Those Who Show Up

by dugindeep (hotsauce)

Summary

NOTE!: there are headers and other graphics important to the story (polling #s, POV changes, etc) that show in web mode but not as a downloaded file. Therefore, some items are repeated when seen in web mode to be sure they are also in the downloaded files.

Jared Padalecki is the latest politician to throw his hat into the Presidential Race. As a Texas Senator, he's well respected by the Republican Party for upholding the values of the GOP. But his earnest, can-do attitude only gets him so far when it comes to the American public.

Enter: Jensen Ackles, a renowned strategist who resuscitates fledgling campaigns and wins political races. Over the course of a year, Jensen and Jared struggle to see eye to eye even as they're both hell bent to win in November. If only Jensen could figure out what skeletons are in the Senator's closet so he can get ahead of a scandal before it breaks.

Decisions are made by those who show up - Aaron Sorkin, The West Wing

Notes

Written for the 2018 SPN_J2_BigBang. Please visit matchboximpala's amazing ART POST and send some love her way!
Infidelity on an OFC (Jared cheats on his wife). Everyone is aged with respect to running for office (Jensen and Jared are mid to late 40s, everyone else around them is respectively older). Set in an alternative timeline (2020 U.S. Presidential Election) where politicians are better received/respected than they are today.
Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.
--Groucho Marx

Chapter 1

365 days until Election Day

The Senator: Jared Padalecki

Jared Padalecki rolled up the sleeves of his white button-up and regarded the folks before him. The high school gymnasium wasn’t large, nor was the crowd.

“Today, I stand here proud to be your U.S. Senator. And proud to uphold our values when fighting to be heard in Washington.” He paused for applause. Not much came. “We’ve fought to protect the farmers with their lands of bountiful crops. As well as the proud men and women who serve and protect as police and firefighters. And we’ve fought hard to keep our human rights for speech and assembly at the forefront of America’s mind. But we have a longer fight ahead of us.”

He glanced around to observe folks fanning themselves with the cardboard signs passed out at the front door. Others were checking their phones or staring at him awaiting something more exciting.

He sure wished he could energize the crowd on what was supposed to be the proudest day of his life.

After spending the last ten years in the Senate, Jared had decided to put his hat in the ring. Or rather, others told him it was the right time. That it was a ‘year of weak candidates’ and he should ‘go for
broke’. His campaign manager nearly twisted Jared’s arm off and lined his pitch with promises of great power and responsibilities, and he eventually followed the lead.

So there he stood on risers in a gymnasium in South Texas. With a tiny group of volunteers off to his left and a pitifully bored community to witness his announcement before him.

Of course, that was the moment the mic screeched and a speaker boomed, wisps of smoke trailing in the air.

Everyone was startled, especially Jared. He glanced to his staff, who quickly motioned for him to continue. He stepped to the edge of the stage and spread his arms to call out to the big open space.

“I’m Jared Padalecki and I want to be your next president! Who’s coming with us to Washington?”

The reaction was delayed, but eventually his campaign team joined him on stage and on the floor, starting a standing ovation among the dozens of attendees.

Jared smiled widely, fighting the turn of his stomach that questioned this moment. He was sure it could only go up from here.

364 days until Election Day

The Blogger: Richard Speight, Jr.

Senator Jared Padalecki (R-Texas) surprised the crowd today at the Valley Christian Heritage School in Alamo when the sound system blew up and filled the room with smoke. Just seconds after declaring he was entering the race for President, the gym was evacuated, with the Alamo Fire Department escorting the crowd to the parking lot.

Fire Chief Roy Thomas reported there were few injuries outside of residents complaining of smoke inhalation and a high school junior with a broken ankle. “Maybe she was just looking to get out of finals,” Thomas said with a wry look.

Senator Padalecki was unavailable for comment. Jeffrey Morgan, Padalecki’s campaign manager, took a few questions before joining the ragtag group of campaign staff in a white Ford Conversion Van. “We, the Senator especially, are not dissuaded by the incident and look forward to many more events with the Texas community and communities across the country. He’s excited for the opportunity to bring his voice to the national stage.”

Hopefully they keep that stage from catching on fire.

Sen. Padalecki has joined a who’s who of Republican candidates that features Tom Welling,
Governor of Indiana; Mitchell Pileggi, the current Speaker of the House (R-California); and New York businessman Michael Weatherly. Sen. Padalecki’s career pales in comparison to the political prowess of Welling and Pileggi in Washington, and most certainly trails miles behind Weatherly’s donation chest, but Padalecki’s good looks and popularity with the youngest generation of voters could give him a chance through the first primary or two.

I’ll be following the trail to report on the Senator’s campaign with his next stops in Oklahoma and Kansas as he continues drumming up support from the farming community.

Stick with us for blog updates and vlog entries on the 2020 Presidential Campaign.

For more local political news and updates, visit my twitter @DickDoesDallas.
330 days until Election Day

_The Underdog: Jared Padalecki_

“So, where are we at?” Jared asked as he faced his election staff. He leaned forward to rest his hands on the back of the chair in front of him and thought briefly on the atrocity of a tie he was wearing, which he’d loosened around his neck the second he stepped off stage and was out of view of the crowd in the auditorium.

The heat of San Antonio was stifling and the navy tie with tiny Texas flags didn’t help one bit. Neither did the silence of his dozen staffers, now scattered across the kindergarten classroom of the same grade school where his mom had taught for a few decades. That had been a point they were there to make with his speech - hometown boy, returning to the very school his mama had worked in. That he was homegrown and deserved all 38 electoral votes Texas could offer.

Jared wasn’t sure it was working because no one would look at him and that didn’t seem right. He thought he’d earned himself a great deal of respect as a U.S. Senator, and he definitely thought he deserved a better answer than silence as a presidential nominee.

“Where are we at?” he repeated.

“Twelve points,” Jeff answered from the back. Unlike anyone else in the room, the political advisor dared to stand at attention and meet Jared’s eyes. “Twelve points and today won’t help a bit.”

He chuckled. “Twelve points sounds pretty good.”

“Behind. We are twelve behind.”
“That’s not a lot,” Jared tried to excuse away. “It’s not so bad.”

“Twelve points behind in Texas. Your home state,” Jeff said slowly. “That’s pretty damned bad.”

Jared wanted to bite back that he deserved better news, but he’d just spent an hour sweating through his shirt and tie as he responded to stilted questions during his fourth town hall meeting in a week. He couldn’t blame just the heat for how damp his shirt and the back of his neck felt. The last few weeks of bad numbers and stumbling through primaries weren’t helping him edge out his fellow Republican nominees.

“Why are we twelve points behind?” Jared asked. “There’re answers for that, right?”

“You mean besides swimming in sweat?” From a table away from Jeff, speechwriter Alona Tal posed her question.

Jeff smirked and scrubbed a finger at the edge of his beard, eventually moving his hand to cover his mouth when Jake shifted in the tiny kindergarten chair a few seats from Alona to ask, “Or the shorts joke?”

“What about him shooting down free education?” another staffer called out from the other side of the room.

“Or same sex marriage?”

“Family values with a low-profile family?”

A few other low blows were slung around until Jared cleared his throat and stood up to his full six and a half feet. “Is it possible that someone has good news?” No one spoke and he sighed roughly. “Seriously? You’re experts at all my faults, but no one thought to share good news?”

“You’re not crashing and burning,” Alona replied.

Jake Abel, a staffer helping Jeff with scheduling, piped up. “Yet.”

Jared scowled and pointed at Alona. “That’s good news?”

“It’s a slow, painful descent, but you’re still upright and functional.”

“This is what you’ve got?” he shouted, shocking everyone into giving him their full attention. “In this room, there are 15 MBAs, four doctorates, and 200 collective years in politics, and this is all we’ve got?! That I’m not crashing and burning?”

The room flinched with the booming of his voice. Once Jared’s anger and heart settled down, he felt guilt wash over him. He sighed and ran his hand over his face. “Where do we go from here?”

“Ice cream social and a photo op with Mrs. Padalecki.”

Jared looked over and to Jake, who continued reading the itinerary he’d long ago been charged with to keep Jared on point. Jared sighed. “Mrs. Padalecki?”

“Your wife.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Sir?” Jake asked with confusion.
“Nevermind. Let’s go,” he snapped before clapping his hands and heading straight for Jeff. They marched out of the room and stayed close together so Jared could speak freely. “I’m not saying he’s a bad kid, but-”

“Which kid?” Jeff asked.

“Jake, he’s not a bad kid-”

Jeff laughed. “He’s thirty-four.”

“That’s still young,” Jared insisted as they turned a corner and headed towards the cafeteria. “He’s fourteen years younger than me. That’s young. And maybe he’s stupid, or thinks I am, but I’m pretty sure I know that Mrs. Padalecki is my wife.”

Jeff rolled his eyes and smacked the back of Jared’s neck before reining him in close. “That man is incredibly good at his job.”

“Well that makes one of us.” Jared frowned as he turned around just outside the packed cafeteria. He faced Jeff as he fixed his tie back up.

Except, Jeff flicked Jared’s hands away and tugged the knot back down for light and casual. “Keep the tie open. This is ice cream on a hot day. Stay loose.”

“Why isn’t anyone doing their job?” Jared asked, still tight yet not as upset as he was in the classroom minutes ago.

“People are working,” Jeff replied smoothly, but Jared could tell there was something off.

“Why am I twelve down, Jeff? I’ve served Texas for fifteen years. I increased votership across the state, education scores are up, taxes are down. My freaking tie is red, white, and blue. I bleed red state all over the place and I’m twelve points down in Texas.”

“There are a lot of reasons you’re down in Texas.”

“Besides the sweat?” After a moment, Jared added, “Or free education or family values?”

Jeff smirked. “It could be the shorts joke.”

Jared eased up enough to kid, “I look damned good in shorts, Jeff. You know that.”

“It’d be nice if you stop reminding the American people that you’re better looking and more fit than 99 percent of them.” Jeff put on a tight, fake smile to make his point. “It’s just a thought.”

“Okay, so there’s one suggestion. You got any others?”

“Go after Pileggi on-”

Jared immediately shook his head. “Try another.”

“You could try solidifying family values by actually-”

“No, Jeff,” Jared insisted. “I’m not putting my kids in the spotlight.”

Jeff sighed; this wasn’t the first time they’d discussed it. Jared knew it was a sore spot, but it was one he wouldn’t wiggle on. “People aren’t just voting for the good-looking candidate with good intentions. They want to know the next First Family.”
And I’d like to see my kids in school, doing homework, playing with their friends. In fact, I’d like to be there to take them to school, not prop them up like a toy. They don’t belong on the campaign.

He tried once more, softening his words with a gentle smile. “The voters want to know who they’re putting in the White House and what kind of man you really are.”

“You want to know what kind of man I am? I’m the guy who doesn’t run people out of the room. I’m the guy who runs a clean race.”

Suddenly, there was a buzz of voices and high heels clicking down the hallway, and Jared looked to his right to find Matt Cohen, a political aide Jeff brought with him from a recent campaign, rushing alongside Madeline, Jared’s wife. Her long, blond hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail with soft bangs sweeping across her forehead. The dark pencil skirt looked just as perfectly pressed as her pale pink silk shirt. She looked every bit the polished D.C. wife, and had ever since they first met twelve years ago during his first term in the Senate.

Madeline had been confident and social, popular among their social circles with her broad smile. After ten years of marriage and two children, that confidence translated into an unfiltered, hypercritical delivery, and her thinned lips in response to Jared’s appearance made his stomach turn in all the wrong ways.

“Oh, look at you,” she murmured when she approached him. She swept bits of hair behind his ears then straightened his collar before righting the loose tie and rubbing out small wrinkles from the chest of his shirt. “You’re always such a mess in the heat. Coming down here in May was a terrible idea.”

“Gotta do what we gotta do, Maddie,” Jared replied before glancing over her shoulder to Jeff, who shrugged.

“Still too hot for you,” she replied tightly. “No one likes to watch you soak like this.”

“Senator, Ma’am, it’s just ice cream and kids,” Alona offered with one of her sweet, calm smiles.

Madeline blotted a handkerchief along Jared’s temples and murmured, “And kids aren’t favorable to sweaty monsters.”

