or Jensen. The Ackles Imperium would fall...

It was his last day at Dr. Milton´s clinic, and despite the usual exhaustion hitting him after half an hour, he felt restless. Sleep wouldn’t come, thoughts rattling through his mind in high speed – faces appeared, voices, memories, all mixed together in a whirling, incessant stream...Jared, Mack, the kitchen in their old house, Uncle Jim on the wooden stairs to his home, Josh laughing down at him from the tree in the yard, Matt with adorably messed up bedhair, smiling lazily at him from the other side of the bed...his mom, baby Mack in her arms, humming a lullaby....his father, frozen in his grief, turning his pain into a cold anger that kept eating at him from within.... and that’s exactly how you started to deal with it, right? Anger...

His friends in the tribe, owning so little and giving so much...

He must have fallen asleep at some point; it was late afternoon already when he was woken by the nurse, his treatment done.

After meeting Dr. Milton again – „We´ll pause for a week and see how your body reacts, then we’ll start a new round of treatments“ – he left the elegant building, his cab already waiting at the curb. Mack would be out, celebrating her scholarship with her friends; he’d not see her again before leaving, which was probably for the best.

All the parking spots were taken in front of the town house – or filled with piled up snow -, so the driver let him get out a few houses down the street. Jensen felt tired and nervous at the same time, dizzy from the medication, as always.

Mack had left the lights on in the living room, so he wouldn’t come home to a dark house. It cast rectangular spots on the pavement, sharp ornaments between the islands of yellowish light around the old fashioned street lamps. He dragged his feet through the slushy snow, glad to be almost home, shoulders hunched against the cold. He almost ran into someone in one of the darker spots in between two lamps, and stumbling, felt a hand grip his arm tightly, straightening him up.

„Oh, sorry, I didn´t see you...thanks....“ He looked up into a handsome face, framed by a wild mass of mussed black hair. Intense eyes bore into his, dark in the shadows. A smile tugged at the corners of a perfectly shaped mouth; a smile that sent a shiver up Jensen´s spine, but not a pleasant one. He tried to take a step back from the stranger, but the hand on his arm didn’t loosen.

„Hello, Jensen. It´s a pleasure to finally meet you in person.“ The smile didn’t falter, even grew, and every alarm started to go off inside Jensen´s head, but before he could use the adrenaline rush hitting him, he felt himself wrapped in a tight hug, his cold cheek pressed against an ever colder, stubbly one, and the last thing he heard before everything turned into a blurred dream, were whispered words...

„Shhh...you won´t feel a thing, Jensen. Not a thing.“
Misha

He was beautiful. He’d known, of course, from surveillance and all the pictures he’d looked at, more than once.... perfect features, even more enchanting because of the signs of fatigue and illness.

What a face....

Shadows and blurred lights ghosted over the delicate cheekbones, the plush, slightly opened lips, in a rhythm created by the car’s drive through streets that were now less busted than an hour before; traffic was still dense, though. Soon they’d be outside of the city and its daily jam .... a place where the snow was actually white, and glistening, a pure, untainted finish to a distorted, dark painting.

Perfect like this man... beautiful, and deadly....

His fingers found the eyebrow, followed it to the corner of the eye, wandered down the cheek, over the roughness of a five-o-clock shadow only visible to his fingertips. The lips were as soft as they’d looked, despite the chapped skin.

Lips Michelangelo would have carved in stone ... a piece of art, living and breathing, right in my lap.

He felt elated. Excited like he hadn’t in years. This man, this piece of art, was breathing because he still allowed him to. His life was in his hands. He was his.

I am the Master over Death and Life.

His God.

The man stirred under his exploring fingers. He wasn’t asleep, not really; just paralyzed and dazed, unable to react, but still conscious enough to feel at least part of what was going on. Misha wouldn’t hurt him, not yet; he wasn’t sentimental about this job, not at all, but he’d decided to take his sweet time and have a little pleasure for once. Touching someone completely knocked out wasn’t fun. He wanted to be felt, to be recognized, as the power he was. Feared. Loved. He was The Angel, after all. An angel as far away from the repulsively cute, glittery plaster models sold at street stands and church shops. He was the smiting angel with the fiery sword, fierce and unyielding.

You are worthy of my sword, Jensen....not like all the thugs and politicians dirtying the face of the earth, all the others whom I took away...

You are worthy of the sword you will fall by.

Jared

Dinner was almost over, and Jared began to get restless – even more so than before. The ceremony
had gone well, everything, in fact, had gone unexpectedly well, perfectly organized by his mother. He was playing along, smiling and saying what was expected of him, even kissing Bela longer and more passionate than she probably had foreseen, his hand at the back of her head keeping her in place. Who cared that he thought of entirely different lips when he met hers? Of short, soft hair, a scratchy chin, calloused hands instead of Bela´s soft, tiny fingers on his cheeks? She played along, holding his face, standing on her toes, and the whole room awwwed and ooohhed, touched by the picture of affection they offered.

It wasn´t a complete lie. He didn´t love Bela, sure, but he´d learned to appreciate her intelligence and skills. He was grateful... their whole plan wouldn´t have had the slightest chance without her cooperation. Of course, she profitted from it, too; but she could have gotten what she wanted without taking such a high risk.

He´d merely played with his food, until his grandma´s famous pirogy were served, a nice surprise; he felt her beady eyes on him and tried to enjoy them as much as possible. He even stole one from Bela´s plate, which made her feed him two more, much to the delight and laughter of the family sitting at the table. Cameras were clicking away, and he was sure one of the pictures would make it into the article Bela had mentioned, „Jared Padalecki, bachelor of all our dreams, already eating out of his wife´s hand at the wedding“ in bold letters under it...

Then he remembered... I won´t be here by then, I´ll be dead. This version of me will be dead.

He looked at his watch. Only half past ten ... still so many hours to pass until he´d see Jensen. And no contact until then, not even a short text message – Jensen had been adamant about it, „No extra risks, Jay, it´s risky enough as it is“.

So, he would be playing along... what else could he do.

Jim

He stopped in front of the house he´d once visited regularly, but hadn´t set a foot into for a while... years, actually. He´d met Mack, of course, but never here, in the town house. Lights were on inside; even when Mack was out with friends (the detail her father had following her had told him as much), Jensen should be home then. Relief flooded him. The men they´d had on his tail had somehow lost him on the way home from the ominous clinic, and had arrived late at the place, involved in some minor traffic incident; but it seemed as if everything was alright.

Ever since Alan had told him about the shady involvement of the FBI in the whole Matt story, he couldn´t shake off a feeling of uneasiness. Jensen didn´t trust easily, had learned not to the hard way, but for some reason, he put enough trust into this agent Whitfield (Jim already hated the guy) to contact him regularly. What did he get in return for his collaboration? Knowing Jensen, he would hardly ask for something for himself... for Mack, on the other hand, he´d do practically everything. Anything.

Jim shivered.

He´d sell his soul for her.

If he trusted Mack´s judgement – and he did – the same went for his lover, the Padalecki boy.

He stared up into the warm yellow light streaming down from the bay window.
He’d pobably also sell his father´s business for them.

Including his father.

After a moment, he sighed and got out into the cold, huddled into his jacket.

Alan might be too proud to talk to his son, but Jim sure as Hell wasn´t. This was going too far. Jim knew he and Alan were up for some kind of judgement day, sometime – rather sooner than later. But the idea of Jensen being possibly played by the people he trusted in – it didn´t sit well with Jim. Not at all.

So, he trudged up the steps to the entrance door and rang the doorbell.

Nothing happened.

He waited, and rang again; rang, in fact, again and again, even kept his finger on the button for two entire minutes. Then, he tried Jensen´s „official“ phone number, the one he´d gotten from Mack.

Nothing.

Jim knew for sure Jensen was not with Padalecki this night.

This wasn´t good. He remembered the doorbell as being obnoxiously loud and shrill, so it could be heard right up to the attic. This doorbell would raise the dead in a cemetery.

He regretted the thought as soon as it had appeared in his mind.

He shivered, but it wasn´t only the cold that shook him.

He pulled out his phone, and after having his finger hoover over Mack´s name for a few seconds, called Alan.
Chapter 27

Jared

The hours after dinner had passed surprisingly fast, what with dancing, cutting the cake, more dancing, speeches and toasts and blessings. His feet hurt, and he wondered briefly how Bela was even still walking in the killer high heels she was wearing. They’d soon be leaving, the official party was coming to an end, older guests already snoozing in the chairs and sofas; he already saw his mother giving orders to the head of staff, while Bela’s father discussed something with one of the security guys – he was pretty sure their security detail was informed of the newlyweds’ imminent departure.

Not long, now... two, three hours, and you’re at the airport.

A sudden longing filled him, head to toes, as if his whole body suffered from the absence his heart so clearly felt. His chest constricted painfully, and for a moment, the need to see, to feel, hear and smell Jensen was almost desperate.

„Now now, there, darling, I won’t tolerate a husband crying depressingly in a corner of the room on our wedding night.“

He jerked. Bela had whispered into his ear from behind him, he hadn’t seen her approach him – too wrapped up in his own thoughts. She came to stand in front of him, and bowing down to him, wiped a strand of hair out of his face, a gesture showing off their „affection“ in front of the whole room. He did his best to smile up at her, a little shaky still. She smirked down at him. „That’s better. Come on, the show’s almost over. Let’s go get the whole ‘saying officially good bye’-thing over with.“ She took his hands and pulled him up, smoothly snuggling at his side while they were slowly making their way over to where their parents were standing together.

His Mom looked at them, her face practically glowing with smug contentedness.

„Mama and Papa Padalecki, thank you for a wonderful, wonderful wedding, we had a splendid time in your welcoming home; but now, if you allow, I’d like to take this stunning young man with me to a celebration of a more intimate nature."

Jared coughed. Jesus, where did one learn to talk like that! Must be the fancy British boarding school....He felt Bela’s fingers painfully pressing into his side.

Before he could open his mouth though, his mother saved him from having to find something equally eloquent to say.

„Oh dear darlings, of course! We were just alerting staff to get everything ready. The limousine will be waiting outside in ten minutes, so you can say good bye properly and get your grandmothers’ blessings.“ She bent forward to add, in quieter tones, „We’ll have to wake your babcia first, Jared, she’s taking a little nap over there, but she’d never forgive us if we make her miss your departure!“ Jared looked in the direction she was pointing to, and saw his grandmother soundly asleep in a stuffed chair, a plaid over her knees, one of the maidens standing nearby to watch over her. A pang of guilt made his chest hurt. From all of his family, his grandmother would be the only one – aside from Megan, of course – he’d really miss, and not only because of her cooking.
Sherri excused herself and walked over to her husband, who was talking to a group of Russians nearby.