Jared rolled his eyes and was ready to complain to his wife about any number of other matters they had to worry about, but Jeff stopped him there, tugging on Jared’s elbow to turn him back around.

Jeff gave him a light shove forward. “Calm down and go kiss some babies.”

299 days until Election Day
Jeff joined his staffers in the hotel bar, all huddled around a corner table, and dropped a newspaper in front of them.

Alona, Jake, and Matt leaned forward to read the headline: *Pileggi Fires on Family Values. Padalecki Stays Quiet.*

“How has the Senate’s most affable man become a cardboard cut-out?” Alona asked as she brought her drink to her lips.

Jeff tugged the knot of his tie free and dropped into a seat beside Jake, looking at Matt for his reply.

With a shrug, Matt leaned back. “The Senate’s most affable man is also America’s safest politician.”

“You knew that when you signed on, Matthew,” Alona chided.

Matt looked into his lowball glass, replied, “I’m not saying I didn’t know that,” and took a long swig of his drink.

“Then what are you saying?” Alona asked, spinning towards him.

He placed his glass down and aimed a close look at her. “Just that he continues to reinforce a sad fact in this universe.” Then he winked even as she seemed to get more riled up.

Alona huffed despite his playful look. “There is nothing wrong with being a clean politician.”

“Oxymoron,” Jake mumbled before drinking from his beer bottle.

“Empty facade,” Matt tried.

“More like a punchline,” Jeff slipped in with a sharp smile to his staff.

Alona sighed. “Jeff, this is not the campaign we signed on for.”

“He’s a good man playing a clean fight.”

“A clean and boring fight,” Alona corrected.

“Is it a fight when there’s only one side making an impact?” Jake asked. “Welling is moving fast on jobs and sweeping up all of the middle class. And Pileggi has cornered the religious right. There are only so many farmers to vote for us.”

Jeff leaned back in his chair and watched the three bicker. He’d hand-picked Jake, Alona, and Matt for their passionate dedication to their civic duty, as well as their interest in making an impact, jumping onto the caboose of a long-shot candidate’s race to the White House. Matt was their slick whipcracker, snapping people into action with a smooth smile and sharp tongue. Jake was dry and a little slow to jump into the fray, but he was a sponge of political history and legislation. Alona had more latent emotion than the two men combined, and it showed whether she was excitable, comforting, or dwelling on bad luck. She’d spent her first few months trying to inject some energy into the campaign.

These three staffers had showed up bright-eyed and warm-hearted with just the right amount of skepticism to kick-start the Padalecki campaign. Six months later, they were worn down and rough with cynicism and the disappointment of standstill politics because, while the Senator really was a good guy with a kind heart, he was also cursed with a safe disposition when it came to American
politics.

Jared Padalecki could be the best President the country had seen in decades, but he had a shit chance of making it to the West Wing with how little movement he allowed.

“We’re digging our own hole,” Jeff murmured.

The table went quiet and stared in horror until Alona sputtered a few syllables and finally got her words together to announce, “This is bad!”

“It’s always been bad,” Jake mumbled.

“No, this is real bad,” Alona said gravely, pointing right at Jeff. “If he’s saying it, then we’re in the deepest shitbox you’ll see in your life.”

“So, what now?” Matt asked with a loose chuckle. “We pack up and pick a new horse to ride? Or do we just sit tight and ride the rapids until we drown?”

“Neither,” Jeff insisted as a tiny idea rattled around his brain. “For now, we're all gonna just sit tight like nothing’s changed.”

“Because nothing has changed?” Alona suggested tartly.

“Because I said so.” Jeff rose and dropped two twenties on the table before giving the staffers a stern look. “Get your asses to bed. We have an early morning.”

“Are you going to fix anything here?” she called after him.

Jake’s quiet, “What’s there to fix?” wasn’t lost on Jeff.

…

“Are you kidding me?” Jared bellowed from the bedroom of the luxury bus.

Jeff left the team to continue discussing the next stop and headed down the aisle, holding onto the cabinetry of the kitchen as the bus shook from side to side, barrelling down a mostly empty country road. He was ninety-nine percent sure of what Jared was reacting to, but he’d learned long ago that it was best to let the Senator get his words out before he tried to calm him down.

He also knew it was best to contain Jared’s outbursts and shield the staff.

Jared whipped the bedroom door open in the same white rumpled shirt he’d worn for a breakfast stop that morning and the same tie offset around his neck. His hair was a tangle of waves he’d been running his hands through, and his eyes were even more of a mess than anything else about him. He breathed in deep with his nostrils flared then sternly pointed at the papers in his hands.

“I never said this, Jeff.”

Jeff offered a small, playful smile, and pulled the papers from Jared’s hands. “Now, let’s see what we’re talking about here, Mr. Senator.”

“Don’t patronize me.”
Jeff hummed before reading through the story he’d been anticipating; it was on same sex marriage and Jared’s inability to take a stance on either side of the fence, instead spinning his way around questions. However, there was a small tidbit that Jeff had not been privy to when Alona gave him a rundown of the day’s press.

“An unnamed source in Senator Padalecki’s camp,” Jeff mumbled, glancing up to Jared and finding him pursing his lips along with flaring his nostrils and sweating at the temples, “reports that the Texan is aligned with Senator Pileggi’s Marriage Sanctity Act, but has yet to verbalize his position in order to keep space between the candidates.”

“I never said that. I never said I was on his side for that stupid piece of paper.”

Jeff slowly looked up again. He wasn’t about to poke the senator, but he was already aware what reaction it would get. “You never said you were against it either.”

“God dammit, Jeff,” Jared shouted, slapping the print-out from Jeff’s hands. “I never said either way because you thought it would be best to stay wide open and now look at us! Unnamed sources are starting lies about me!”

“Welcome to D.C.,” he said with a quick flip of his eyebrows.

“We’re in Oklahoma,” Madeline added, and Jeff suddenly realized she’d been behind Jared on the bed the whole time.

He offered her a flat smile. “Mrs. Padalecki, you mind if Jared and I have the room?”

She didn’t budge, nor say a word. Just blinked at him like it was ridiculous he’d ask for such a favor. Jeff knew Madeline Padalecki from his time around Washington D.C., but he’d rather work directly with his client than let a spouse get in the way. Didn’t matter if it was someone with the kind of history she and her family had claimed at the Capitol. He forced his smile wider and moved to the side with a gesture towards the front of the bus. “We’ll be just a moment. Promise.”

“Maddie, it’s fine,” Jared sighed, immediately drawing her attention.

She seemed to assess him, then Jeff, before standing up and grabbing her phone. “I should call the kids anyway. Your father’s taking them to soccer tonight.”

Jared frowned. “Tell them I’ll call tonight.”

There was no answer, but finally Jeff was alone with Jared and could have a civilized conversation without an extra set of ears. Especially hers. “Okay, so the Marriage Sanctity Act,” Jeff prompted.

“I never said either way if I supported it. Why are there rumors putting me in the same category as Pileggi?”

Jeff put his hands up to placate him, hoping to bring it all down from a rolling boil to a simmer. “I’ll find out who said this.”

“That’s not my point,” Jared insisted.

“No it’s not. It’s mine.” he smiled a little. “What’s yours?”

That set Jared off, his arms waving around, motioning at the tight, dark space of their worn-down tour bus. “I didn’t sign up to run a lame-dog race, Jeff.”
“Jared, sit down,” Jeff instructed, then nearly shoved Jared down to sit on a dresser. He leaned in with one hand on the wall and ground his teeth for a second before railing right into him. “First of all, you didn’t sign up. I came to you and had to shove you into the race because I believe you’re one of America’s best options and that you were tired of swimming in circles in a democratic senate.”

When Jared opened his mouth, Jeff lifted a finger and aimed a sharp look to shut him up. “And when you finally relented, you insisted - declared - that this would be the cleanest race in the history of America. And it is. You know what else it is, Jared? It’s the quietest, slowest, and most dead-end candidacy I have witnessed first-hand. And, need I remind you that I consulted Dole?”

“Dole ran a good race,” Jared insisted, face set in anger.

“He spoke to a pen.”

The Senator silently seethed, looking off to his left with his shoulders lifting high and dropping low with exaggerated breathing. Then he turned a bit to the right and Jeff figured it was to avoid facing the few staffers, and mainly his wife, who all had to have heard their argument.

Jeff was certain he’d broken the man, just about sent him running for the hills with his tail between his legs, and if that’s how it was meant to be, Jeff could deal. He’d rather they cut it now than keep dragging this corpse of a candidacy up into the Midwest for the summer where it’d likely splash across newspapers and television that Jared Padalecki’s career was over the second he stepped into the race.

“It’s Senator.”

Jeff stared for a second then shook his head. “What?”

Jared’s eyes bore a flash of defiance Jeff had yet to see in the months they’d spent on the road.

“Senator. My title, my name, my respectful position at the moment is still Senator.”

Pulling back, Jeff watched as Jared rose to stand in the tight space beside the kitchen counter. He felt his heart kick up for a few quick moments as Jared glared down at him.

“If you’d be so kind as to continue using it.”

This was the man Jeff met five years ago, the one he’d dragged into the race a year back, and the one he’d been dying to see for the past six months. Stopping the grin from spreading on his face was impossible, but Jeff at least had the decency to nod and reply, “Of course, Senator.”

“Thank you,” Jared nodded back, then took a deep breath, seemingly to calm himself from the sudden onset of anger. “I’m not quitting. Not now, not before we’ve made a dent.”

“I have just one question for you then. Senator,” Jeff tacked on with a small smile. “Are you ready to fight?”

Jared considered Jeff for a bit until he finally murmured, “I’m not getting messy.”

“Oh course not.”

Glancing around the bus, Jared acknowledged his wife and Alona and Jake down the way. “No one on this bus is getting messy either.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”
“No one, not even the unnamed source, is dipping a single toe into Pileggi’s camp.”

“Absolutely, sir,” Jeff replied with a sure nod.

Jared pushed a finger towards Jeff’s face. “Not one toe.”

Jared wouldn’t get dirty. He never let Jeff do it and insisted their young staff play on the right side of the laws they were trying to uphold. This wasn’t the first time, however, Jeff found himself in a situation like this. He knew his options.

293 days until Election Day

The Consultant: Jensen Ackles

“I was hoping you would’ve sent one of your pretty staffers to greet me,” Jensen Ackles insisted with a broad smile while shaking Jeff Morgan’s hand. “Then I wouldn’t have to face your ugly mug.”

Jeff smirked and enthusiastically shook back before ushering Jensen inside the hotel suite. “I’m pretty sure you are to stay as far from them as possible.”

“That’s no fun.” Jensen glanced around the creamy grey living room and over the pearl-colored furniture. It was a suite, sure, but they were in Cedar Rapids. It wasn’t a suite at the Four Seasons or anything remotely close. He lifted his eyebrows in question. “What do you folks do for fun around here?”

“We haven’t figured that out yet.”

“You figure out how to sleep? You look like roadkill that’s been raked over the coals.”

“It is the Midwest after all.”

“That’s no excuse.” Jensen let his eyes roam over Jeff, then tsked and shook his head. “Just means that you’re letting yourself go in your old age.”

Jeff snorted. “Drink?”

Jensen dropped into the corner of the sofa and spread his arms while licking his lips. “A drink is always on the docket.”

“Are you charging me already?”
“Since the end of our phone call.” Jensen smirked and accepted the tumbler of whiskey. He crossed his leg over his knee, adjusted the spread of his suit jacket, ready to get down to business. “You think you get a discount because we were friends twenty years ago?”

Jeff laughed and sat in the armchair nearest Jensen. “How was the flight?”

“Lovely. If I knew I’d be riding coach, I would have walked.”

“You’re such a little priss, it’s adorable.”

Jensen laughed and took another sip of his drink. “To what do I owe the honor of your request?”

“You may have heard that Padalecki’s campaign is a little sluggish right now.”

He snorted and shook his head. “Pard’ner Padalecki has you attempting to fire all engines, huh?”

Jeff motioned with his glass as he spoke. “He insists the core of us remain clean, and I don’t really blame him for that. We’re staying clean and now—”

“And now you call me in to help pig up the pig-pen.”

Jeff nodded. “Something like that.”

“You sure you don’t want to run him alone?”

“Three months in and we’re actually losing ground.” Jeff shook his head then grabbed a manilla folder from the side table. He set it on the coffee table and slid it towards Jensen. “Room key, staff rundown, schedule for the next two days.”

Jensen took his time drinking and staring at the envelope. This packet would set him on the road towards making a credible politician out of the last-place candidate. When he looked back to Jeff, his old friend was watching intently, waiting for Jensen to shift even an inch towards the envelope.

“You’ve done a lot of good work with him,” Jensen said instead, a tad fond. He didn’t particularly love dishing out compliments, especially in the political arena, but Jeff had been a good friend for a long time. Much of what Jensen knew, he picked up as Jeff’s shadow; the man was damn good at whipping candidates into shape. “He damn near lost that accent until you mosied on back down to San Antone,” Jensen purposely overpronounced. “Too bad you can’t lose the bad itch in his policy.”

Laughing, Jeff settled into his seat, crossing his ankle over his knee just like Jensen and tapping his tumbler against the heel of his dress shoe. “You up for a challenge?”

“With who?” Jensen asked, chuckling as he looked around the room, disbelieving. “With your two-bit candidate who’s only got a nice smile and an aw-shucks, too-pretty-for-words family? You really think I’d be interested in something as bloated and expired as this?”

“Tell us how you really feel,” came from behind Jensen, making him flinch so fast, he spilled whiskey on his pants.

Jensen cursed under his breath at the mess as well as the sight of Jared Padalecki shuffling into the room. His shoulders were hunched, hands in the pockets of his rumpled dress pants, and his suit shirt unbuttoned enough to show off his throat working through a rough swallow as he stared at Jensen.

Seconds later, Jensen put his glass down on the coffee table, rose, and moved around the side of the couch to greet the man. With a small smile, Jensen held his hand out and offered his most respectful
tone. “Mr. Senator. Pleasure to meet you.”

Padalecki took his time looking over Jensen before slowly shaking his hand with a small, skeptical hum. He glanced over Jensen’s shoulder and nodded towards Jeff. “This is your guy?”

“This is my guy,” Jeff replied, all while Jensen critiqued Padalecki in person.

The Senator was tall, broad-shouldered, and tan, just like all the pictures. Here and now, however, he was without the trademark easy smile or bright eyes. The mess of his clothes told Jensen that his short run thus far wasn’t going any better behind closed doors than in the public eye. He looked a cross between defeated and menacing.

“You’re the guy,” Padalecki said. “You’re the guy who came down here to save our two-bit, bloated asses?”

Jensen stumbled to find the right response – on one hand, he could be that guy; on the other, he felt foolish having his words thrown back in his face. Even if he meant every one of them.

“Or are you just wasting our time now?” he asked with a tight squeeze to Jensen’s hand.

“He’s not wasting our time,” Jeff insisted, coming to stand beside Jensen. “We go back far enough for me to know he wouldn’t bother coming down here if he hadn’t already sorted out every attack on Pileggi and written your first soundbite for the morning.” Jeff slapped his hand down on Jensen’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Jensen stared at Jeff then the Senator, not caring how long it took for him to consider both men and how much trouble they could get up to in the coming year. How he and Jeff could run behind party lines, doubling over Pileggi’s efforts to corner the red states and righteous Christians who’d been following the aging, six-term Senator since he was first elected in Florida. His campaign had armed itself well against Jared Padalecki.

There would be nights with no sleep, mornings drowning with coffee, and nothing even comparable to first class during the next year of bus rides and trips in vans, suffering through 100-degree oppressive summers and bitter glacial winters.

Hell if he wasn’t looking forward to the challenge.

“Up,” Jensen replied once all of his thoughts had settled.

“Excuse me?” Padalecki asked, looking beyond confused for a man with an MBA and twenty years in the federal government.

“I came up. Dallas to Cedar Rapids is up, not down. Or if you’d rather, I could say north and south for the sleep-deprived in the room.” The Senator didn’t respond. Jensen dropped his hand, sighed, and stuffed his own hands into his pants pockets. “Please tell me I don’t have to teach you that Iowa is north of Texas. It’s basic U.S. geography.”

“So you’re in?” Padalecki asked as he widened his eyes.

“I’ll have to sleep on it,” Jensen replied, slipping around Jeff. He moved back to the sitting area, snatched up the manilla envelope and the one carry-on he’d brought with him on the last-minute flight - ignoring Jeff’s smug smile - and headed for the door.

“Where’re you sleeping?” he asked, still with that strange dumbstruck look. It would be amusing if he weren’t vying for the highest office in America. It was sad and pathetic at the moment.
In the room Jeff’s putting me up in.” Jensen smirked. “I’m sure y’all don’t mind a li’l Southern hospitality while I consider all my options.”

He didn’t bother waiting for an answer, just headed right to his room, swiped the key card, and turned the TV on as soon as he passed it. He grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels until he hit Fox News and then moved about the room to hang his jacket, toe his shoes off beside the desk, roll up his shirt sleeves, and finally settle on the bed with a legal pad he’d been carrying with him since he left his parents’ home in Dallas.

Just six hours ago, he was lounging in the family room with his nephew tucked into his side, his sister on the floor between his knees, and a tall glass of sweet tea. It was nice and homey. Quiet and reminiscent of the family life he abandoned long ago. But it wasn’t politics. The weekend had been the largest Ackles family reunion yet, with light beer going down easy on the warm day, playing horseshoes and cornhole, and shooting their empty beer bottles well after dark, lacking any real competition.

Politics and competition and the win, that was what he lived for. His family had long stopped trying to understand it and instead gave him a small, knowing smile when he jumped off the couch to take Jeff’s call. He’d only heard a few words from his mentor, realized this was his chance to overcome his role as the student, and hopped onto the next flight out of DFW.

The moment Padalecki’s name was uttered on TV, Jensen rested back against the headboard and grabbed the phone to order room service. And lots of coffee.

292 days until Election Day

The Staffer: Matt Cohen

“Were you on that bus?”

Matt blinked at the newspapers set down in front of him, then followed the hand to a suited arm and up to a vaguely familiar face.

“I was enjoying my breakfast, thank you very much,” Matt insisted, tugging his plate of raisin toast out from beneath the papers.

The guy sat down at Matt’s side, clearly taking over most of the table with a dozen newspapers, his own coffee, and a leather-bound legal pad that had seen some days, evidenced by how the pages were easily curling over the top of the binding.

“No, please,” Matt smiled sharply. “Take a seat. Would you like some toast?”
“Matt Cohen, right?” the guy asked, all no-nonsense, just like his straight look.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re Matt Cohen. I was asking to be polite, but I knew it when I walked in.”

Matt narrowed his eyes, sighed, and glanced around the room, looking for a photographer who might be ready to nail him with this awkward exchange. Maybe another reporter who would ambush him next. He put his hand out towards the guy and chuckled lightly, “Look, buddy—“

“I was told that two of three senior staffers were on the bus with Jeff and the Senator, and I’m guessing you’re the lone ranger who hasn’t got a clue about what’s going on yet. I’m guessing you didn’t hear the Senator say he’s not getting dirty and that anyone who was within those four walls wasn’t either.”

Suddenly, a few things clicked into place. Alona had whispered something like that last night, had insisted the Senator was defiant to Jeff about their involvement with any response to Pileggi’s attacks or the *unnamed source*.

“Who are you?” Matt finally asked. “And where’d you hear about the bus?”

With a sly smirk, he leaned into the conversation. “Jeff told me. I’m the guy who’s going to show you how the game of politics is really played.”

The face quickly registered and Matt mumbled, “Jensen Ackles,” with a small, growing smile.

Ackles – a man who had been heard of yet not often seen in his two decades of political warfare spent in Jeff’s shadow – smiled a clean, white smile in return. “You wanna get a little dirty with me, kid?”

Matt wasn’t purposeful in his political demeanor – step up when needed, tiptoe around when told to stay back – but he knew when shit had to get done. And he wasn’t afraid to work his magic (and smiles) behind the scenes when he was able. Right now seemed as good a time as any. Everyone had the updated polling numbers on their phones first thing this morning. He was ready to get plenty dirty if it moved the needle even an inch.

With Jensen Ackles grinning at him like they were about to become best friends, Matt was ready and able.

…

Matt walked onto the side patio of the hotel’s restaurant where a dozen photographers and reporters were spread out with their own continental breakfast and mainlining coffee. Most were scribbling notes or tapping away at laptops, and Matt waited until they noticed his presence.

“Are we gonna hear from the Senator today?” one of them called out.

With a smooth smile, Matt motioned his hands out to calm them, then tucked them together at his waist. “Unfortunately, the Senator is currently packing up to hit the road. We’re angling for an early arrival in Des Moines this afternoon.”
“Is he avoiding a response to Pileggi’s accusations?” another reporter asked.

“What’s the Senator’s position on same sex marriage?” a third joined in.

Matt ran his hands over his hips, flicking his suit jacket back and smiling broadly. He thought of the slip of paper in his left pocket, the one Ackles had handed him after a short conversation about the boundaries Matt could stretch without the Senator coming down on him. All with Ackles’ guarantee of protection.

“He is not avoiding a response to Pileggi. As you all know, Senator Padalecki is a red-blooded Texan with two beautiful children and a wonderful, faithful wife. He is a lifelong member of his church, has sat for prayer with congregations in nearly every town we’ve visited. He cares about families. Breaths traditional values. If you want to consider the possibility of family values in politics I’d like you to consider Pileggi’s record in DC. Maybe a quick glance over his record on the Women’s Act for Care. I don’t know,” Matt ended with a shrug and light smile.

“What about the WAC?” someone asked from the corner of the patio. “It died before it got to a formal vote.”

“I believe Pileggi was one of the committee members who supported those tax hikes, which would fund services at Planned Parenthood and other abortion clinics. For a conservative, he is awfully loose with his actions when it comes to social programs.”

“Are you saying Pileggi is failing to adhere to his standards?”

Matt pointed at the short, balding man in the corner who was furiously writing every word. “Eric? Did I say that?”

“Not yet,” the guy replied. “Off the record?”

“Off the record?” Matt repeated with a shrug. “Perhaps Senator Pileggi should consider his previous statements, or personal history, before launching attacks.”

“Personal history?”

Matt nodded at the reporter, aiming for casual and carefree. “You’re the investigator, not me. Maybe a few things got swept under the rug back in 2004.”

He waved and felt a sharp chill run down his spine as he thanked them and went back inside, despite how active they suddenly all were to get more information.

Jensen was still seated at the table, watching Matt closely as he returned to his seat. He instantly made Matt uncomfortable, critiquing with a close eye and remaining silent even as Matt smiled at him.

“I’m supposing you didn’t crash and burn out there,” Jensen says, bringing his coffee cup up to his mouth.

He leaned back in his seat and tapped the arms of his chair, still feeling awkward under Jensen’s stare. “I’m pretty sure it was the opposite.”

“You feel guilty yet?”

“For what?”
“For taunting the dogs. Those reporters aren’t gonna quit ‘til they find that little nugget you just slipped under the table.”

Matt chuckled. “You wanted me to slip it under the table.”

Jensen didn’t reply, just lifted his eyebrows and regarded Matt.

“What’re they gonna find on Pileggi?”

“If they find the right sources? Ask the right questions?” Jensen casually leaned in close to murmur, “An affair or two to trample his family values credo.”

“Does the Senator know this?” Matt asked, suddenly wondering just how dirty they were about to get.

“No, and you’re not gonna tell him either.” After a moment, Jensen asked again, “You feel guilty yet?”

Something flipped in Matt’s stomach, making him question what exactly he was doing on this campaign - what he had been doing ever since they started. The answers in succession were who knows? and absolutely nothing, but he rather liked the idea that they could make themselves useful now, whether it was behind the Senator’s back or not.

“If they find that out …” He drifted off while watching Jensen easily sip from his coffee and flip a newspaper open, as if he hadn’t just dropped a bomb in Matt’s lap.

“One less horse in the race,” Jensen murmured.

“You got more tricks up your sleeve?”