Jared felt Andrej´s pale blue eyes on him.

„So, Jared, I´ll be looking forward to seeing you at the first official meeting of our families´ now joined forces...I´ve heard only the best about your skills so far, it will be a pleasure to add such a promising young talent to our legal department."

Jared stared back, transfixed by the coldness in the other man´s eyes, the threat underlying his words (or are you hearing things now...). Only Bela´s sharp little fingernails prevented him from making a complete fool of himself. He pulled himself together.

*Play the role, man, just a little while longer...*

„The pleasure is all mine, Andrej. I´m thrilled to prove myself outside of the academic world, and what better place than a cluster of thriving companies with branches all over the world."

„Indeed.....although you might find real life law work less...entertaining than your time in college with its fulfilling – how do you call it – social life."

Again, he felt the threat behind the jovially enough spoken words. He held Andrej´s gaze for a moment, until Bela´s voice interrupted their silent struggle.

„I´m sure you´ll find interesting enough things for Jared to handle, Daddy, and as far as the social life is concerned, well, I am planning on keeping him busy enough in that department, so don´t worry about him!“

Andrej smiled down at her for a second.

„I am absolutely sure of that, devochka“, he said. When he looked back at Jared, the warmth left his eyes again.

„It´s all a question of eliminating the... unworthy distractions, right? How do the Americans put it so well... Get your priorities right!“

„Exactly“, Jared managed to croak out. A chill ran up and down his spine, made his heart clench with fear.

Again, Bela saved the situation (God, she wasn´t wrong about that Oscar!) when she playfully slapped her father´s arm.

„Well, Daddy, I will be his number one priority from now on, so don´t you dare take him away for too long from me for some tedious law work!“

*Ten minutes, and we´re out of here.*

*Ten minutes. You can do that.*

_Jensen_

Everything was a blur. Light and darkness rapidly alternated on his face, making his eyes sting
under the half-closed lids; they wouldn´t close, even as he willed them to. They were moving, and something, someone was touching his face, *fingertips*, but it wasn´t Jared´s hand, he knew his touch by now.... he was lying, bent a little awkwardly on the back seat of a car, probably, and his head... it rested in someone´s lap, but again, it wasn´t Jared´s lap, not his scent, not his body, not...

*What the Hell happened.*

He was trying hard to get his mind to work, to fill the blurred dark spaces. He had gotten out of the cab... yellow lights on the sidewalk, exact rectangular forms on the trampled snow, already powdered with a fresh layer of white.

A man. He´d run into a man, and.... they hugged. *Why did we....*

Something had stung him.

*Drugged. He´s drugged you... paralyzed you, somehow...that´s why you can´t move, can´t think straight... some neurotoxical substance, probably...* His thoughts began to swim again, although he desperately tried to grab at them, keep them clear, but everything blurred together, the touches, the moving car, maybe he was still at the clinic, just dreaming, or maybe it was only one of his visions, a vivid, scary flash of pictures that had hit him at the rituals more than once, seemingly unrelated yet forming a story, somehow, like seeing a whole movie in one second, all the scenes at once... *yeah, that must be it. Can´t be real. Must´nt be real.*

*Misha*

„Take him to the place I told you, lock him in, and wait for further instructions. No one touches him.“

„Yes, Boss.“ The man even saluted. *Can´t deny where he´s coming from.*

„What about food, water?“ The other one... Yuri.

„There should be enough stored away in the building. But there will be no need for you to bother with it. I´ll come up myself sometime tomorrow after I´ve finished business down here. He´ll still be unresponsive most of the time anyway.“

The man nodded briefly.

„Don´t damage the merchandise“, Misha added. „I like my special clients to die in pristine conditions.“

The man´s eyes flicked up for the first time, and shifted away immediately.

„Understood.“

They both turned and climbed into the bulky truck. The little lodge where they´d take Jensen was too far up in the woods to be reached in a normal street car in winter.

He´d be told to eliminate Jensen, and he would; keeping him alive for just a little more time, bathing in the feeling of power that went with it, was a luxury he rarely granted himself. It also served to prove it to himself that he was an indepent player still... not just the Russian mob bosses´
bitch. He might do what he was told to do... but in his own individual ways.

He was an artist, after all.

Andrej

„You don´t let them out of their sight until they are at the airport and enter that damn plane. I don´t trust that Polish little shit. Or my darling daughter, at that.“

„Right.“

„And contact Yuri and Grigorij. I know they are on duty for The Angel tonight. Check on them, and make it clear to them they should fear me more than the man working for me.“

„Done.“

„Good. And as for the Big Meeting on Monday – let´s show those Polish derevenshchina how to lead a real business meeting.“

„As you wish, Boss.“

He hung up his phone and leant back in the plush back seat of his limousine.

Pressing the intercom, he leant forward a little once more.

„Mihail, tell the manager of the „1001 Nights“ we´re stopping by. Let´s pick up some company...we´ve got a wedding to celebrate, after all.“

Jim

Maybe this was fate´s idea of payback.

He´d been the one to make people disappear, or at least to order others to do so, for a long time, after all. Didn´t matter that he hadn´t made them leave the state (or worse) himself; his hands were dirty, he couldn´t deny it.

Well, now he knew first hand how it felt to be at the receiving end. How your heart, your whole chest seemed to pull together into a tight knot, each time you let your thoughts wander to the inevitable What if...

Alan had been furious. Then shocked. Then cold as ice. Then fuelled by his usual anger again. Pushed into hectic overdrive by it. Had sent everyone out.

He, he was just – scared. Trying to get over the paralyzing feeling of dread. Looking for words to tell Mack already, in case Jensen didn´t show up. Wasn´t found.

At least she´s OK and safe.
For now.

He stared at his phone, willing it to ring and dreading it at the same time.

What if the news you get is the wrong one...

He felt old, and tired.

It had been hours, and no sign of Jensen. Like he´d been swept from the face of the earth.

He´d even driven over to the Padalecki boy´s flat, just to confirm that he was at his parents´ place outside of town for real. Celebrating his freaking wedding, the damn fucker. How is Jensen OK with this? What the Hell were they playing at?

Something bigger was going on, he knew his `nephew´ good enough to be sure about that; but how had the boy managed to keep anything out of their eyes? They´d been so thorough...

He´s too smart for his own good. And as stubborn as his damn father.

And gone.

It didn´t make things easier if you knew first hand how to make someone – a body – disappear for good.

Grigorij

„Who was it?“

„The Big Boss."

„The Angel? New instructions?“

„No, not him. The one above him. Or, someone calling on his behalf at least."

Yuri gaped. „Andrej?“ His voice sounded unusually squeaky. „I mean“, he collected himself and straightened his shoulders. „What did he want?“

„He made it clear we are following his orders first."

Yuri shot him a nervous glance.

„We...uhm...we won´t get into a mess because we followed the Angel´s orders, will we?“

Grigorij huffed. „We´ll find out soon enough."

„Dammit....“ Yuri´s voice was a rough whisper only.

Grigorij stared at the cards in his hand. It was all a game...a complicated game of cards with ever changing rules. It was important not to miss the shifting of power. And, rule number one: Always stay in the bank´s good graces.

Yuri fiddled with his deck, their actual game forgotten.
He opened his mouth to say something when Grigorij’s phone started ringing again.

„Yes.“

„Grigorij... my trusted man.“ The words were slightly slurred. Someone had had their share of alcohol – and probably more – this night.

He sat up, immediately on alert. „Boss.“

He saw Yuri’s eyes go wide.

„I understand you’ve got the second Ackles´ spawn secured in one of our mountain places.“

„Yes, Sir.“

„So he’s still alive?“

„Yes, Sir.“

„And why’s that?“ The voice was silky.

Grigorij gulped. „Because...The Angel told us to keep him alive for now, Boss.“

„Ah... but see, Grigorij, I am giving the orders here. And I want him dead. Now.“

„I – yes, Boss.“ His hands felt clammy all of a sudden, fingers tight around the well used playing cards.

„And Grigorij... no need to be subtle.“

„I understand, Sir. The body?“

„Hmmmm...“ Someone talked in the background, a low murmur, some female giggling, a seductive moan. „We’ll leave that to The Angel. Or, even better...“ He hummed appreciatively, whether at his own string of thoughts or because of something his female companions did, Grigorij couldn’t tell.

„Just leave him there.“

„As you wish, Boss.“

The call disconnected, and Grigorij slowly put the phone on the table, then the deck of cards. Yuri stared at him with glassy eyes.

He shoved back his chair violently.

„Come on, we’ve got work to do.“

Jensen

It was cold.

It had been for a while already; at first, it had hurt, but not any more now.
He was able to move minimally, now, sluggish, pathetic little shifts of his bound arms and useless legs, a twitching of his fingers. And his eyes, although it didn’t make much difference: The room was pitch dark, damp, too, and smelled of wet concrete and chalk.

_A basement._

He couldn’t remember getting here. It had become increasingly difficult to breathe while he still was in that other car, with the fingers wandering over his face, and then everything had turned black for a while... now, it was dark, too, but he was pretty sure he was awake. And that what he felt, and smelled, was real.

_So that’s it, then._

_The plan ... Jared..._

Before he could finish the thought, a wave of dizziness swept over him again. He sucked in the freezing air in short little gulps, trying to get more oxygen into his protesting lungs.

It wasn’t enough... he slipped from the cold, clammy darkness surrounding him right into that other, welcomingly warm one without even noticing.
Chapter 28

Jared

It all kept going smoothly. Scarily so. They sverved into the lane leading down to the underground diner, peeping through the back window to see the tail car change lanes too, a few cars behind them.

*Bait taken.*

Bela had ordered her burgers on the phone so it would be delivered immediately.

They halted, and only a minute later, the paper bag was reached through their window. Jared looked at the car behind them; they were lucky again, a car full of teenagers had slipped in between them and Andrej’s security guards; they were still discussing what to order. It would give them extra time.

Bella told the driver to stop for a moment as Jared `didn´t feel well´; they got out, Bela heroically supporting Jared on one side, Chad on the other, they slipped into the corridor through the maintenance door – and there was Garth, ready to take Jared´s jacket and hat, but starting with hugging them all tightly.

„I know we don´t know each other, but – friends of Jensen´s are my friends, too.“

Jared gaped when the eerily skinny guy took a wig out of a box, put it on his head, and shoved the hat right over it. Together with the suit, he looked similar enough to Jared, at least from a distance.

Bela pulled a big handkerchief out of her white brides´ purse and pressed it into Garth´s hand. „Take it, and put it over your mouth. „Jared“ feels sick, so you can use it to hide part of your face.“

„Brilliant!“, Garth exclaimed enthusiastically. Jensen´s friend seemed to actually enjoy his role in the whole affair.

*Does he know about the risks, too?*

He had to; Jensen would never lead anyone, much less a friend, into danger like this without making them aware of the downsides.

The next second, he was surprised by Bela hugging him tightly; she pecked a kiss on his cheek, „Make your boy happy, Jared!“ Chad hugged him and looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn´t find the words; Jared´s eyes stung, his throat constricted dangerously, and in the end, Chad just pressed their bodies together almost painfully before letting go, wiping at his face; Garth waved a little akwardly, and gone they were, Garth pressed against his „wife“ and „friend“, handkerchief covering most of his face; and a moment later, the car had driven away. Jared waited until the next car had followed, more than a minute later; then he wriggled out of his suit trousers and white shirt and pulled a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, hoodie and warm jacket out of a bag Garth had left for him. Newly dressed and hood pulled low over his face, he ran down the corridor, turned left, another corridor, right, and stood in an underground parking lot. He hadn´t even come to a halt yet after practically stumbling through the heavy metal door, when a car at the far left flashed its headlights once.
Gen. Thank God.

He reached the car in no time, slipped into the shotgun seat, and took a deep breath.

„Hi, handsome.“

He looked over at her, smiling genuinely for the first time the whole night.

„You OK?“

„Peachy. You?“

He shrugged, and let out a deep breath. „Honestly? Too wired to tell. I´m just glad when everything is over.“
„Sipping colorful drinks at some remote beach, your lover at your side, butt naked?“
„Something like that, yes...“

She grinned, carefully driving through the exit.

„ Barely an hour now, Jay.... you´re almost there. “

„ Yeah... “

It sounded less enthusiastic than she´d probably expected, and Gen shot him a sharp glance.

„Everything IS OK, right? No disturbances so far?“

He tried to relax. „No, no, everything went exactly as planned. I´m just... I know it´s ridiculous, but I´m... worried. I know it´s silly.“

She huffed. „Silly? When you are just playing two...actually, three mob organizations at once? That´s not silly, it´s your sanity speaking. “

„Thanks, that really helps a lot, Gen. “

„You´re welcome anytime, sasquatch. “

He couldn´t help laughing, and telling from her smug face, she´d exactly known how to make him feel better, if only for a moment.

Grigorij

He turned the old-fashioned switch, and instantly, the room was flooded with a clinical, cold light. It was empty, aside from the smelly matrass at the far wall under the narrow, boarded up window. After the stuffy warmth of the room above, with its big fireside, the cold down here was biting. He wondered how long anyone could survive it... a day, maybe? Rather less.

A weird noise filled the room, and it took him a while to recognize it as the shallow, yet labored breathing of the man huddled together on the matrass, wrists awkwardly cuffed to a pipe on the wall
above his head. The intakes were too far apart to be normal.

*Sounds like death*...

He watched Yuri walk over and kick the man with his boot, hard. The breathing hitched.

„Looks like he´s dying without us already, the little sucker.“

Grigorij shrugged. „Doesn´t matter. Boss wants ugly, we´ll give him ugly.“ He took a baseball bat from a hook on the wall and pulled a knife out of his right boot. „Bat or knife?“ He held out both to Yuri.

Yuri took the bat without hesitation. „Can´t wait to beat that pretty face to a pulp. Fucking fags, man. Disgusting.“ He swung the bat back and forth a few times to test its weight. Most of the wood was covered in a dark, brownish crust.

Yuri raised his arm to take a swing for real, when Grigorij grabbed his arm and stopped him.

„Wait!“

Misha´s words echoed in his head, „*Don´t ruin the merchandise...*“ ... this whole job sucked, and he felt like sitting between two chairs. But he hadn´t gotten this far and survived as long for being an idiot.

„What! Having second thoughts? Or do you want to have a go at pretty boy´s ass here with the bat before I reduce him to ground meat? Teach him a lesson? Didn´t take you for a soft one, G. “

„Shut up“, he grunted. „The Angel wants him intact, the Boss wants him hacked to pieces. I ain´t gonna go against the Bosses´ orders, but I ain´t gonna forget about The Angel either.“

„Meaning?“ Yuri looked confused.

„Meaning we are killing....or, finishing him off, whatever, bloody, but we ain´t gonna touch his face. Boss didn´t say nothing about the face, and The Angel is obsessed with it, so – that´s how we compromise.“

Yuri looked at him in awe. „Smart.“ He kicked the unconscious man again, harder than before. There was no reaction. „Pity he´s out already. No real fun when there ain´t no screaming, right?“

Grigorij shrugged. He´d lost the special thrill of killing and torturing, taking lives slowly and painfully, a long time ago. He leant against the door and shoved his hands in his army trousers´ pockets. It was fucking freezing down here.

„Go on, get started. I don´t want to get pneumonia in here.“

He watched Yuri raise his arms again, and bring the bat down full force, right against the man´s skinny side. A sickening, crunching noise filled the room, again and again, while Yuri let blows rain down on the chest, the sides, the legs and hips. The breathing noises had already stopped after the second blow, and aside from the dull thuds when the bat met skin and muscle and the following cracking of breaking bones, Yuri´s grunts were the only sound.

Grigorij thought of the warm fire above longingly.

„Enough“, he said, and pushed himself off the wall. He sank down on one knee and opened the handcuffs, taking the unharmed arms and arranging them at the broken body´s sides. Yuri hung the
bat back on the hook and wiped his front with a checkered handkerchief.

„So that´s it?“

„That´s it.“

They looked down at the body for a moment in contemplative silence.

„What´s The Angel gonna do when he finds out...“

„Don´t know, don´t care. We´re packing up and leaving right for the Bosses´ place. Come on.“

He turned around, Yuri at his heels, switched off the light at the door, and stomped up the stairs, not waiting for the other man to close the door behind them.

Jim

„They left the wedding in a limousine, the Russians are tailing them. Headed for the airport, it seems.“

*Honeymoon... clearly.*

„Anything out of the ordinary?“

„Nah ...just stopped at the diner at the Haverhill Mall, you know, the underground one, with the Spicey Special... Came out after three, four minutes, drove right on.“

„Hm...“ Jim rubbed his face tiredly. „Ok, just call me if anything happens, and report to the other teams as well. No one´s seen Jensen somewhere at the airport for sure?“

It would have been the only thing making sense, both boys meeting there, pulling some elaborate stunt on both their families... but none of the teams he´d sent anywhere had seen even a glimpse of Jensen, and when one of his men had reported an activity at the private section of the airport (sent there on a hunch Jim had had earlier, what with all the FBI contacts Jensen had had lately), telling him a small machine was getting ready on the runway reserved for Federal Agencies... his feeling of something not adding up deepened.

„He could be disguised....“ the man sounded hesitant.

*Jensen´s always loved to play dress-up... I can still see him running around the yard in one of his Mum´s hats, wearing one of her colorful foulards as a cape...* He´d asked him if he was Superman, and of course, Jensen would stop, and think about it, head tilted a little, biting his lower lip...and then, he´d answered. „I´m not Superman. I´m Super-Jensen.“

Jim knew one thing for sure...if Jensen didn´t want to be found, their chances of finding him were minimal.
Finally, the airport... Gen drove him right through to the Private Section, showed an ID and the special pass they’d gotten thanks to Agent Whitfield, and ten minutes later she pulled up at one of the smaller hangars.

She killed the engine and stared out into the sickly orange artificial light. It had stopped snowing, temperatures would be falling once more for the next two days, freezing over everything before spring finally got its chance ...

They sat in silence for a few seconds, until Gen sighed, and turned to face Jared.

„So, that´s it, then.“

„Yeah...“

„Don´t forget what you promised me, Jay.“

He croaked out something similar to a laugh. „I won´t.“

„Ok, then....“ She opened the door and got out, forcing him to do the same. The cold hit him like a wall.

„Let´s make this quick, or we´ll both freeze to death before your plane even starts“, she said with a smirk turning into a grimace when a gush of wind blew snow crystals into her face.

He didn´t answer, just stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her tiny frame.

„Thank you, for everything...“ His throat felt uncomfortably constricted, his eyes were stinging again, and not from the cold wind.

„Take care, Jay. Of both of you.“

„You too, Gen.“

He could see a tall, dark-clad figure approaching them from the hangar.

„Good bye“, he whispered when she tore free from his long arms.

She sat down behind the wheel again, nodding at the stern faced man coming closer.

„Bye, Jay...“ The car´s door closed with a pang. Jared watched her turn the ignition and pull away, going back the way they´d come in, tail lights pale in the yellowish light surrounding them.

„Mr. Padalecki?“

He turned. „Yes?“

„I´m Agent Turner.“ He reached out his hand, and Jared shook it briefly. „Please, follow me inside the hangar, Agent Whitfield is waiting for you.“

Jared trudged along the older man, thoughts still with Gen, Chad, Garth, Bela, everyone involved in this whole escapade...
It was good to be sheltered from the wind again after the biting cold outside, even if the air was only a fraction warmer inside the hangar.

„Mr. Padalecki.“

The tall, good-looking black man who reached out his hand seemed to x-ray Jared with his eyes.

„I´m Agent Whitfield. Good to finally meet you.“

Jared nodded. He let his gaze wander around the rather small hangar, stopped at the group of people standing hunched over a laptop in the tiny cubicle at one side of the building. The agent who´d brought him inside walked over to them.

He frowned. „Where´s Jensen?“

Agent Whitfield looked at him, lips pressed together.

„Mr. Padalecki...I think we´ve got a problem.“

Jared felt all blood drain form his face. No. No no no no no.

„What happened?“ His voice was gone, reduced to a rough whisper.