Jensen glanced over with a sneaking smile. “A whole damn bag of ‘em. Unless you’re worried about the Senator finding out.”

“We could actually make some movement here.”

Turning more pages over in the paper, Jensen didn’t break from whatever he was looking for. “I didn’t join this circus to make some movement.”

He stared at Jensen, amazed by the facade of cool and easy even when the Senator was dead last in a six-horse race. Something sparked, and Matt sat at the edge of his seat, moving closer and keeping his voice low. “You think we could win.”

“You stick close to me and it’s highly possible.”

“Then, no.” Matt said firmly. Trying to convince Jensen, and maybe even himself, he said, “I’m not feeling guilty”

Jensen smirked and pushed the paper towards Matt, pointing at a quarter page advertisement for an ice cream social at the town hall that afternoon. “Delay the trip to Des Moines. We’ve got another stop to make this morning.”

“I’ll talk to Jake.”

“Who?” Jensen asked immediately then scowled. “The other kid?? He’s running the schedule?”

“The Senator and Jeff set the schedule.”
“Not anymore.” Then Jensen was gone in a hurry, newspaper and legal pad tucked under his arm.

Matt was confused by the abrupt exit, yet the sparks of excitement slithered up from his toes and he hurried to catch up. He knew it would be best to plant himself in Jensen’s orbit if he was going to make any further contributions.

291 days until Election Day

The Wife: Madeline Padalecki

Madeline Padalecki turned the volume up on the TV once Jared and Jeff boarded the bus. She crossed her legs and pointed at the screen where an on-the-campaign-trail reporter was rattling on.

“Did you really okay this?” she asked.

Jared and Jeff stopped beside the TV, picking their eyes up from Jeff’s stats to pay attention as the commentator in the studio suddenly laughed.

“An unnamed source in Padalecki’s camp is about to become an unemployed source. Now they’re pointing fingers towards Pileggi’s history?”

The campaign reporter on the left side of the screen gestured with his notepad and said, “A quick look into the Florida Senator’s history tells us that he was named briefly in an investigation of Charlene Handley, a woman from Tampa who was sentenced for solicitation back in 2004. There were a dozen other state employees tied to the investigation, however, Senator Pileggi was able to avoid any real criminal charges or any ties to Handley.”

Jared’s mouth had dropped open and Jeff looked a bit worried. Madeline could read Jeff’s hesitation. She was certain he was behind it.

“I didn’t,” Jared mumbled, then turned to Jeff. “We didn’t discuss this. Who keeps talking?”

Jeff quickly defended with a firm, “Look, Jared-” before Jared cut in.

“No, I want to know who keeps talking. Why can’t you find the leak in your staff?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Well, work on it faster!” Madeline yelled, unable to let something like this take down the campaign. She’d worked hard for this. Far too many late nights, long trips, and patience brought her through her husband’s career and to this point. She wasn’t about to let this opportunity fall between their fingers because of some incompetent staff. “I want pink slips handed out.”
Jeff slowly turned to her with a strange smile, and she couldn’t hate that man more than in this very moment, with his three-piece suit, smug look, and damned twinkle in his eye like he was only playing house. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Senator? Did you say something?”

“I said that I want people to be held responsible for this.”

“Maddie,” Jared broke in. “We’re working on it.”

Her gut wrenched at the sound of his tired voice using that nickname. It was cute when they first moved in together and hosted dinners for his constituents during his second senate race. But ten years as a political couple changed a lot.

“Work faster,” she said through gritted teeth. “Find out who’s behind this and get them out of here.”

“That would be me.”

All three of them turned around to face the new presence on the bus.

“You,” she harshly whispered. Of course it was Jensen Ackles, because of course Jeff would bring someone as tainted as this guy into the campaign. Madeline had been around politics her whole life, with her father holding one of the top jobs in America without needing to run for it. Attorney General James Wilson had been in position for three administrations, playing both sides of the field to keep his place in history. Now, Madeline wanted her own place in history and Ackles had to be here for it. “Why you?”

“Nice to see you, too, Madeline,” Jensen said with a smooth smile as he fixed a button on his suit. “Too bad it isn’t under better circumstances.”

Jared pointed between them. “You know each other?”

She ignored the question and went on with her own. “Why are you here and why did you put our staff up to this?”

Jensen took a deep breath, unruffled by her anger, which only drove her crazy. As he always had. “I’m here because your husband is failing in the polls. And I did it because it had to be done.”

“I don’t want to gain points over this kind of thing,” Jared insisted. Then turned to Jeff. “I told you not to do anything like this. I wanted to be clean.”

Jeff lifted both hands in surrender. “I did nothing.”

“You hired him,” Madeline complained. “You brought the devil into this.”

“That’s harsh,” Jensen replied with a good-natured laugh. “Even coming from you.”

She glared at him as long-ago memories flooded in, ramping up her heart rate and adrenaline. Following her father around Washington certainly brought her into the same circles as Jensen Ackles, but she would rather forget those interactions. Mama always taught her to act the lady and fool the boys, so she needed to follow that lesson.

“All right, well,” Jensen tested in the tense silence, “I know we were ready hit the road, but we have to make a pit stop at an ice cream social.”

“We don’t need ice cream,” Madeline complained. “We need to get Jared on stage and talking. People like hearing him speak.”
“People like looking at him,” he corrected.

“That’s rather shallow,” Jared complained.

“And it’s true,” Jensen quickly replied. “You haven’t had much to say in formal speeches. People like sitting next to you. Your one-on-one personality is more favorable than leading the masses. You’re too uptight on script.”

Jared glared at Jensen, then at Jeff. Madeline did the same and was about to bark out more complaints when Jensen cleared his throat.

“Speaking of, I have a speech writer I’d like to bring on board.”

A moment later, Jensen’s phone rang and he walked further into the bus and farther from them. Madeline reached for her husband’s hand and tugged, lowering her voice for effect. “Sweetie, c’mon now. You’re not going to let someone else come in and boss you around. This has always been our plan. We’re going to do it our way.”

Jeff coughed lightly, pulling Jared’s attention from her. “Senator, I really think we should listen to what Jensen has in mind. We don’t have to follow all of it.”

“Or any of it,” Madeline slipped in.

“But we should listen. You said you would listen.”

“Jared, we don’t need to do this,” she insisted.

He looked at her and slowly shook his head. “We have to do something.”

“And we will.” Madeline stood and moved in close to him, appearing soft and caring. “But we don’t need him to do it.”

“We need something.”

“And we’ll find it. But we don’t need him.”

She knew Jared was waffling, and she also knew she had to complete the sell. So she slipped closer with one arm around his back, the other reaching for his cheek to pull him down. She set a quick kiss to his cheek, rubbing her thumb at the traces of lipstick left behind. “Sweetie, we’ll find a way. I can talk to Daddy and we’ll-”

The rest of her words were forgotten when Jensen rushed back towards them speaking quickly.

“Pileggi’s wife is heading straight back to Florida and his people are racing around for a way to back out of the news. We have to get you two out in front of cameras and you have to ...” He paused with a strange look in their direction before shrugging. “Look just like that. Happy wife and happy life.”

“So the ice cream social?” Jeff asked, eyes bright, eating up Jensen’s enthusiasm for his plan.

“Definitely. I think it’s a few blocks away.” He turned to Madeline and Jared. “How do you feel about walking? A couple of love birds taking in the town and holding hands? Madeline, I’m sure you can fake it for another forty minutes then we’ll get back on the bus and it’s on to Des Moines.”

As Jensen passed them to exit the bus, she harshly sighed. “I hate you and everything you are.”

He stopped halfway down the stairs and grinned at her. “Glad to hear the feeling’s mutual. Now let’s
Heat flaring deep in her bones, Madeline turned to her husband. “Jared, I swear to God. If he so much as—”

“Stop it, Maddie,” he replied with a swift move of his hand. “We’ll take our blessings where we can.”

She turned to Jeff, who merely nodded in return. “After you, Mrs. Padalecki.”

Once off the bus and surrounded by the gaggle of reporters and cameras, Madeline turned on the smile, though it tugged tight at her cheeks. She held tight to Jared’s hand, swinging a bit as they strolled down quaint downtown streets. Together, they waved at residents, shook hands, answered quick questions and provided thoughtful comments along the way.

She fought the inherent need to scowl at Jensen whenever he was in her sight line, even when it appeared he was doing his best to stay far away from the commotion of their march to the social. It was even harder to ignore the growing realization that Jared really did thrive in smaller groups, smiling with old couples, kissing babies, and guest-starring in more selfies than a teenager on Instagram.

While she wanted to prove Jensen Ackles - and Jeff by proxy - wrong in his suggestions, she decided to throw herself into the role of future First Lady, a woman of the everyday people in the pure Midwest rather than bitter wife being bossed around.

She’d leave this anger for another day. Suppressed, but not forgotten.

281 days until Election Day

The Anchor: Alaina Huffman

“It’s six o’clock and you’re watching Talking Points. I’m your host Alaina Huffman, and joining me on tonight’s panel is former Communications Director for the Fuller Administration, Samantha Smith; Professor of Politics and Political Strategy at Georgetown University, Julian Richings; and CEO of FactsFirst.com, Michael Rosenbaum.

“We start tonight with the end of Governor Pileggi’s campaign. With the Florida Governor dropping out of the race, we’re easing into Illinois with three candidates remaining in the race for the Republican nomination. Indiana Governor Welling continues to lead in the polls, but Padalecki is inching his way up. Is he just picking up Pileggi’s supporters or does the Texas Senator have a real chance in this race?”
“Alaina, I gotta tell you,” Smith began, “this is the most surprising turn of events. Pileggi had a stronghold on the votes in the South, backed by his decades-long career in politics. He’s well-respected in Florida, has the right connections to get policies through Washington, and he’s the only one in this race who could prove international experience.”

“But he’s not in the race anymore,” Rosenbaum pointed out with a sly smile. “And he’s not exactly respected across the country, given the response to the latest controversy. That campaign is deader than a turkey at Thanksgiving. Just bury his name along with his career.”

Huffman chuckled a bit, bringing her hand up. “Okay, Mike, we don’t have to get out of hand here with hyperbole. What’re your thoughts on Padalecki’s latest surge in the wake of Pileggi leaving the race?”

“Certainly, he’s picking up a lot of Pileggi’s numbers,” Rosenbaum agreed. “Someone has to. But how long can this last?”

“I think it’ll last a while,” Smith replied. “Ackles has been known to work a lot of magic behind the scenes of some of the tightest races in the South.”

“Samantha, you bring up a good point,” Huffman noted. “Jensen Ackles isn’t a name known in many households, but he’s a well-known player behind the scenes of politics. He’s played at all levels to move unlikely candidates into office. Julian, do you have any thoughts on Ackles’ power in this race?”

Richings nodded and offered, “His most recent success was with Aldis Hodge during the Georgia Gubernatorial race. And that was a hard fought race against incumbent James Patrick Stewart. They had to fight not only an ideological shift from traditional governing to the progressive, community-driven process Hodge campaigned on, but they made great strides with grassroots organizations in the urban centers of Georgia.”

Rosenbaum laughed. “But do you think the urban community will go for Padalecki? He’s behind some of the highest numbers of incarceration for African Americans in Texas.”

“That’s not rightly on him,” Smith argued. “The Governor of Texas and others at the state level are to blame. Senator Padalecki works on the federal level.”

“And, the most frightening thing is he could be President in twelve months time,” Rosenbaum countered. “You can’t tell me there isn’t some fear in you for a Padalecki White House? You’re a goddamn Democrat, Samantha. How is this ideal for you?”

“I never said it was ideal! I’m just pointing out that just because he’s from Texas, it doesn’t mean he wears all the scars that come from that state.”

“Then what scars does he get?”

Smith pursed her lips, reading into Rosenbaum’s attempt to goad her. She shook her head and refused to answer, meaning Rosenbaum goes on the attack.

“Don’t sugar coat it! Padalecki is too sluggish to remain in the field. The whole list of Republican nominees is a joke, but here we are trying to make sense of it. This show is just a mockery of it.”

“Okay, Mike!” Huffman shouted to stop his tirade. “I get it. You don’t like the show. You didn’t have to show up.”