Agent Whitfield looked at him, a worried expression on his face. „That´s the problem – we don´t know exactly. Jensen should have been at the meeting point near the Ackles´ townhouse, but he never showed. We tried to contact him in various ways, but... so far, we´ve got nothing. He didn´t maybe try to contact you or...“

Jared fumbled for his phone with shaky hands, the one he only used for talking about the „Plan“ with Jensen. He waited impatiently for the phone to come to life, finally checked the messages, the voice mail, anything – and found nothing, not a word from Jensen. He looked up at Whitfield, and his face must have clearly shown his growing desperation, because the agent only took his arm and led him over to the cubicle´s side, pressing him down into a chair.

„These are agents Miller, DeMourne and Lin. They´ve all been part of the operation for a while now. Agents, this is Jared Padalecki, Jensen´s boyfriend.“ They nodded, friendly enough, all of their faces showing the same stern focus he´d noticed in agent Turner before. Everything seemed strangely distant, as if he were watching himself and the other people in the hangar through a glass pane, a little distorted and muted...

Someone shook his shoulder, a water bottle was pressed into his hand. He stared at it, unsure what to do with it, his mind seemed frozen, his body paralyzed.

*Jensen is missing.*

Cold filled his gut, a burning block of ice, spreading through his arms and legs and reaching for his chest, his heart...

Andrej´s pale blue eyes appeared in his mind, his voice... „it´s all a question of eliminating the unworthy distractions...“

„They´ve got him“, he croaked out, not looking up.

„What?“

„The Russians have him. Bela´s father...he must have found out something...Oh, God.“
He buried his face in his hands.

_This can’t be real. I’m dreaming, a nightmare, not real. NOT real._

„Jared. Jared!“ Whitfield shook him, forcefully, until he let go of his face and glanced up at him.

„Let´s say you´re right. Who would Andrej send to execute such a job? Would Bela know?“

Bela...they had to tell her to abort the plan...everything had gone south, they had to get Garth out, Chad, Gen, Mack... Jesus, Mack.

„Mack“, he croaked, „What about Mack, is she safe?“

_ Jensen would never forgive me if something happened to her, never..._

„She´s safe, we got her under surveillance, she´s sleeping at a friend´s place. Don´t worry about her, Jared. We´ve got Jensen to worry about. So – Bela?“

Jared rubbed his front. A headache started to build, pressure against his skull´s insides, a slow, maddening throb.

„Yeah... I think she´d know“, he whispered.

„Ok.“ Whitfield squeezed his shoulder, then turned to the other agents, talking to them rapidly, giving orders. Jared´s thoughts drifted away... Jensen tying his boots, his short hair all messed up, sticking in all directions... his fingers wandering over Jared´s chest, exploring every inch of skin as if it was a treasure map... his lazy smile when he woke up and realized Jared was already watching him, glancing back through heavily lidded eyes, his curled lashes throwing delicate shadows...

He curled in on himself, head bent down as far as it would go, arms wrapped around it protectively.

If Andrej had Jensen... their only hope was that he´d keep him alive to have Jared on a short leash. The perfect leverage. But what he´d heard about Andrej so far ... the guy would dismiss the idea of leverage just to set an example. _Make a statement._

Something Chad had mentioned surfaced in his mind... the scary bodyguard.

_All those car wrecks littering the Ackles´ family´s history... If he´d been in a car crash, the FBI would know, right?_

_What will they do to Jensen...._

_Before they kill him._

_Misha_

Grigorij didn´t answer his phone. It was a first.

Misha stared at the cellphone´s screen, thoughtfully scratching hi stubbled chin. Either Grigorij was dead – a rather improbable possibility -, or someone had intervened. If Grigorij ignored him, that could mean only one person – the only one they might fear more than himself.
Officially, Misha belonged to Andrej´s imperium; he was of Russian origin, after all, and had put his special knowledge and skills to good use for the Russian mob boss for years.

He himself, though, had always understood his role as that of a free lancer more than a Family member. He didn´t belong.... was too much of a free thinker to fit into the tight hierarchical system. He´d also created his own powerful position within the Family, collecting dirty information on practically everyone, ready to use it as leverage whenever necessary.

*Maybe your activities have caught the attention of The Boss, and this is his way of giving you a warning...*

Misha didn´t appreciate being slapped on his fingers. If Andrej had crossed his plans, he would make him pay for it someday... and he would watch his back until then.

He parked the car near the cabin. The snow was knee deep; footprints crossed it, only slightly smudged by the wind. They must have left a while ago already, hours, probably; the fire in the huge fireplace was burnt down, the room already cool. There was no sound from the basement, but then he hadn´t expected any. He went down the steps and opened the first massive metal door to the right.

Death had a special smell to it, even in the biting cold in the rather large room.

He went over to the immobile figure on the matrass, surprised to find Jensen´s face intact; of course, the body was a whole different story. He crouched down to gaze at the peaceful expression the dead man showed, such a contrast to the story of violence, pain and suffering his broken body told. A thin layer of ice crystals covered the long, feminine lashes, the eyebrows and hairtips; it made Jensen look like a magic ice prince, enchanted to sleep for a hundred years until some princess would find him and kiss him awake.

*Or some tall, lanky prince....*

Misha touched the cold cheek, the full, slightly parted lips, frozen into a sensual pout in death.

*What a waste.*

He got up and left the room without looking back; on his way down into the city again, he reminded himself to send a short text message later, using Jensen´s phone. Just an address.

The FBI would know what to do with the information.

His mind was already occupied with other things; he had a revenge to plan, after all.

*Jared*

Night turned into a hesitant dawn which finally gave way to cold, grey daylight.
And still no sign of Jensen.

At some point Whitfield squatted down in front of Jared.

„Jared...I know this is unpleasant, but we have to rule out every possibility.“

He bit his lower lip. „Are you 100% sure that Jensen didn´t...bail...on you? Us?“ At Jared´s blank expression, he added, „He´s vanished before, and certainly is capable of planning something like that – it´s just, it almost seems as if he doesn´t want to be found.“

„What?“ Did the agent really think Jensen would... „Are you fucking serious?“ Jared felt his anger flare up within a second. It felt good.

He was on his feet and had the agent pulled up with him without thinking.

„Jensen is not bailing on us“, he pressed out between clenched teeth. „He´s been taken, or- or worse. Don´t you dare -“

„Ok, Ok, Jared. I didn´t really think so – just crossing the t´s, you know.“ In the corner of his eye, Jared could see the other agents relax again.

„You better dot your i´s by finding Jensen“, he growled. „If you and your agents had him better protected, none of this would have happened!“

It was a relief to blame someone – someone else – for everything. Whitfield looked genuinely regretful, he had to give him that.

„Jared, I – I´m truly sorry. We had our eyes and ears on him, practically all the time, but the two agents following him around were pulled into a traffic jam because of a car crash a few blocks down the Ackles´ town house, and when they finally arrived at the meeting point at the back, maybe ten minutes late, he wasn´t there."

„Did they try -“

„They tried the house, Jared. No one answered.“

„He could be asleep. He was so tired all the time, could barely -“

Whitfield shook his head, and Jared stopped. „We had someone check the house. Which was pretty complicated by the way, it´s well warded against breaking and entering. I personally called the clinic he´d gone to all week; Dr. Milton told me Jensen would be tired, dizzy, the medication would make him nauseous, and given his heart condition he should avoid any physical strain, at any cost, but -“

„Heart condition? What are you – he didn´t have - he got scans and stuff because of his head. But that was last week."

Whitfield looked at him funny. Then he rubbed the bridge of his nose, and sighed.

„He didn´t tell you.“

Jared sank back into the chair without noticing. It was as if all energy was sucked from his body.

„Tell me what?“ I don´t want to know. I don´t. I can´t. He´s OK. He would have told me if... right? He would have told me. It hurt, a searing, deep pain inside his chest, to think otherwise.
„Well, given that he didn´t tell us anything either, and we only found out through our usual channels, I guess he...“ He looked at Jared´s frozen face. „I guess he didn´t want to deal with it before – before all of this would be over.“

Jared closed his eyes. „Tell me what“, he repeated. His voice sounded strange. Flat and lifeless.

He heard Whitfield clear his throat. „Jensen suffers from a tropical disease, one that´s pretty common in the parts of the world where he stayed the last four, five years. The problem, according to Dr. Milton, is that he caught a very rare form of the illness, one that´s highly aggressive and doesn´t respond to the usual medication or therapy.“

Numbness filled his head, spread out over his chest down to his arms and legs.

„But – if he´s got a tropical disease ... his heart – why would he have a heart condition?“

Whitfield sighed. „You would have to talk to Dr. Milton to get valid information on that. As far as I know, Jensen suffers from cardiomyopathy. Milton said he already put him on a transplant list. He was - he is considered a priority case.“

„A transplant...“

This is not happening. You’re dreaming...a nightmare. You’re still sleeping, the wedding will be in a few hours, and tomorrow, Jensen will be at the airport, with his slow smile and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, holding your face with both of his hands to pull you in for a kiss. And he’s well and healthy and he hasn´t lied to you about his condition and who knows what else.

He tried calling Bela and Chad, to tell them they had to hold back with the plan for now, but in the end it was Whitfield who gave them a short summary of the situation, with Jared pacing up and down the hangar like a caged animal, unable to focus on anything, mind whirling with voices, pictures and memories, driving him crazy.

In the end, the FBI decided it was safer for all of them if Jared went where he was `officially` supposed to be – at his wife´s side -, and agent Turner and Lin more or less forced him into one of the cars. Jared experienced moments of numbness in between phases of terror and paralyzing anxiousness, his mindset switching back and forth between dread, anger and desperation; and in the back of his mind questions kept running in circles, surfacing each time he stopped fighting against it: What if Jensen wasn´t kidnapped...what if it was all a lie, a scheme, what if he set up a trap... what if his father found out about everything, and keeps him prisoner somewhere, forcing the FBI to step down from blowing up his whole organization...what if he was too sick to come and ...and... but he wouldn’t let his thoughts go there, shoved pictures down where Jensen was lying somewhere, alone, with no chance to reach out to him...

And in the darkest moments, when emotional exhaustion gnawed away at his guards, he felt a deadly conviction that he hoped in vain anyway, that Jensen was long dead and gone, slaughtered by his father in law´s goons, a man whose hand he´d shaken and who he´d even hugged – albeit unwillingly – after the wedding.

Grey landscapes flew by the window, still and dismissive in the murderous cold.

Despair was an icy grip around his heart.
They were half the long way up to the lodge when the call came in.

Lin was on the steering wheel, so Turner was the one to take it. He didn´t say much, but Jared instantly felt the tension straightening the agent´s shoulders and spine.