Rosenbaum narrowed his eyes and bared a wolfy grin. “Even bad press is free press, Alaina.”
“Of course it is, Michael,” she returned, voice as flat as her look. Then she got back to the point. “Julian, Jensen Ackles has been known for backing new blood and shaking up political races. Many of his efforts have seen a long shot come from behind to win. Is it also in the cards for Padalecki?”

Nodding with the question, Richings easily responded. “Ackles has proven himself to be a force that competitors shouldn’t, and can’t, overlook. I think it says a lot not only for Senator Padalecki, but also Jeff Morgan and the team he’s now building up around the Senator. Alaina, I think we’ll be seeing a lot of Senator Padalecki in the coming months.”

“We just might,” Huffman delivered to the camera, wrapping up their topic. “Tweet us at CNN Talking Points, hashtag America 2020 to share your thoughts on the Race to the White House. We’ll be back after this break with former Pileggi campaign manager Sam Ferris to fill us in on the Governor’s next steps.”
267 days until Election Day

The Speechwriter: Danneel Harris

A security agent marched half a step ahead of Danneel to guide the way to a back room where a dozen folks were scattered about on folding chairs or sitting atop round tables, furniture intended for teachers currently leading lessons in other rooms.

She spotted Jensen at the far end, stepping from side to side as he rattled off details about the Senator’s appearance for mid-day service in the adjoining church. He was in boss mode, so she stayed and listened to everything he said.

“We need pictures of the Senator with the kids, lots of smiling faces. Nothing but happiness and joy. I want to see the lines in his teeth when he smiles at them. I want pictures of him genuflecting before the holy water, priests, even the crucifix at the front of the church. I want every single reporter outside to know how much he lives in his faith.”

Danneel rolled her eyes at his irritable passion when getting his point across. She had seen it before, as recently as Georgia when they marched Aldis Hodge to every black church and made sure he knew the words to every hymn the choirs sang with glory.

“Don’t even say it,” Jensen loudly insisted, and she found him pointing right at her.

“I didn’t say a word,” she replied with a smart smile.

“You were thinking it.”

“Are you in my brain now?”
“There’s plenty of room inside that big head of yours,” he fired back, grinning when the staff appeared to be scared of her reaction to that insult.

“I could take this big head on back to Louisiana,” Danneel offered. She even aimed a thumb over her shoulder and turned halfway to the door.

“Don’t you dare.” Suddenly, the tension in Jensen’s shoulders dropped, along with the angry determination in his brow line. “Girls and boys, this is our new speechwriter, Danneel Harris. I don’t expect you to love her, but I do expect you to respect what she writes.”

Danneel waved and stood at attention, friendly smile in place. But that dissipated when no one seemed to respond to her introduction. Worse was when a staffer with a soft face and tight blond ponytail raised her hand.

“You report to her now, Alona,” Jensen quickly explained, not bothering to wait for the question. “Is it a demotion? Not quite. I think you’re good, but we need more than good right now. I had to bring in the muscle.”

Freshly disappointed, Alona shot a look at Danneel then at the bright-eyed, dark-haired man sitting beside her. He merely shrugged in response.

Jensen continued to give directives for the church service, details on where the Senator would be walking in and with which priest at his side. “No one steps foot near Willis. Word has it he’s a new transfer from a parish in Indiana where he was a little too close to an altar boy. We don’t know the facts and I don’t want to argue them in the media if anyone sees one of us within fifty feet of him.”

Then he clapped loudly, shocking the group into full attention.

“I think that’ll be it for now. Just remember to stay on the message when talking to anyone. We’re no longer shooting for the big headlines. We’re going for the farmers and blue collar workers who don’t feel like they’re heard anymore. Trust me on this one.”

Danneel clutched the handles of her travel bag, standing perfectly upright, and waited for Jensen to finish talking to Alona. The woman had jumped up immediately after Jensen ended the pow wow, and Danneel wanted to give them a chance to sort things out.

There wasn’t much by way of talking, and Danneel was too far out of earshot to know what little Jensen actually told the woman. Seconds later, the staffers moved on to their assignments and Jensen left the group to greet Danneel, sharing a quick hug and kiss on the cheek.

“I swear, you look better and better each time I see you,” he said with a charming smile.

“And you look the same,” she insisted. There wasn’t even a line on his face, the man just … “You never age, do you? You drink the blood of your subordinates and gain their unyielding devotion to follow you into hell.”

“Hell’s got all the good drinks.” Jensen winked before setting a hand at her back and directing her away from the folks still lingering in the room. “I couldn’t be happier to see you. Especially today. He’s sharing the sermon with the Monsignor for a full church service. Not to mention about two dozen cameras watching from the back.”

“So, you need words,” she playfully guessed.

“Not just any words. Your words. Your good words. From the Good Book.”
With a sigh, she explained, “I’m Catholic, Jensen. How many times do I have to point that out to you?”

“God is god is god, right?”

“I’m Catholic,” she repeated.

Jensen shrugged. “Yeah, and?”

“And we’re in a Lutheran church,” Danneel pointed out. Like she had done plenty of times before. Not just in Lutheran churches, but also Baptist community centers and a Pentecostal mega-church, among others. “I’m not Lutheran,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but that’s like, what? Catholic Light?” Suddenly, he grinned, tipping his head to eye her carefully. “I know you can do this. We’ve done it a hundred times before. You know how to write about faith, and the congregations fall at your feet.”

Danneel sighed again, doing her best to not be insulted by Jensen simplifying religion and faith of any kind. But she knew that he was right. This wasn’t the first time he’d called her in, nor the fifth. They’d been together on seven previous campaigns, including Aldis Hodge for Governor of Georgia.

Putting a gregarious, faith-based, community-driven man like Hodge into the highest seat in Georgia had been the highlight of her career. She hadn’t thought she would go much higher, but here she was, watching the rising star of the Republican nomination race walk towards her with Jeff Morgan at his side. They were both taller in person, more imposing and fierce in their focused strides. She was used to Jensen’s ferocity on the campaign trail, yet there was something far more forceful in the brisk way they moved. Not to mention the way all three now dwarfed Danneel when they stood around her. Especially when neither of the newcomers acknowledged her.

“Jensen, we need to talk,” Jeff said they approached. “We have some concerns with the language.”

“We have concerns, or the Senator does?” Jensen quipped.

“I have concerns,” Padalecki insisted, “which means we all do.” He shuffled the papers until he found the problematic passage.

“Faith is what brings families together at the dinner table each night. And prayer brings our hearts together at that table. There is no greater power than being together with prayer leading our way. And here together, our prayers will lead us far.”

Danneel exchanged a look with Jensen, while doing her best to remain quiet about the clunky phrases. She hadn’t even introduced herself after all.

“How many times do we need to say together?” Padalecki complained.

Jeff scowled. “And I’m no man of the cloth, but I’m pretty sure there is more to religion than praying at the dinner table.”

“Faith does more than lead us far,” the Senator continued. “Is this really what you want me to say? Who the hell wrote this?”

“Not sure you should use the H-word in a church,” Jensen joked, before glancing away when it was obvious neither Padalecki nor Morgan appreciated his comment.
“Can you talk to Alona?” Jeff asked instead.

“I’ve already taken care of this,” Jensen said with a smirk. He pulled the papers from the Senator’s hands and offered them to Danneel. “We’ll have something for you soon.”

“I need something sooner than just soon,” Padalecki demanded.

Danneel was shocked when Jensen refused to yield. She’d seen him square up to a number of blowhard politicians and analysts, but not with a Senator running for President. She’d expected him to be a little less … Jensen.

“And you will,” he responded easily.

They engaged in an intense and quiet stare until the Senator pointed out, “The service starts in thirty minutes.”

“You’ll have it very soon,” Jensen corrected. His smile pissed the Senator off even more.

She understood Jensen’s attitude was not crafted for all types; he could be callous, sure, but she had yet to see him go head to head with a candidate. She’d witnessed him dismiss staffers, reporters, even competitors. In her experience, the client accepted what Jensen brought to the table, even when his style lacked grace. End justifying the means, and all that.

The way he flippantly regarded the Senator was completely different.

Now, stuck in the middle of standstill, with two grown men daring the other to step back with an apology and maybe even their balls tucked between their legs … well, Danneel wasn’t one for tension, so she opened her mouth to alleviate the situation.

“Faith is not about prayer,” she blurted out. When all three turned to her, she quickly went on, “Not really. I mean, there’s far more to faith than just reciting words someone wrote a long time ago. It’s about putting yourself into the will of your god, trusting that he has love at the base of everything he brings to you. It’s about sharing oneself with the church, devoting oneself to the message of love and hope, and believing in all that your maker can and will do for you.”

Following an awestruck silence, and Jensen’s childlike grin, Jeff asked, “Who’s this?”

“Danneel Harris,” she offered along with her hand. “Very nice to meet you. I’ve heard nothing but good things about you both.”

“Surely you haven’t heard much,” the Senator quipped, briefly glancing at Jeff with a smile. “And what is Danneel’s role on the campaign? Do I not have enough advisors bossing me around?”

“Danneel is our new speechwriter,” Jensen announced. “I have a feeling you’re already impressed with her.”

“I’m not impressed with your attitude,” he fired back with a glare. “Or the fact that you’ve fired Alona without approval.”

“I didn’t fire Alona,” Jensen responded easily, as if he weren’t just accused of sorting out the campaign staff without authorization.

Ignoring Jensen, the Senator faced Danneel, relaxing his stance to fully regard her. “But I’m interested in what you just said. Are you Christian?”
Danneel stood tall and lifted her chin. She was proud that he was buying into what she said; she meant every word of it. “Yes, sir. Born and raised in Our Lady of Wisdom in Lafayette, Louisiana. My mama still serves as a communion minister every Sunday at 10 o’clock mass.”

“We’re at a Lutheran Church,” he said with a bit of question to his tone.

“I already pointed that out to Jensen.” She flashed a quick look at Jensen before smiling back at the Senator. “But we’re all Christians and all believe in the Christ, Our Lord. And really, Mr. Senator, I believe that we all have faith in someone or something above our control and it shouldn’t matter if it’s Jesus of Nazareth, or Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, or even the Buddha-Dharma. We all share this Earth and are bound to love it and each other. That’s the basis for most religions, right? To care for your neighbor as you do yourself.”

Padalecki slowly nodded, his smile coming at a snail’s pace, but it was there all the same. “I like you, Danielle.”


“Yes, ma’am.” He winched then motioned at the papers still in her hand. “You’ll work with Alona to get all that in there?”

Jensen chuckled, explaining, “She’d probably just get it done faster on her own if - ”

“And she will,” the Senator commanded with that tension back in his voice when addressing Jensen. “And then she’ll work with Alona to show her. We’re not firing Alona.”

“I never said we were,” he argued, but it was no use because the Senator and Morgan quickly welcomed Danneel to the team and left them alone.

“That was ...” she began, struggling for the right word to encapsulate all of the feelings drumming through her veins.

“Exciting?”

“Not quite. I mean, talking to him, yes. That was exciting. And that he really does care about the church, listened to what I had to say. All exciting. But ...” She gave Jensen a look of judgment. “He really doesn’t like you, does he?”

“How could you tell?” Jensen rolled his eyes, turning away from their spot in the room to recover his leather pad from the table where she first saw him.

Danneel approached him and lowered her voice so the few remaining staffers in the room weren’t privy to their conversation. “Are you really not firing Alona?”

“The Senator just insisted I don’t,” he pointed out. “So I guess I can’t.”

“But you were planning to?”

“I was going to do what was right for the campaign.”

“You brought me in,” she argued, “Without meeting anyone else. And you were going to give me someone else’s job.”

Jensen sighed and looked her in the eye. “Yes, I was planning to fire her because she wasn’t cutting it. And because I want you. Need you. Look at what happened when you spoke for thirty seconds?
You just told a lifelong Christian why he has faith. And he believed you, which is half the battle these days. Half the battle is getting people to believe in what is said to them.”

There was the thrill of knowing her words got to the Senator in that way, how he was instantly tuned into what she said. As a campaign speechwriter, she strove for that kind of success.