„We have to go back“, he said quietly after ending the call. His eyes found Jared´s in the rearview mirror, and he gazed at him for a moment, oppressive news too visible in his face.

„They found Jensen.“ He looked down at the cellphone in his hand, a resigned tiredness pulling at his face, then back up again.

Jared saw the pity in the older man´s eyes. How many times has he been the one to bring devastating news? To destroy lives with a simple sentence?

„I´m sorry.“

Jared closed his eyes. The window was cold against his cheek, his temple.

The maddening tornado inside his head died down, leaving nothing but a void, the ability to think blown away.

There was only emptiness.

By the time they arrived back in the city, the FBI had already transported Jensen (Jared refused to think of it as `Jensen´s body´) to the coroner´s office. The autopsy had already started; agent Whitfield outright refused to let Jared in on it. He´d shaken Jared´s hand, squeezed his shoulder; his eyes, too, were resigned, his shoulders had lost their upright posture. He gave Jared the bare minimum of facts – obviously, they didn´t have many, so far – and returned to the autopsy room; only Turner stayed behind with Jared in the bland waiting area, where Jared slumped into the dirt-colored sofa. The FBI agent left the room to stand outside the glass panelled door; Jared could hear him quietly talk on his phone, noticed the weariness in his gestures.

He stared at the opposite wall for a while, trying to find back into the empty blackness that had filled the whole ride back, taking away time and space; but it wouldn´t come, his brain insisted instead of sending pictures his way, scenes from procedural copshows he´d watched with Chad, laughing at the characters´ manierisms and the forced plot twists. He saw the sharp scalpell open up the pale skin, cut through the invisible lines he´d drawn between Jensen´s freckles, the perfection of his body, remembered the instruments always waiting on the side table on TV, the small circular saw that would mold into his ribcage, the clamps, neatly arranged on a stainless steel counter, clamps that would spread apart his ribs, opening Jensen´s chest to the eyes of the examiner, reveal his sick, tired heart.

He remembered the quiet rhythm of Jensen´s heartbeat at his ear, the way it made him calm down, ta-damm, ta-damm, the smooth, warm skin under his cheek, the faint scent of sweat and soap and the one that was just Jensen.

The heartbeat, the scent, everything else that was Jensen.

Everything that had been home.

Gone.
Only then, the realization hit him full on, taking away the oxygen, making it impossible to breathe.

He barely made it to the bathroom.

While the pictures and memories his imagination had sent him left him bent over the toilet until he was dry heaving - eyes stinging and chest painfully constricted-, seeing Jensen´s body for real made something inside him shift. He´d insisted on being allowed inside, after the coroner had sewed everything back up, hours later; and Whitfield, although sceptical and visibly unhappy, had finally given in to Jared´s stubbornness.

He´d expected a bruised, ruined face; and finding Jensen on the stainless steel table, a blue sheet covering his body up to his chin, looking peaceful and completely unharmed and painfully beautiful, caught Jared, who´d already steeled himself against the worst, off guard.

He glanced down into the still face, so well known, yet so different and strange all of a sudden, barely able to keep his hands from touching, his fingers from wandering over the plump, pale lips, the bluish shadows under his boyfriend´s eyes.

He took in a shaky breath, feeling Whitfield´s watchful eyes on him, and pulled the blue cloth down in one swift move.

He´d expected the worst; actually seeing it still knocked the air out of his lungs for a moment.

And then, something else started to fill his insides, began with a slow, cold burn deep inside his guts. He let his eyes wander down his boyfriend´s body, and every bruise, every smashed bone and broken limb fuelled the icy fire searing his insides. It was this anger alone that kept him upright, a new energy that brought back his focus, ignited his numbed brain.

He shoved the pain and desperation deep down, made it the horrific foundation of this new, burning emotion, and embraced the anger with open arms.
Jim

By mid morning he was absolutely sure something was horribly wrong. Their people had caught the FBI cars leaving the airport, one driving up northwest, two back to the city; they’d been pretty sure they’d spotted Padalecki at the hangar, being led to one of the cars. Jim saw his suspicions come true: Had those two boys really planned on running away? Helped by the FBI?

_Jensen might be too smart for his own good, but he isn´t reckless. And he´d never, NEVER, put anyone he loves in danger._

It made perfect sense for the boy, then, to go to the FBI to arrange a Houdini act... witness protection program, the full length. Mack’s call the day before came to his mind, her excitement about that art program in Japan she’d hoped to be able to participate in... miraculously, someone had not been able to take their place, and she’d finally gotten her chance, and at a very short notice, too, as she’d leave on Sunday evening...

He didn’t have to think twice about what Jensen had had to bargain for that. The FBI had been on the Family’s heels for some time now, the Family was well aware of that (maybe not of the full extent of their investigation; but Whitfield had the focus and the thirst of a bloodhound when it came to bringing down the Families, and obviously, the Ackles Imperium was the first stone to be pushed on Domino Day).

He tried to call Alan. No one answered.

Alan

He stood at the wall-sized window, once more staring down at the snow-covered city, thoughts running a mile a minute, when his secretary knocked.

„Yes.“

She came in, but he didn’t turn around.

„What is it.“

„Sir, there´s an agent from the FBI waiting outside. He says he wants to talk to you. It´s urgent.“

_Finally..._

He’d been waiting for this to happen, ever since it had been clear that Jensen was collaborating with the FBI, had been doing so for years... Jensen, who now had gone missing, inexplicably, wiped from every radar they had in the city.

„Show him in“, he said, talking to the glass in front of him. „No calls or visitors“, he added, his eyes following a flock of black birds – crows, most likely – rising from the flat roof of a skyscraper across the street, sailing down in between the tall structures, an elegant yet slightly menacing dark
shadow in all the shades of white and grey.

„There were three ravens sat on a tree...“. His mother used to sing the ballad when he was a child, scrubbing dirty laundry or the muddy floors, sewing or cooking, always busy... he couldn´t remember the lyrics, just that the story had been a sad one – they always were – of love and death and painful memories.

*Turns out your life is just like an old ballad ... it comes down to lost love, death and pain.*

He shook his head to shy away the darkness that had gripped him. It wasn´t like him to wallow ... neither in sadness, nor self pity.

There was another knock, and this time, he turned around.

„Mr. Ackles“, the FBI agent said. Alan remembered his voice, just as pleasant as his features.

„Agent Whitfield“, he replied, waiting for the man to approach him. He detected an unusual uneasyness in the man´s face; he´d been much more smug and self-assured the last time they´d met in person, back when Jensen´s boyfriend had died.

*You´ve lost a few feathers, too, during the years, haven´t you, agent...*

They didn´t shake hands.

„I´ve come to see your presence as a foreboding of bad news to my family, agent Whitfield“, he said, his gaze involuntarily wandering over to the wall with the few family pictures he kept in his office.

Looking back at the FBI man, he noticed something flicker over the man´s face, if only for a moment before he had his emotions under control again.

„I´m afraid I´m not here to break with this tradition“, Whitfield said, voice terse. „I´ve come to ask you to identify a body, Mr. Ackles.“ His gaze flicked to the pictures on the wall, too, before he looked back into Alan´s eyes. „I´m sorry.“

Alan felt strangely detached. The moment Jim had called and told him about Jensen disappearing – again -, he´d already feared the worst; and ever since, he´d only waited for the other shoe to drop.

„Jensen?“, he asked, and was surprised by how flat his voice sounded. Inside, he felt something drifting away, the anger he had held onto all those years, like a piece of driftwood stubbornly hanging on to the shore, gripped by a sudden current, floating and whirling and leaving an empty beach.

*Void*....

A tiredness began to creep up his spine, so overwhelming it even pushed down the adversity he´d felt against the man in front of him, the man who´d used his son to get to himself, to the Family. He knew he should feel rage, should fight for the successful imperium he´d built from scratch, a scrawny little boy from the Irish quarters with nothing to his name but a quick wit and flexible morals.

He searched for the anger inside him, his trusted fountain of energy and motivation.

It was dried out. There was nothing there.
You’re an empty shell, and if it weren’t for Mackenzie...

Mackenzie. Who was leaving for Japan this weekend, the last of his family... at least she’d be safe, he’d see to that. He’d not fail another one of them.

He had stared at the pictures again, Mary at the beach, the sun in her back; the one complete family picture, a little awkward and stiff. Jensen’s graduation, his pensive squint. Josh’s cocky grin. Mack at her prom, so young and beautiful.

Whitfield hadn’t said anything, he realized, but when Alan turned back to him,

the agent nodded, eyes sharp and searching. „I´m afraid so. We took the body to the bureau´s morgue already.“

Alan nodded, slowly, and took his jacket from the back of his chair.

„Let´s go“, he said. He pressed the intercom button on his desk. „Cancel all of my appointments for the day. I´ll be out“, he said, then he made an inviting gesture in the general direction of Whitfield, and left his office through the door leading to the private elevator.

I wonder what this means for the investigations...does Whitfield have the guts to follow through with it, arrest a man who’s just lost his second son?

Jensen’s face appeared in his mind, the small, wide-eyed boy, always snuggled up against his mother, as if he knew he’d loose her way too soon... the face he’d seen on the pictures Jim had sent, freckles stark against the strangely pale skin, cheekbones too prominent.

He looked happy on some of these pics... the ones where he was with the other boy. The enemy.

Whitfield stared at the numbers showing the floors, obviously anxious to reach the ground floor.

This might be the last time you use this elevator...

He realised he didn’t really care.

Jim

By evening, he had confirmation for his suspicions, when the news flash on his cellphone showed unmarked FBI cars, followed by a fleet of police vehicles, surrounding the Main Building of Ackles Inc. He looked for the familiar face of agent Whitfield among the agents; but there was no sign of him. The fairly excited news lady announced the earlier arrest of Alan Ackles, head of Ackles Inc., by the FBI; further information was expected following the press conference called in by the bureau at 8 p.m.

Jim turned off the TV when the news changed to another topic.

Whitfield would never have missed the opportunity for celebrating a public victory like that. Not without a damn good reason...

He tried to get the well known images out of his head.

Crashed cars. Smashed bodies. New graves and empty places in pictures.
Jared

Two days.

48 hours. 2880 minutes. An eternity of seconds.

Whitfield had explained about the text message they´d got. It had been sent from Jensen´s phone, a last macabre message from an already dead man. The address had led them to a remote house up on the way to the mountains, a cabin, more like, with a vast basement; in one of the rooms, they´d found Jensen – Jensen´s body -, already frozen in the gruesome cold, skin glazed over with a layer of white crystals.