Still, she thought, ultimately admitting, “It’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair? That I was going to give you a job? That you’d get another line on your resume?” Jensen let out a curt, ugly laugh. “This is politics, Dan. What did you think would happen if you came out here.”

“I thought I already had the job,” Danneel let out softly. Cutthroat politics, she knew well. But stealing someone’s position without realizing it wasn’t well known in her world.

“You did. I was giving you the job.”

“Without the Senator’s approval,” she pointed out.

“I don’t always need his approval.”

She eyed him carefully and saw something different stewing beneath the surface. “Why doesn’t he like you?”

Jensen laughed hysterically, emphatically shrugging. “I don’t know. And I don’t care. I’m not here to be his friend.”

“It bothers you that you aren’t, though.”

“Oh, please,” he dismissed, walking quickly out of the room and heading onto whatever came next for him. “If I remember correctly, you have a speech to write. Or did you not want the job I just handed you?”

Danneel hurried to keep up with him and smirked as she expanded on her backseat psychology from years of working alongside Jensen on other campaigns. “You want him to like you. You always want the candidate to need you, and he doesn’t. So you’re turning up the attitude.”

Jensen waved his hands about, dismissing the issue at once. “So what if he doesn’t like me? Maybe it’s because I’m smarter than he is and he hates being told when he’s wrong. Or maybe he thinks I’m more attractive than him and he’s threatened. Maybe he doesn’t like knowing he needs someone like me to boss him around. Hell, it could be all of the above.”

“Shouldn’t use the H-word in the Lord’s house,” Danneel joked. “But really, you don’t think it’s your attitude?”

“I’m sure it’s that, too.”

Now, the reality came to a head: the reason it stung to watch Jensen and the Senator share cross looks and heated words. “I don’t want to work for someone who doesn’t trust you.”

“He trusts me just fine, Dan. I wouldn’t still be here if he didn’t. And in case you haven’t noticed, our lame duck candidate is now in second place with only a few months left until the convention.”

“Jensen,” she started, only to be stopped in her tracks by Jensen’s sudden stop and his blinding white smile, smug and insistent.
“And with you and your words, we’ll be on the big stage in no time. So, what’re you complaining about?”

Danneel sighed, at her wit’s end with Jensen and the possibility that, in time, she’d be pushing someone else out of a job. With another deep breath, she willed away the negativity shrouding the good news of taking on this type of position. If all went well, and Senator Padalecki survived the next few months, overpowering Welling’s Midwest following, she’d be writing for the de facto Republican Nominee in no time.

And if she had to deal with the tit for tat between Jensen and the Senator for a while, she supposed she’d have to pick a horse to follow. At the moment, it was Padalecki, awaiting a refreshed speech to lift a congregation in Southern Illinois.

“I hate you,” she mumbled, glancing away.

If possible, his grin grew tenfold and he pointed at his temple. “You’re already writing aren’t you.”

“Can I get an empty room with an outlet? My laptop needs some juice.”

Jensen set his hands on her shoulders and lightly shook. “Anything for you, my dear.”

260 days until Election Day

The Strategist: Jensen Ackles

Jensen had been keeping his eye on Jared since he stepped foot onto the campaign. It was his job after all: deconstruct the candidate, find the best qualities to amplify, hide the worst. He wasn’t hired to be anyone’s friend, simply to develop the best tactics to win.

And Jensen was good at schemes and dreams. Not to mention winning.

What he wasn’t yet succeeding with was tearing down Jared’s defenses. The Senator was still uptight and short with him, often fighting any suggestion or plan Jensen crafted to gain more points in the polls.

Everything Jensen had researched told him Padalecki was the real deal: good-natured, for the people, looking to make a better world not just for his own children, but all children. His support for Republican ideals kept his constituents happy in Texas. Farming, taxes, and guns were at the heart of many of his previous campaigns, and were at the forefront of any legislation he threw his weight behind.

Yet, he often strayed to the left side of the spectrum. He never spoke out against sex education,
abortion, or gay marriage, like many of his peers did in the loudest of voices. Jared did his best to keep his family life neat and tidy, with his children joining him and the Mrs. at church, but not on the campaign trail. He boasted that his mother was a grade school teacher and he stood behind the teacher’s unions in Dallas when a strike threatened their livelihood four years ago.

And as the campaign progressed and Jared began to relinquish power to Jensen’s ideas, confidence grew quickly. Among the staff, the supporters, and most importantly, in Jared Padalecki himself.

The numbers didn’t lie. The Senator from San Antonio was a real contender, and America could see his potential. Jensen, too.

If only he could nail down whatever was nagging him at the back of his skull. All those pesky voices that wondered what could possibly bring Padalecki down before he could take his seat in the White House.

Jensen had seen it all in his time … this campaign, it was hookers and Pileggi. Fred Lehne in a mayoral race in Denver when the government uncovered his tax evasion. Casual racism and Pellegrino leading the way to Kurt Fuller becoming the 43rd President of the United States eight years ago.

For the rest of the world, many vices were forgiven when the offender atoned for their sins. In politics, there wasn’t time for apologies, especially not with a twenty-four hour news cycle and the internet unearthing every documented moment of a candidate’s life.

The upside was Senator Padalecki looked as good on paper as he did in person. The downside was that whatever he’d buried would be as damming as a decomposing body. Jensen didn’t think Jared had the kind of campaign funds to cover that up.

Worse yet, he didn’t have that kind of time. Jensen needed to find the Senator’s secret before anyone else did.

…

At the end of another long day, Jensen approached the campaign suite. Two bodyguards flanked the doorway and he smiled; they were new additions that Jensen had suggested a week ago. Jeff must have finally gotten approval from Jared, no matter how many times the candidate insisted it was overkill.

If things continued at this rate, the bodyguards would do more than serve as decoration at the door. They’d follow Jared to events and keep any potential threats far away from the roving headquarters. Prying eyes and all that.

The man on the left flashed a keycard at the lock and propped the door open. “Mr. Ackles,” he said with a curt nod.

Jensen nodded in thanks. “And your name?”

“Penikett. Tahmoh Penikett.”

When Jensen turned to the other suit, he asked, “And you?”

“Bamber. Jamie.”
Another smile and nod. Jensen was impressed with the way the two men stayed completely still aside from looking at him. “Glad to have you on board. Only rules are to keep this room clear of anyone you don’t know by name. And protect Senator Padalecki.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

“Well done, boys.” Jensen entered the suite feeling pride, shoulders firm and wide before dropping at the sight of the Senator in the living room.

Jeff, Danneel, and Alona were huddled together in the kitchenette, while Jared watched the nightly returns from the Democratic primary in New Hampshire. Danneel typed furiously at her laptop with Alona pointing at the screen providing edits to the words Jared will deliver tomorrow morning to the National Federation of Republican Women. No one paid Jensen much attention aside from a quick wave from Jeff, so he decided to check in on their candidate.

Gone was the strong facade of an experienced Texas Senator, replaced by the disheveled man behind the suit. Jared looked like he’d been through the wringer. He was slouched on the couch, a half empty glass of dark alcohol in his hand and head pushed deep in the back pillows. His tie was gone, shirt unbuttoned and parted to show the undershirt beneath. Feet up on the table, sans shoes, and pants wrinkled like they’d been rolled up in a ball in his suitcase all day.

Still, Jensen offered a joyful salutation as he stood beside the couch. “What’s the good news, Senator?”

“Collins is sweeping the country,” he mumbled before taking a long sip from his glass.

“That’s not exactly news.” Jensen glanced behind him to the kitchen, specifically to Jeff for an answer to this dreary scene. An exaggerated shrug was the only response he got before Jeff went back to helping the writers iron out a few phrases.

Jared slurped through another drink, then pointed his glass towards the screen. “He’s leading the Democratic race with no competitors.”

“Okay?” Jensen asked, flippant at first. Yet, when he noted the Senator’s dull look, he prodded, “Are you concerned, sir?”

“No competitors means he’ll run his way right to DC without anyone to stop him.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of how it works,” Jensen agreed. He wasn’t sure where this was coming from. What he did know was that a dip in the Senator’s confidence could lead to a drop in his performance tomorrow, and in the numbers.

“Which means we won’t stop him.”

“You’re not facing him now.”

“I’m not going to be like him,” Jared said after a sigh.

“No one is.” Jensen added a chuckle to ease the sad note to the conversation. “And, quite frankly, why would you want to?”

“He says exactly what he wants to.” He finally looked up to Jensen, blinking widely like he was trying to wake himself. “Who doesn’t want to do that?” Then he gestured at the screen with his glass.

An independent candidate running on the democratic ticket, Misha Collins took his bow in a hotel
banquet room in Concord, New Hampshire. Closed captioning filled in the blanks with the sound muted; Collins whipped the competition and was thanking all of the “independent thinkers, the castaways, the unheard voices that are now coming into the light. We are doing this together, for one another, for our future.”

“Maybe I should’ve been an independent,” Jared lamented before taking another drink.

“How many of those have you had?” Jensen asked, trying to reach for the glass.

He kept it just out of reach, bringing it down to his lap, held between both hands. “Maybe I should’ve been an independent and then I could say what I want. Be the person I really want to be. Be accepted as what I really want to be.”

Jensen again checked on the three people working in the kitchen. They weren’t close enough to hear much, but he also recognized he was in the middle of a conversation that needed no witnesses.

“You feeling okay? Something happen since we returned?” he carefully asked.

“Maddie’s here for tomorrow’s women’s event,” Jared answered flatly.

“She hates that name,” Jensen pointed out.

“And she hates you. Why’s that?” Jared stared up at Jensen, wide eyes imploring with his eyebrows furrowed in concern. Perhaps even in annoyance or criticism.

“You don’t want to hear that story right now.” Jensen didn’t want to tell him, let alone when the man was down, kicked by whatever personal demons had hold of him tonight. And Jensen would much rather know what was going on under the surface before they shared Jensen’s history. “What kind of stuff do you want to say?”

Jared took a deep breath and focused on the TV again. “I should’ve been an independent.”

“Not in Texas,” Jensen reminded him. “You couldn’t do anything but bleed red down there.”

“Hell of a place to grow up red.”

“I can only imagine.”

“You’re from Texas,” Jared started. “Richardson. Left when you were eighteen.”

Jensen tipped his head in thought, and a little in surprise. “You been reading up on me, Senator?”

“Wanted to know what I was getting with you on the payroll. Surprised to learn you’re in the closet.”

Taking a step back, Jensen put distance between him and whatever would come out of Jared’s mouth next. “Excuse me?”

“Is that why you left as soon as you could?”

“Is that why you don’t like me?” he fired back, placing himself on the offensive.

Jensen had done his best to neither confirm nor deny the rumors that ran wild about him. After all, he had a reputation to uphold, one built on his steely bravado before anything else. He hadn’t gotten this far by debating his sexuality, and he wasn’t going to start now.

The fact that Jared had heard the rumor, and was tossing it in his face, led Jensen to believe this
could be part of the trouble lurking in the shadows. If Senator Padalecki had spent his career avoiding the topic of traditional values like sexuality and same sex marriage, maybe he was just hiding his true feelings on the topic.

Jensen wondered if Jared didn’t want to be within a mile of the public conversation because his conservative beliefs were that strong. And to think, Jensen was just starting to give the guy a break.

“Is that it?” Jensen asked with a sharp look. “Doesn’t matter if I keep it quiet, you just don’t want someone like that around you?”

Jared watched him for several long, uncomfortable seconds, face unreadable. Jensen crossed his arms over his chest and met the flat look with as much confidence as he could muster. There wasn’t much he feared in getting fired; Jensen had faced that plenty of times when he overstepped his bounds and spoke too frankly early in his career. Now, his reputation carried him where he was needed. Still, he despised the thought of being kicked off a job over something like his sexual orientation, especially when it didn’t impact a single thing he’d done for Padalecki.

“Must be nice,” Jared mumbled, before sizing Jensen up from his waist up to his face. “Being gay and universally attractive. I bet your social calendar is full.”

“That’s not your business,” he defended with a harsh glare. “And if you haven’t noticed, my calendar is presently stacked with trying to win an election.”

Jared continued to watch him, then turned back to the TV and took a drink. Muttered over the top of his glass, “If I could just say whatever I want...”