The second message Whitfield got, coming from an anonymous number this time, contained only a combination of numbers and letters; one leading to the land registry and, after a little digging, to a chain of owners, the last of whom, in the end, turned out to be a `hunting club´ belonging to Andrej AKA the Russian mob. The FBI was still taking samples up there; each of the four basement rooms had obviously been used as prison/torture room at some point. They´d try to find out if the DNA of any missing person matched the samples.

Jared had insisted on getting a copy of the coroner´s report.

On the first day, numbness ate away at his hours, left him surprised at how much time had passed when he finally resurfaced into clearness; the anger he´d taken with him from the morgue had never ceased to burn deep inside, and once he had the first preliminary report in his hands, read through a flood of medical expressions he had to look up to be sure of their exact meaning, the numbness was gone, and in its place he felt only determination.

He wanted to be sure. Of every bruise, every smashed bone, every blow and kick, of every cell destroyed with a brutality that required „extreme, unhindered force“, as the report stated.

Every word he looked up, every connection he made to the pictures and to the images he had forced himself to memorize when he stared down at the body that had once been a warm, breathing human in his arms; every one of these medical terms was a step to a clarity he hadn´t felt before.

*They have taken what was mine, because they expect me to be someone else...
Now I´ll be exactly who they want me to be.*

Sherri

„Thursday still stands?“
"10 a.m. sharp, just like scheduled."

"And Jared honestly agreed to attend the meeting?"

"Oh yes, he did." Sherri couldn´t help the proud grin spreading over her face.

"I have to say, I didn´t think this whole `getting him straight-thing´ – she chuckled at her own pun – would work so well; but look at him, one good scare and he´s all the compliant, good son he was meant to be. No more escapades, no more.... abominations."

Her husband frowned down at his hands. „But don´t you think it´s...weird, how quickly he gave in? He used to be more persistent, if I remember correctly...“

Sherri laughed. „Oh, well, he has been one stubborn child, and to tell you the truth, I started to feel a little disappointed in him lately... but I am not above blaming myself for his behavior. We´ve been too indulgent with him. All it took was a clear ´no´, and on track he is again.“

Gerald stared at the glass pane separating the front seat of the limousine from the back. „Don´t forget one dead young man. And the promise of more bodies if he doesn´t oblige...“

Sherri shrugged, and squinted at him. „Don´t tell me you´re suffering from a case of conscience all of a sudden? You know as well as I that it had to be done. We knew about Jared´s weak spot, and we pressed it at the right moment. God bless Andrej and his skilled crew. The timing was perfect, don´t you think?“

Gerald grunted. „I´m not saying it wasn´t necessary to kill the Ackles boy. I´m just a little concerned about Jared´s sudden motivation to join the combined forces, play the role we always planned for him. It sounds too good to be true."

„Well, his motivation might be questionable – I´m absolutely sure he feels like he has to protect someone, the last of the Ackles kids, for example... he always had this weird sense of righteousness, and don´t get me started on his fits of consciousness. But once he´s in, and sees all the power that comes with a position in so huge a conglomerate – you´ll see, he´ll get a taste for it. He´s only human, too, and he´ll find that out soon enough."

„I´m sure his wife will help him see things from the right perspective, too...Bela is a piece of work, I must say.“

Sherri shrugged once more. „That might be true, Gerald, but she has her mind on the right things. She´s Andrej´s daughter through and through, and Jared can be happy to have someone like her to learn from. God knows we tried...“

Gerald chuckled. „It´s all about motivation, right? It took us some time, but, voilá, we found the perfect one for Jared after all. I knew the boy had it in him... with his brains, he´ll soon climb the steps. Jeff will have to watch his back, mark my words."

Sherri looked at him, her eyes sparkling.

„Together, they´ll make us proud. And if they need a little nudge here and there – well, that´s what parents are here for, right?“
Jared

Bela had come back on Monday, as scheduled (no extended honeymoon, Jared still had his classes and there was the big reunion meeting on Thursday which Jared was meant to attend, to be introduced „officially“); the FBI had taken care of Garth and Chad, as far as Jared knew; they were both „visiting family“ until the waters had cleared a little. Jared was worried...they had played a role in their scam, and he was pretty sure Andrej and his own parents had their suspicions, probably even knew everything, which put everyone who’d helped them in danger. It was exactly what Jensen had feared most..

Jensen.

He shivered and shoved the images down with force ... the good ones, of a living, smiling Jensen, and the ones that kept giving him nightmares ever since he’d been to the morgue.

You’ve got work to do. Focus.

He stared around the flat he was now living in with Bela, a big enough place, nicely furnished, but still missing any indication that actual people were living there: it was more like an advertisement for „young urban living“, carefully arranged, but soulless.

He didn’t care. He’d no intention to stay, anyway.

Bela wasn’t around much; after the colossal failure of the whole plan, she had been unexpectedly supportive – mostly by leaving Jared alone and giving him the space he needed. She’d been livid, Jared had heard that much from Chad, when everything went south because of her father; and Chad swore she’d cursed in russian for a full hour, before suddenly falling scarly silent, brooding in a stuffed chair, until she finally seemed to find back to her usual determined self. Chad couldn’t give any specifics, he’d been in shock himself and had to calm down an absolutely destroyed Garth, but he mentioned that Bela had an expression on her face that made him put as many square metres between himself, Garth and her cold fury as possible.

Her support went much farther, though, once Jared had made his decision and asked for her help.

Of course Bela would know someone who knew someone who had a third cousin who had an associate who had access to exactly the things Jared was looking for. So, he found himself standing at one of their flat’s windows, staring down into the grey street, waiting for a call of said associate. The temperature had risen, if only slightly; but with the lack of fresh snow, the streets soon were covered in dirty slosh mixed with chunks of ice, gravel and salt. They’d forecast a sudden weather change for the weekend, with temperature rises way above zero.

His phone pinged. He picked it up and took the call.

„Hello, Jared.“

The man’s voice sounded disturbingly like coming right from the pit... a deep, gravelly rasp with an underlying melodic softness that made the hair on Jared’s neck stand up. After he’d talked to Bela – and after she’d looked at him as if he had lost his mind, but, well, he could be one stubborn guy, his mother sure was right complaining about that – he’d worked on a list of things he had to consider, stuff he’d need, following a book he’d found in the library – he was careful not to use the internet for anything suspicious. Andrej most likely had his tentacles everywhere, and Jared made
sure not to leave any traces behind.

„I understand you need some help.“

A shiver ran down his spine, all the way to his toes.

He cleared his throat. „Yeah, I – I have a list of things I´d need. Can you help me with those?“

„Send it to me. Use a new burner phone. Then I can tell you if there´s any problem. And we can talk about the price.“

Jared swallowed. „Yeah, uhm...OK. The price. Yes.“

The chuckle on the other end of the line was surprisingly soft. „Don´t worry, it won´t be anything you can´t pay, Jared.“

Somehow, that information didn´t calm down Jared´s sudden unease in the least.

„Oh...OK. I´ll send the list...“

„I´ll be in touch.“

The line went dead.

*You did it. With a phone call, you turned into a criminal.*

He unpacked the last cellphone he´d bought when Jensen was still alive, when their plan was still something to look forward to, a future somewhere far away, free from their families and pasts, tangible. He´d heard about the arrest of Alan Ackles, the shut-down of Ackles Inc. by the FBI; had seen the pictures of FBI men and women carrying out boxes, tech personnel swarming the place and taking over computers and laptops. He knew his parents were nervous; Ackles hadn´t been the only Family Business under Whitfield´s watchful scrutiny. It made the big meeting between his and Bela´s Families all the more important and urgent, even if it meant that security would be on a level unheard of so far.

He didn´t care. He was invited – something like a guest of honor, really, it was his initiation as a true Family Member, after all – and he´d be there with everyone else.

He plugged the phone in and went to the kitchen to prepare some tea; he hadn´t had any coffee since Jensen had...gone...

*The bitter taste of coffee on those lips, mixed with salty sweat, sometimes tears, lips so soft and plush, exploring his mouth, his face, his whole body...*

Tea was fine. Tea didn´t bring up memories he couldn´t face right now.

The list he had to send wasn´t very long. He typed in the items and material he needed, and pressed the `send´ button.

*Done.*

*Alan*
He had promised to take care of Mackenzie, keep her safe.

„The FBI will do everything in their power....“ He knew the phrases, had heard them enough times by now to know that there was no guarantee, never. But Whitfield seemed determined. Alan sensed something in the agent, the unease he’d noticed when the man had fetched him to identify Jensen’s body hadn’t truly left his eyes; it was only covered by a layer of fragile confidence. *Guilt.* It’s gnawing at him just as it is at myself....

Jensen had looked peaceful. More so than the last time he’d seen him alive, years ago. Like in the pictures Jim had shown him, reluctantly, where he was with the other boy.

He’d expected triumph in Whitfield´s eyes, once they had left the morgue; it never came. They´d immediately taken Alan to the FBI headquarters and into an interrogation room. He´d had his telephone call, but before one of his expensive lawyers could show up, Whitfield had entered the room once more, alone.

„I know this can´t be much of a consolace to you, but I´m sorry about what happened to Jensen.“

Alan had watched the agent for a while. The regret seemed genuine. Finally, he´d nodded slowly. „You mean, you´re sorry your plan didn’t work out the way it was meant to....trading my son´s freedom for information leading to my arrest and the whole business going down with me? Except it wasn´t freedom, right, it was his life you were putting on the line, and don´t tell me you didn’t calculate the risks and found them crazy high...and you still went on with it, cause it was your only way to get to me?“

His voice was cool, almost detached, as if they were discussing a business deal that needed some readjustments.

Whitfield didn´t flinch or blink. „Your son insisted...he was adamant about a few terms, and wouldn´t bulge, even when I ..when we made it clear the risks were high. He only insisted that we take care of his sister and his... and the Padalecki kid in case something happened to himself.“

Alan huffed. „You know, I actually believe you, agent Whitfield...that´s exactly what my foolish son would do, wouldn´t he? And you knew he would, right, cause you got a good glimpse into his soul the last time you dealt with him.” He fixed the other man with a cold glare. „Just spare me the drama and admit that you used my son and his damn ... stubbornness, used him back then and did so now, although you were aware of how dangerous it would become. I don´t like people lying to me, Mr. Whitfield, and believe me, after having lost practically all of my family, I can assure you that I can take the truth.“

Whitfield had shifted uncomfortably, then, had stared at the mirror-window for a minute or two, before looking back at Alan again.

„He wasn´t stubborn.“

„What?“

„He was determined. Jensen. And... I know this sounds old-fashioned, but...he had...he always seemed to be ...righteous. And he´d follow what he thought was right no matter the consequences."

Alan looked at the man for a moment, then at his own hands, folded on the scratched formica table. The veins stood out, bluish, against the papery, dry skin. *Old hands.* When did they become an old man´s hands?
“Whatever”, he said, and almost smiled, thinking of all the times Josh had used the word, being the loud, obnoxious, cocky, self-assured teenager he was.

He couldn´t remember hearing Jensen say it, not to him, at least. Jensen had either started to discuss something eloquently, driving him crazy, or hadn´t said anything at all – making him even angrier.

_They were so different, those two, like day and night. And yet I always could see so much of their mother in them both._

And now, Josh´s body was rotting in the ground next to his mother´s bones, while Jensen´s corpse was waiting to be cremated, after it´d be released by the FBI.

_Of course, he´d have a last will. Cremation. Just to defy family tradition._

He hadn´t even been surprised when they´d handed him the sealed letter, his son´s neat, rounded letters on it. _What kind of son writes a letter to his father to try to make him understand?_

_And what kind of father needs such a letter in the first place..._

One more name on a stone.

He rubbed his front, then looked straight into the agent´s eyes.

„I will give you my full cooperation, agent Whitfield, regarding my family´s business and my own...role.... in the shadier parts of the company line. On two conditions.“

Whitfield stared at him for a second, then nodded.

„Tell me.“

„Josh´s and Jensen´s names stay out of it; and you see to it that my daughter is safe and stays that way. And you find those responsible and take them down. You take them out of the game just like me. I´m willing to pay for...everything, but only if you make them pay, too.“

Whitfield´s face was inscrutinable when they glanced at each other, but then Alan thought he saw something like... respect in the other man´s eyes, if only for a moment.

„I´ll do what I can, Mr. Ackles.“

Alan nodded, and went back to studying his hands while the FBI agent went to the exit.

„You know, Mr. Ackles...“ Alan looked up when the man stopped at the door and turned back to him once more. „I think maybe ... maybe there was also something of you yourself showing in Jensen. But you both would never have admitted to it. I guess you were right about the stubborness, after all.“

He left the room, leaving Alan with his thoughts and memories and the emptiness in his chest, where the rage and the anger once had made it so easy to be what he´d made himself into.

_Jim_
It would have been easy to get away.

He didn´t especially like the idea of being locked up for the rest of his life; even less being dragged through a trial for months. He´d done things he wasn´t proud of, most of them in his early years in the ‘business´, and he knew that even if he had stopped years ago, those crimes wouldn´t just cease to exist only because they might be statute-barred by now. And there were some that would never fall under that statute of limitations...

Alan´s kids were one of the main reasons he´d finally let his conscience win, and tried to be a better person; that and the fast rise of the Ackles Imperium, bringing with it a carreer far from the first jobs where he had to get his hands dirty regularly.

For a while, it had seemed as if Donna and the kids would influence Alan in the same direction; but soon enough, his friend´s competitive and ambitious spirit got fuelled too easily by greed and the lust for power, and Alan was willing to put his actual wife and children second after the Family he ´d managed to become head of.

_He was willing to sacrifice his role as a father to that of Family Boss ... and now he has sacrificed almost his entire family to it. Donna´s death should have been the motivation to reavaluate decisions._

Instead, it had only driven Alan further from his family, and on a path that ended - at open graves.

Jim rubbed his face tiredly. He´d seen Alan´s spirit wavering when Jensen had come back, more so after he had gone missing; after his determination to forcefully end the relationship between his son and the Padalecki boy, he seemed strangely taken by surprise that the other side had been the one to succeed faster and ...permanently.

And now, Jensen was gone, Mack was in a safe house only Whitfield knew where, and the Business would follow the family into the grave...

Alan seemed ready to stand up for his decisions and actions. Jim didn´t have a clue why his boss/friend had given in so fast ... well, he had his suspicions, Alan wouldn´t cooperate with the FBI without gaining something from it, if not for himself, then for his only left child or the Family Business. Something other than Jensen´s death must have driven him to such a surrender... _more than his son´s body, dead in a morgue, smashed and broken?_

He let his eyes wander around the room, the familiar pictures on the walls, knick knack and books on shelves and tables. The colorful drawings Mack had made as a child, of flowers and jungle plants and strange animals; Josh´s favorite car models (which only ever were finished because Jensen helped him, patiently) on a shelf; the deep, glass-covered frames Jensen used to build, filled with drawings of birds, feathers, pieces of eggshells and nests... he could still see them all kneeling at the low table on a rainy afternoon, or spread on the old rug, soft and faded, with crayons or toys or a book...

The good memories, he realized, were all connected to those kids. His family. The good ones and, at the same time, the ones that hurt most.

It was time. Time to go and face his own past, pay for his own role in the game that had led to lives ending way too soon. Too violently. He owed it to them, and to himself as well.

He closed the door, turned the key.
You'll not be coming back anytime soon.

He wondered if they’d let him attend the funeral.

*If there is any.*
Chapter 30

Jared

The city was grey, the sky clinging to it like a dirty wet rug. Jared stared out through the car´s window, his eyes following the water drops racing each other on the glass.

He felt strangely calm.

„What will you wear?“

Bela had stood in the door to his bedroom – the spare one, Bela had occupied the master one.

„The grey suit?“

She´d nodded. „Good choice. It brings out your eyes.“ She had walked over, in the slow, seducing walk she´d perfected so much. „That night at the club... you wore a grey shirt back then. It looked so good on you... didn’t stop me from wanting to rip it off your shoulders, of course.“

He looked up at her, standing between his legs. She wiped a stray strand of hair off his front, tucked it behind his ear.

„Bela...“ he began, but she put a finger on his lips. „Sh....“

He´d never been able to read her, but for a moment, he thought he saw concern in her face.

„You’ll do something stupid, won’t you?“, she asked, voice a rough whisper. „Grand and heroic and fucking stupid.“

He couldn´t hold her gaze, with all of her usual snarky, arrogant attitude gone. He leaned against her stomach instead, front pressed against the fine leather of her jacket. The scent reminded him of Jensen, which was crazy, cause he´d never worn leather for the time Jared had known him. The familiar tug in his stomach, the tightening inside his chest followed his thoughts, loyal companions to everything labelled `Jensen´ in his mind. He shoved it down.

He felt Bela´s fingers in his hair, a slight stroke that turned into a pull.

„Just... don´t mess it up. Make them pay right.“

He looked up at her. „I won’t.“ She nodded. „I know...“ Again, a hint of sadness echoed in her voice.

„You won’t be at the meeting, right? You’re going to that charity thing instead?“

She grinned. „Oh, no. My father insisted that I be at the BIG meeting to honor the merging of our Families. The charity was postponed on request of the main donor, who happens to be my darling father, too. On the upside, I can watch you take your revenge. From a first row seat. I hope – Jared?“

Jared had gotten up, gripping her shoulders tightly. „No – no, no, no. You can’t be there. NO way you’re attending the meeting. Find some excuse, be sick or whatever, I don’t care, but you can’t be inside that room, OK?“
Her glance went from confused, to amused, to suspicious within a few seconds. She took his hands and pulled them off her shoulders, keeping a tight hold on them.

„What exactly is your plan, Jared? I suspected something stupid, but now you’re making me really worried.“

He shook his head, pressed his lips together. „I can’t tell you. But you can’t be there.“

She opened her mouth to say something, but he was faster.

„Please, Bela. Trust me with this.“ He stared down at her, trying to put as much sincerity into his gaze as possible. „I just don’t want to put you in danger. And I can’t be distracted by having to worry about you.“

She looked at him, eyes squinted. She didn’t seem convinced; after a moment, though, she nodded once.

„Ok... I’ll find something to keep me away... my father will be furious, though. So you better have something up your sleeve to appease him. “

Jared forced a smile on his face; it turned into a relieved grimace.

„Oh, I will. Don’t worry about it. “

„Sir? .... Mr. Padalecki?“

The driver’s voice pulled him out of his memories.

„We’ve arrived, Sir.“

„Oh. Ok. Thanks for driving me, Don.“ His parents had insisted on sending one of their drivers with a limousine. Jared was actually glad about it; he didn’t want to mess things up by getting into a car crash, and he doubted he could focus on traffic at the moment.

„It’s always a pleasure, Mr. Padalecki.“

The old man smiled back at him in the rear mirror. He was one of their long-time employees, and Jared had known him all his life. I wonder how much he knows about the business my parents are in...

He watched the impressive building in front of them for a moment before finally opening the door and stepping out into the damp, cold air.

The line was filled with static noise and weird screeching sounds for a minute before someone took his call. Precautions, Jared thought. I’ve probably been redirected five times.

„Yes. “

„Felicia?“

„Yyy...es?“
Her voice sounded carefully suspicious. „Who’s that?“

„I’m... it’s Jared. Jensen’s...“

„I know.“ She interrupted him hastily. „Sorry. Can’t be too paranoid these days...and please, call me Charlie on the phone.“

„Yeah. I mean - OK.“

They stayed quiet for a moment, Jared lost in memories of Jensen talking about how he’d met the girl who became to be one of his friends... maybe, really, his only one, back then.

Because she was just as overly protective of herself, secretive and damaged like him? He hadn’t asked, had hoped to get to know the genius girl someday.

„Jared?“

„Yeah.“ He shook his head, tried to ban the thoughts haunting him.

„Are you OK?“

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. „I... not really. It’s...“ He searched for a word that would express how he felt: like stretched out too thin, fraying at the edges, and with a permanent weight hooked into his flesh, pulling at him, down, down, down...

„I know...“ He could hear the same heaviness in her voice. „Jared, I... I’m so sorry. Jensen, he...he seemed so full of hope when we spoke...“

„Yeah...“ He didn’t know what else to say. They both had planned, and hoped, against all odds. Had taken the risk – and lost.

„I think he was happy, Jared. When he was with you. I haven’t... he hasn’t been like that since – you know. Matt.“ Her voice was rough.