Jensen wasn’t up for a midnight maudlin show, so he walked over to the kitchen to check with the others. Apparently, his feathers were visibly ruffled because Jeff eyed him strangely.

“Everything okay?” Jeff asked quietly.

“Yeah, the Senator’s in a mood.” Jensen waved it off, then took a deep breath and turned his back to the room. “Make sure he’s not hungover in the morning?”

“Are you okay?” Jeff corrected.

“Peachy,” he replied with a fake, broad smile. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

...

Jared stood steady at the podium the next morning, a sweeping banner above him casting an odd shadow over one side of his face as the sun fought to come through the clouds. The bright, bold letters on the banner honored the founding members of various state chapters for the National Federation of Republican Women, while Danneel’s poignant words, spoken from Jared’s mouth, solicited the tens of thousands of votes they hoped to capture.

His voice was firm, Danneel’s written words punctuating every declaration. He pledged to maintain the integrity of the electoral process and the principles of the party, and acknowledged the dire need to elevate more women in government.

“Voices such as yours, from the women who continue to build up our communities, to sustain the breath and life of where we live … they need to be heard. They need to be recognized and become part of the daily conversation that keeps this country going day after day after day.”
As predicted, the crowd reacted in delight, cheering and clapping as Jared unleashed his smoothest of smiles despite sweating like an alcoholic going clean.

Offstage, Jensen leaned close to Jeff and kept his voice low. “How much did he drink last night?”

Jeff’s words snuck out the side of his mouth: “We wrapped up shortly after you left.”

“He’s a mess.”

“I know.”

Jensen checked his watch and huffed, knowing they had another two hours at this event. Jared needed to give the women face time and take questions and photos and unveil the new sign out front of the local flagship building opening behind them. “He’ll be running on fumes by noon.”

Jeff patted Jensen’s back with reassurance. “We’ll get him some coffee.”

“Make it an Irish coffee and add in some Tylenol.” Watching Jared wipe his face for about the tenth time in as many minutes, Jensen closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Hands in his pockets, he fiddled with his phone in one hand, money clip in the other. “What’s beneath the surface?”

“What?” Jeff was distracted, listening to the speech, until he clued into Jensen’s question. “Nothing. I’ve told you before. He’s clear as glass.”

Jensen barked a laugh. “He’s not so clear now. And he sure as shit wasn’t last night either. What’s going on with him?”

“I can talk to Maddie.”

“There’s something else.” He shook his head and kept a close eye on the Senator up on stage, where he was moving emphatically through the speech, yet dripping sweat down to his collar. “He kept going on about Collins and how he wished he could speak his mind.”

Jeff turned at that, eyes wide and dark with doubt. “What?”

Shaking his head, Jensen carefully whispered, “I’ve been waiting for a shoe to drop, and last night that shoe was all about how he should’ve been an independent. He couldn’t stop going on and on about it. How he wants to speak his mind and be who he was really meant to be. Who does he really want to be? What aren’t we seeing?”

“I’ll talk to him.” At Jensen’s harsh look, Jeff lifted his hands and pleaded. “We’ll talk to him. Together. We’ll get to the bottom of this. If all it means is he’s tired of listening to us dictate everything, then we figure that out. Maybe we can pull out a few golden nuggets.”

“Yeah, out of his ass … they’ll be diamonds, he’s so uptight.”

“Calm down. It’ll be fine. It’s probably something small. Maybe he and Madeline had a fight.”

“He did complain about her going to bed.” Jensen bit his lip with apprehension washing over him. “But I don’t know if that’s all there is.”

“See, just a marital tiff. Maybe he needs a little pick me up.” When Jensen rolled his eyes, Jeff chuckled and nudged his shoulder. “Maybe we all do.”

Jensen shrugged him off and attempted to hide his smile. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much.” He gestured towards the Senator and lifted an eyebrow in suspicion. “In the meantime, you
can take care of that mess.”

“He does look terrible.”

“Total mess.”

After a moment, Jeff determined, “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“I’m telling you, there’s something there.” Jensen aimed a fierce look at him. “If you don’t find it, I will. And if I don’t … then we’re gonna be fucked when someone else does.”

...  

Late in the evening, Matt and Jake struggled to stay upright, not to mention the half dozen aides they’d brought in over the last few weeks to fully cover the expanded needs of the campaign as it grew. After another round of yawns, Jensen dismissed the team with orders to sleep. “This doesn’t stop. Not any time soon, if we do our jobs right, so go get some sleep.”

Folks were happy with exhausted smiles, until Jensen tacked on, “We still meet at 6 am.”

The response was a chorus of grumbling as they shuffled out of the suite. Energy picked up when someone suggested the hotel bar, and Jensen figured they’re just glad to be away from him for a little while.

Their night was over, but his wasn’t. He leaned forward in an armchair with his elbows on his knees, and eyed Jeff as he stood and patted his pockets until he pulled out his keycard.

“I think we should all call it a night,” Jeff urged before stalling at the silence that followed.

Jensen looked at Jeff, then to the Senator and back. Jeff did the same to check on Jared. They’d relieved him of his hangover sometime after lunch, which was a formal sit-down with the National Federation of Republican Women, followed by the greasiest bag of food Matt tracked down from a diner in town. Adding water, along with energy drinks throughout the afternoon, the Senator was more like his affable, social self on the remaining stops across the state.

At this point, Jared was again worn out, probably in need of sleep. They all were, but Jensen needed a few quiet moments to dig through the issue of last night. And maybe something else just below the surface.

Jared grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and headed for the couch, belatedly realizing they were waiting. Carefully analyzing him to find the right moment to speak.

He didn’t regard the tension so much as dismiss it. “Good night, fellas,” Jared mumbled before swallowing about a quarter of the bottle.

“Senator,” Jensen murmured.

Jared barely considered him, reaching for the remote control, but he froze when Jensen spoke again.

“Jared, we need to talk.”

Jeff inhaled sharply and crossed his arms over his chest. It was obvious he wasn’t comfortable with whatever was about to be said; Jensen was thankful that Jeff would allow him to stay at the helm of the conversation.
“Last night. We need to talk about last night.”

Jared picked at the edge of the bottle’s label with his eyes focused on the movement. “What about it?”

“First of all, you can’t drink like that on the campaign,” Jensen insisted. “For one thing, today was a disaster. The teleprompter—”

“I just missed a few words,” Jared defended. “It’s happened before.”

“You were a wreck on stage.”

“It was hot in there. And I sweat a lot. This isn’t new information.”

“Look,” Jensen affirmed, “I’m not going to argue each detail with you.”

“Too late for that.” Jared finally brought his head up to fix Jensen with a rigid stare. “Wouldn’t you say, Jensen?”

The long look rattled Jensen. There was a strange mix of defeat and darkness in his eyes, not to mention the determined set of his brow and lips, daring Jensen to continue down this road. Jensen needed to fall into this hole to get his answers. Not yet, though.

He pivoted ever so slightly. “What you said last night, that you wanted to be who you really were. What do you really want to say? Who are you?”

Jensen absolutely meant it with the best of intentions. He’d love to discover the humanity fighting to rise to the top and present it to the world. Show voters what Jeff had seen in the Senator since he first dragged him into the field. As it stood, Jensen didn’t know what that was. Didn’t know what he was doing out here aside from trying to win a war for his own glory.

“That’s not what I meant,” Jared replied softly. Yet his words were laced with petulance.

“Who do you want to be?” Jensen eased his voice, even shuffled to the edge of his seat to put himself right into the conversation and inch closer to the puzzle that was Jared Padalecki. “What do you want to say?”

The struggle was clear on Jared’s face, the way his lips thinned out in a fine line and his eyes narrowed and darted away. His chest rose and fell quickly, with shallow breaths doing little to ease Jensen’s concerns about what the Senator was hiding.

“Jared, what do—”

“It’s not that,” Jared blurted out. “It’s not about anything.”

“What isn’t?” Jeff asked, finally sliding into the conversation and coming up behind the couch. He rested a hand on Jared’s shoulder, forcing Jared to flinch, no matter how supportive the touch was intended.

“It’s not about politics,” Jared clarified. “I just …”

Both Jensen and Jeff waited for the rest of that sentence, but it never came. Jared continued to fiddle with the bottle, drink here and there, and otherwise remain completely silent.

Jensen was reluctant to push, even though knew he must. It was in the job description. And his blood; he never backed down from a good fight.
“We’re doing all we can to get you to the front of the race,” Jensen reinforced. “We’re getting there. We’ve made up a lot of ground, but if there’s something else you want to be saying or doing while we’re at it, you have to tell us.”

Suddenly, Jensen was fixated on the bend of Jared’s brow and the flinch in his jaw as he retained whatever tension he hid just beneath his skin. He was so attuned to the subtle movements of Jared’s nose, blinking eyes, and pink lips rubbing together that he didn’t realize the TV was on until lights flickered before them.

Jared played with the remote to get the volume high enough to hear the newscaster run through the latest points in California for both the Republicans and the Democrats. Jensen knew there would be no further answers tonight.

Still, he stood and waited a few moments before warning the Senator, and maybe them all. “If there’s something going on, something you’re hiding or that’ll take you out of the race, you need to tell us. If we don’t handle it now ... Jared, I swear to God, someone else will handle it, and it will be the end. It will end you. You have to let us help you.”

“Not to say you’re in trouble,” Jeff politely interjected.

“I’m saying you are,” Jensen corrected, a small, harsh laugh on his lips. “I’m absolutely saying you’re in trouble if you don’t tell us about it. We can’t do our jobs if you don’t let us. We have to help you.”

Those were the last words Jensen said for the night.

Jeff bid him a quiet good night in the hallway and Jensen spent a good minute staring back at the suite door, Penikett and Bamber in place.

“Sir?” one prompted.

Flustered by the conversation with Jared, or lack thereof, Jensen couldn’t determine who was speaking. He waved them off and returned to his room with the memory of Jared’s blank stare at the coffee table.

While he hoped the staff would squeeze in a respectable amount of sleep, Jensen stayed up most of the night digging through all of his resources, contacts he’d never delete from his phone, and even the Senator’s high school and college records.

The upside was that Jared Padalecki was as clean as his campaign boasted day in and day out.

The downside was that whatever was awaiting them would be big and nasty, and Jensen wasn’t sure they could survive it if he didn’t know.

252 days until Election Day
The Underdog: Jared Padalecki

“Have you slept at all?” Jeff asked when Jared appeared in the living area of the suite.

The straight answer was not really. The long answer was that they were facing Super Tuesday with eleven states up for grabs. It was the first real test on a national level, and Jared had been shaky and anxious from the moment he tried to go to bed last night.

He’d tossed and turned for a good hour or so, and when Madeline yanked on the covers, he knew he was doing neither of them any favors by staying in bed.

It had taken four trips through the suite, methodical steps alternated with short, quick pacing, nearly wearing lines into the carpet. Worry coated his bones, forcing him to walk unsteadily like there were cement blocks on feet this morning. Super Tuesday could be the end of everything. And in a way, he hoped it would be.

Madeline was up early and out the door for a breakfast across town with a high school parent teacher organization, allowing him to shower and get ready in peace. Though peace was a relative concept when the campaign team had declared the dining room as polling central with voices and phone calls signalling it was time he faced the day.

The scene before him was just one blurry mess: people hurrying from the dining table to the kitchen counter and back again, papers passing from one hand to another to another, and voices rising higher and higher to be heard over the noise.

Jared blinked repeatedly to clear the fog of his brain, but it was no use.

“Sorry, what?” he finally asked when he realized Jeff was still standing next to him and awaiting an answer.

“You haven’t slept, have you?” Jeff didn’t seem to want an answer because he immediately called out, “Coffee for the Senator!” then shuffled Jared into the dining room to relay the morning’s events.

The words were mush in his sleep-deprived brain and he was left staring at times and places on the schedule put into his hand. He suddenly craved peace and quiet, solitude, and a chance to sit still without a camera on him.

Jared knew his chances were slim today. Knew Tom Welling was a strong contender for the conservatives who wanted a candidate with the voice of everyday America. Knew there was a slim chance he’d rise to the occasion tonight, no matter how many times his team assured him otherwise.