„I... yes. We – we were. Happy.“

Silence stretched between them. Not an empty, uncomfortable one; it rather seemed like both of them were lost in their own minds for a while. Jared rubbed his eyes, fighting against the pictures of Jensen on that stainless steel table... was that how he’d had to identify Matt, all those years ago? Finding his boyfriend with his head smashed in, body broken and bruised even worse than...

„Jared?“

He cleared his throat. „Yeah, I... sorry.“

„Is there a reason you called?“

He sat up straighter, pinched the bridge of his nose again. „Felicia, I mean, Charlie, I need your help. I know what you did for Jensen on behalf of his father’s business.“

„Yes?“

„Can you do the same for me? At least... initiate something similar?“

„I can try... Jared, it isn’t exactly easy to hack into -“
"I know! I know... and I – I don’t want you to do anything to get yourself into any danger. Just – could you give me something the FBI can work with ... open the door, so to speak?"

"I’d need somewhere to start...“

"I think I have something you could work with."

"Ok.... Jared?“

"Yeah?“

"I get the feeling you are planning something reckless and extremely dangerous."

He bit his lower lip. It was already chapped, and he tasted blood.

"I have to set a few things right, Charlie.“

She sighed. "I know... but, Jared, it won´t give you back what you´ve lost."

He closed his eyes. "I know. But there are things nobody should get away with."

"Yeah... that’s what Jensen used to say."

"I didn´t – I didn´t know that."

"Yeah. I can see why you two were meant to be together."

He huffed. "For two weeks, at least."

"Jared, I -“ Her voice sounded strangled all of a sudden.

He felt the familiar prickling in his eyes. He hadn´t really cried much, hadn´t allowed himself to give in to the constant burn behind his eyelids.

"I have to go. Thank you, Charlie... I’ll send you what I´ve got?“

"Jared, wait. I didn´t -“

"Good bye, Charlie.“ He disconnected the call, threw the phone on the floor and stomped on it until it was shattered into pieces. Then he swiped the remains together and threw them into the bin.

One more item off his list.

The bulky security men posted at the entrance to the hall gave off a convincingly threatening vibe – and in this setting, one rather took that vibe seriously -; but Jared knew that the technical equipment the less intimidating personnel behind them used was the far bigger threat to everyone who tried to sneak anything into the room the meeting would be held in. They used state of the art scanners, similar to the ones one had to endure at airports (only, probably, even more sophisticated), and scanners were also discretely built into the doorframes so no one got the feeling of being suspected of anything (while everyone, of course, knew security measures were taken, only the extent stayed a secret).

Jared approached the line of men clad in black, the utter cliché of „security detail“, a sharp contrast to the people filing into the hall through the vast entrance, all looking smart and rich and powerful
in their expensive business clothes.

„Jared!“

He turned at the familiar voice, forcing his face into a professional smile. He supposed it didn´t really work, seeing the frown on his mother´s face.

„Mom! Dad.“

*Smile. They are your parents.*

„It´s good to finally have you here, son.“ His father nodded at him, padding his shoulder twice, with short, measured movements. *Like a political candidate running a campaign. Studied gestures and well rehearsed smiles.* He wasn´t one for showing affection in public. Or anywhere else. Never had been.

„FINALLY being the key word! Jared, I´m so proud of you.“ His mother grabbed his arms and looked at him expectantly. He dutifully bowed down and kissed her cheeks.

„You look great in that suit. Just as smart as you are, Sweetie.“

He felt slightly nauseous, but schooled his features into friendly coolness. „Bela suggested it. She likes the fabric and color.“

„A very smart girl. I knew she´d be good for you, give you exactly the initiative you lacked. It´s what Padalecki men need, obviously. A little push now and then.“

His father grinned down at her. Jared saw real affection in his eyes, realized it had always been there. It was strange to connect the picture of his parents as a loving couple with the people who´d let Bela´s father kill Jensen without batting an eye.

*Or, have Jensen´s mother die in a so called accident. And his brother.*

They probably were convinced it was the right thing to do, and in their own twisted world, it was, he realized. *Driven by their own version of Self-Righteousness.*

The thought somehow helped him focus. In his world, what he was about to do would be the right thing, too, after all.

He passed security together with his parents. No beeps, no discrete, „Excuse me, Sir, would you please...“. His mystery contact with the gravelly voice had made sure of that...

„Don´t worry about security. I´ll take care of it.“

Of course, it could have been a trap. He could have been caught, blowing up the whole meeting, destroying the efforts his parents had been putting into this Family merger for years, within an instant. Open Family War – that would have been the outcome, for sure.

But nothing happened. His phone was collected by a distinguished looking man with a polite nod, just as everyone else´s. Andrej liked his meetings to be private and stay private, Bela had told him as much; and he sure suffered from his own version of paranoia. Jared couldn´t detect the security cameras, but he knew for a fact they were there.

He was greeted jovially by his father in law, a little condescending, Andrej´s cold blue eyes
mocking him, challenging him to react, lash out, or break down; but he stayed calm, felt calm, even; meeting the man responsible for Jensen’s death for the first time after the wedding gave his cold anger new fuel. He grinned at the man, shook his hand with a strong grip.

„It’s an honor to be here, Andrej.“

„Indeed, Jared, indeed... many men out there would kill to get a seat on this table.“

_I know.... and I will. You’ll get what you deserve, Andrej... Y’all will. You created a monster._

He was introduced to a few men in expensive suits whose handshakes gave him goosebumps. How many people did they have killed? Tortured? How many lives destroyed?

He schooled his face into the mask he’d rehearsed in front of the mirror for the last two days: cool, polite, business-like. Arrogant and self-assured. The perfect son, son-in-law, Family Heir.

There was some commotion when his older brother arrived, a little late as always, his broad grin and the hug he engulfed Jared in almost leaving cracks in his resolution ... almost. Jeff was part of the system, a viral part already; and the system had to go. It was the only way.

Everyone was seated at the shiny wooden table, Russians on one side, the Polish Family members on the other, contracts were signed, short speeches held. Jared was welcomed into the Family world, and finally, glasses were carted in, champagne bottles popped open. It was a blur of voices and colors, _smile, smile, smile, keep smiling and looking like this is the cherry on top of your cake, one you’ve always wanted._

He was convincing, he knew it, not overdoing it, just letting his professional smile stay in place. He felt Andrej’s calculating eyes on him, waiting for the tiniest sign of weakness, or emotion – but he gave him nothing, played his role perfectly.

„Well, my dear friends, it’s time for the photograph. Let’s give the world out there something memorable – a glimpse of this historical moment.“ Andrej got up, and everyone followed, clinking their glasses, drinking, leaving their seats, chatting, now that the official part of the meeting was over. They were politely shooed to the wall with the rich ornamental wood carvings, organized into two rows by a man who reminded Jared of an old-fashioned butler with his striped vest and neatly parted greying hair.

He came to stand behind his parents, Jeff at his side – they were just too tall to be in the first row. Jeff nudged his side with his elbow, and bowed close to whisper into his ear.

„This is it, little brother. You climbed up the ladder pretty fast, huh? Guess it doesn’t hurt to bang the Big Bosses’ daughter. Well done, bro, well done! Glad you found your way, finally. I’m proud of you.“

He swallowed down the bile that threatened to raise in his throat.

„Thanks“, he murmured, and was spared more words by Andrej who raised his champagne glass.

„Cheese, everyone! Let’s give people something to talk about!“

_Hell yes, we will...._

The photographer crouched down in front of them and started to click away.

Jared closed his eyes.
Green eyes looked at him sleepily, adorably unfocused, fluttering shut again, long lashes throwing
delicate shadows over the skin under Jensen´s eyes. „Hey, sleepyhead....“ He let his fingertip
touch the tips of the curly lashes, followed their line to the corner of Jensen´s eye, barely touching,
let his finger wander down to his lips. Traced their perfect bow, the softness under the chapped
skin. He knew how they felt on his own lips, how they tasted. Could tell how Jensen´s front would
creak between his brows, how the tiny dimples above the corners of his mouth would show for a
moment. How he´d hum in that deep, low tone that made Jared´s heart flutter so painfully happily.

Two weeks, and you knew all of that.

The green eyes opened again, looked directly into his own. There was wonder in them, the same
wonder he himself felt each time he woke up to this face, this warm body cuddled against him. The
wonder that in their world, in their lives this was possible.

Finding the one.

Finding love.

He opened his eyes, took in the bustle around him, raised glasses, voices. Power and arrogance
wafting through the air like a sickening smell.

„Ok, that´s the final one! Your best smile, everyone!“

Final, indeed.

His hand found the button on the belt the man with the gravelly voice had sent him.

His brother threw his arm around his shoulders, pulling them close.

„We did it, bro! Cheese!“

He closed his eyes again, and pressed the button.

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EPILOGUE

Misha

He watched the merry group gather for the photographer, finally standing in two rows, Andrej and
the Padaleckis in the middle, Jared directly behind them. It was the perfect place, right at the
center. He zoomed in on the young man´s face on one of the other monitors, looking for any sign
that he would chicken out. The polite mask he showed was almost scarily perfect though. His saw
him close his eyes, and for a moment, emotions flickered over the carefully controlled face; no one
paid attention, though, everyone was cheering and focusing on the photographer dancing around in
front of them.
Jared opened his eyes, looking directly into the hidden camera for a second, and Misha knew.

He’ll do it.

„Ok, that´s the final one! Your best smile, everyone!“

Oh, Andrej, you´ve got no idea .... shouldn´t have crossed my paths, dear friend.

And you shouldn´t have underestimated those two boys, dismiss them because of your prejudices... like everyone else did ...

He saw Jared´s brother pull him closer. It almost made him miss the movement of Jared´s hand, under his jacket. The young man closed his eyes.

There was a white flash.

The monitors went black for a moment; then grey noise filled them, accompanied by a soft hiss from the speakers.

Misha leant back in his leather chair, staring at the flickering monitors in front of him. The picture of the two young men crossed his mind, standing in the snow, fronts pressed together, the Padalecki boy´s big hands cradling the shorter man´s face so gently. Snowflakes whirling around them, the cold almost visible, tangible in the photo. It had looked so... anachronistic. Out of time, out of place, a black and white photography of another era. But then, that´s what love probably was. Timeless. Unchanging in its fierce power.

Well, he wouldn´t know, would he.

He spun the chair around and pushed himself up. This town needed some new structure. And he sure as Hell wouldn´t be the one to take orders this time.

Works inspired by this [open_J2_BigBang 2017 Art Masterpost: Till Death Do Us Part](#) by Mangacat

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