In his fits of insomnia, he’d considered what could happen upon returning to his old life and pretending none of this happened, that Jeff never came to him with the convincing argument that
America needed young blood to energize it. He won’t crash and burn now. He’d quietly slip out the back with a respectable showing over the last few months. It was the least he could do, and with that realization, he snapped to attention and focused on his schedule: the breakfast with the Vermont Commission for Women, followed by a meet and greet with Vermont Interfaith Action, then a quick puddle jump down to Massachusetts to run from Northampton, down to Springfield, over to Worcester, and end the night in Cambridge to watch the results.

He was grateful they’d spent the past week on the East Coast; no need to adjust to time zones, though the chill of early spring in New England was a little more difficult to accommodate. Jensen insisted they forgo jackets. The decree was made a month ago once they were done with the Great Lakes winter.

Suddenly, Jensen’s high, boisterous laughter cut through the room and broke Jared’s already limited attention with Jeff.

“Look at that jackass! It’s only 42 degrees out and he’s ready for a blizzard.” Then his voice leveled out for a strong directive: “No long johns this time!” He was pointing at Jared from across the room, eyes wide and insistent. “Last night you were sweating all through the charity dinner.”

“He’s only human,” Jeff defended, and Jared turned away to ignore their shouting over the commotion from the kitchen.

“We’ve got new numbers!” someone cried out, and Jared stepped in that direction, only to be stopped by Jensen and a firm hand at Jared’s chest.

“No numbers for you, bud,” he asserted with a sharp eye.

“But I -” Jared began.

“It’s bad luck. You can’t read them today.”

Jared stared at him, waited for the punchline or even a smile to break through. Neither came. “It’s bad luck?”

“Danneel!”

Her head popped up from where she’d been huddling over her laptop with Alona and Jeff, further disorienting Jared. He could’ve sworn they’d just been talking to Matt and …

“Super Tuesday, superstitious,” she recited without pause. “Super bad.”

“Super bad,” Jensen repeated, grave and concerned as he looked Jared in the eye. “You didn’t sleep, did you? You look like shit.”

Jared bristled under the comment and ran a palm down the length of his tie. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “I was told there was coffee?”

Turning back to the kitchen, Jensen yelled, “Coffee for the Senator! Two cream, two sugar.” After a beat, his voice rose louder than anything else in the room. “And now!” He shook his head, pushing away the aggravation, then grinned at Jared. “You ready for today?”

“I’m ready for a nap, but according to Jeff’s schedule, that won’t happen until midnight.”

“At that point, it’s just sleep. But you’re not doing that either, huh? Something going on?”
He avoided meeting Jensen’s eyes because it wasn’t the first time the question was put before him. And just like the last few times Jensen asked, Jared found he couldn’t respond. “No, nothing’s going on,” he returned smoothly, doing his best to keep a straight face as he took in the continued furious movements of everyone in the suite. “Been pretty bored lately, actually. Thought maybe I’d pick up knitting.”

“You joke, but I would stick you in a group of grannies if it would help.”

He assessed all of Jensen right then, from the smile going slack on his face, the furrowed brows, and down to the strong T of his shoulders holding the weight of the campaign, and further to the surprising mess of his shirt half-tucked into his designer pants. Maybe Jensen didn’t sleep much either. Jared imagined there was more stress when standing behind the candidate than actually being the one on stage, especially when they were under the gun like this.

Jensen’s smile remained in place and Jared had to know where this version of him came from. “And what about you? What’s got you all happy?”

“It’s Super Tuesday,” he said plainly, like it was that obvious.

“What’s so happy about Super Tuesday?”

“This is the big day when the people get to exercise their right to vote and have their voice heard.”

He eyed him closely. Jensen was anything but altruistic about politics. “Really?”

With a proud grin, Jensen replied, “I know. I’m full of surprises.”

“Full of something.”

Matt slipped his way through the melee to stand before them. “Coffee for the Senator. And numbers for Jensen.”

Jared was grateful for the interruption and bypassed the offered mug to reach for the papers, even when Jensen argued to ignore them, repeated superstitious and super bad and a number of other super annoying phrases.

His eyes widened with his heart thumping wildly in his chest. Even though he had his own thoughts for his future upon waking up this morning, seeing concrete results twisted him up.

“Eight points,” Jared rumbled without fully comprehending it. Repeated it a few times to let it settle in his brain. “We’re eight points down again. We were even this time yesterday. What the hell is happening? Jensen?”

Rushing into crisis mode, Jensen yanked the papers away and set the coffee mug into Jared’s hands. “I told you no numbers. Drink the coffee and then I’ll explain.”

“Is this how it goes?” Jared worried aloud, voice growing more frantic with every passing second. “It just falls apart in the final seconds? I don’t even get a Hail Mary? I’m just done?”

Without a word, Jensen led him through the suite and into the half bath off the dining room, shut the door behind him, then looked up. His eyes were wide and bright green like a jewel in water. Gone was the trademark smugness or the curl of his lips or the arch of his brow. Also gone was personal space as they were pushed together in the small quarters of the bathroom.

Jensen’s hands settled on Jared’s shoulders, palms running down to grip at his biceps. His voice was
surprisingly soothing given the way they’d failed to see eye to eye since the moment they met. “Okay, Jared, I need you to breathe. Take a deep breath in, hold it for ten seconds, and release it.”

Jared’s mind twisted over itself, circling round without a place to focus, until Jensen squeezed tighter at his arms and nodded his head to prompt Jared.

“C’mon, we’ll do it together. Breathe in … and ten, nine, eight, seven …”

Following the instructions, Jared felt the pull of muscles across his chest, the quick pounding of his heart deep inside, and heard the softness of them releasing the breath together.

“Alright, let’s do it again. Breathe in … and ten, nine, eight …”

Jared did as told until Jensen released him, both from the exercise and from the hold on his arms. He listened carefully to Jensen’s soft voice convincing him that eight points was okay. It was fine. Predicted, actually, because if Jared had read the whole sheet - he added with a small smirk - then he would have realized those numbers were for Indiana and they never bothered visiting the The Hoosier State. Not when Welling had it wrapped up the second he announced his campaign from the steps of the capitol building in Indianapolis.

Jared cracked a small smile with comfort, silently thanking Jensen with a long look for talking him off the ledge. Maybe also for treating him with empathy rather than bossing him into submission in what could be the final hours of Jared’s career.

The longer they stood close in the tight space, the more Jared realized that he wasn’t facing the Jensen he met that first night in Iowa. And it definitely wasn’t the man he’d butted heads with every waking moment they’d worked together.

The quiet moment was wholly unexpected, staring at one another with a hush around them. More unexpected was Jensen grabbing Jared’s hands and holding gently. “You’re gonna be fine,” he assured him with surprising care in his tone. “We’re doing fine. You’re doing fine. Better than fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Jared cleared his throat and tried to look away, but there was no reprieve from Jensen when the wall mirror illustrated just how close they were standing. It was unsettling to stand before a new version of the man he’d been fighting all this time. And purposely, sure, keeping Jensen at arm’s length. Now, there wasn’t a chance to get even a foot between them without Jared shoving him out of the way to escape the bathroom.

He took another deep breath, counted down from ten, and exhaled after one before saying anything. “How many points is better than fine?”

“No numbers on Super Tuesday.” Jensen reminded him, a bit of grit returning to his words. He shook his head and began reciting when Jared stepped over his words.

“Super Tuesday, superstitious,” he said, then grinned when Jensen did.

“Super bad,” Jensen added with a wry smile. He lifted his eyebrows in question and Jared nodded, confirming he was better than before they stepped into the bathroom, so Jensen let them out and marched to the kitchen.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks when he heard Matt reading to the other staffers. “Five down in Massachusetts, ten in Alabama, but up in Florida. Move money and at least 15 can follow in Alabama.”
“Are you reading that on your phone?” Jensen complained.

Matt glanced up, frozen in place, mumbling variations of um.

“Are you seriously reading that on your phone? Do you not know the rules of Super Tuesday?” Jensen marched over to snatch the phone from Matt’s hands. “Do I need to tattoo it on your forehead? I said the Senator doesn’t hear his numbers. Super Tuesday!”

A chorus of superstitious, super bad breaks out and Jensen flings his arms out in anger.

“Super bad. I swear, we can just put it right across your forehead, big block letters. Super. Bad.”

“Actually,” Matt started once Jensen ran out of steam, “I was reading a tweet from Weatherly’s manager.”

“What?” Jared asked, followed by Jensen nearly shrieking the same word.

Matt awkwardly laughed under the sudden impatient tension of the room. “They’re posting his numbers. And where to put money.” He grabbed his phone back from Jensen and read: “NRA, Confederate Sisters, and Cardinal Brown gets us 15 in Alabama.”

Jensen’s eyes flicked back and forth in thought, then he spun around to look at those in the immediate vicinity. “Why?”

Matt shrugged, no longer fearing Jensen’s anger. “Your guess is as good as mine. But there’s nothing but screenshots of these emails all over Jessica Alba’s timeline.”

“Jessica Alba as in Weatherly’s new campaign manager.”

“Yes.”

“Why would they do that?” Jensen glanced across the room, lifting his arm up and snapping for attention.

Jared knew this charade. Jensen was coming to some absurd conclusion and needed someone to look into it. For all that Jensen insisted Jared relax, the guy was doing a grand job of working himself into a breakdown. Still, Jared asked, “What’re you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

Slowly, he replied, “Thinking about why his campaign manager would be tweeting out his numbers just before the Super Tuesday bell rings.”

The phone chirped and Matt scrolled through messages, then laughed hysterically. “Oh, wow, here it is.”

Jared rushed in first, suddenly caught up in the energy of the mystery. It was better to focus on that than today potentially being the last day of the campaign. Reading the mess of tweets on Matt’s phone was far more entertaining than considering his own political demise.

Especially when those tweets included not just the list of states in Super Tuesday, or Weatherly’s numbers, but also commentary on major political heavyweights Weatherly had to meet along the way.
“Glover has money, no connections,” Matt read aloud, even as Jensen, Jared, and Jeff crowded around him to see the words for themselves. “Sheppard’s connections, dark. Little money, international friends have deep pockets. Boost dollars in Vermont and Massachusetts, thousands of gun owners. Get from foundation.”

Jensen laughed brightly, clutching his chest and shifting around like he couldn’t hold his energy in. “Is Alba really tweeting all of this? Just … right there … out to the internet.”

“Maybe she meant to DM someone?” Alona offered.

“DM?” Jeffs asked and Danneel, along with other young staffers, laughed at him before settling into the gravity of a situation no one could explain.

“Direct message. Maybe she meant to share it with someone else.”

“But on Twitter?” Jensen clarified. “She wouldn’t send info like that on Twitter. She said to take from his fucking foundation, for Christ’s sake.”

“Well, it’s here,” Matt pointed out. “Maybe someone else is doing it?”

A mess of questions flew through the air. Jared was equally concerned about the reasoning behind this thread of confidential information, as well as the implications for today’s primaries. Suddenly, Jared met Jeff’s dark look and his stomach dropped.

“Could they be hacked?” Jeff questioned, looking at each of them to gauge interest in the idea. “Could we be?”

“Surely there’s nothing exciting going on in Jeff’s phone,” Jensen joked. “I’m sure we’re fine.”

“What about yours?”

“Are we really thinking about this?” Jared asked, voice rising with worry. “What could be leaked from our devices?”

“I’m sure the porn would make headlines before anything to do with the campaign.” Jensen winked when Matt faced him; no one else was in the least bit entertained.

Especially Jared. Especially after he thought they’d turned a corner just five minutes ago in the bathroom when Jensen showed a bit of compassion. Jared gave Jensen a flat look and complained, “Don’t be cute.”

Jensen offered a simple shrug. “I wouldn’t know how to.”

“They’re gone!” Alona cried out.

Everyone turned to the kitchen and watched her mess with her phone, eyes wide at whatever happened on screen.

“What’s gone?” Jared focused on each of their faces; there was little comfort in realizing they were just as confused as he was. Yet they all seemed to be sitting at the edge of something exciting. Waiting for the alarm to set them off running.

“Her twitter, all the tweets, they’re gone!”

“Screenshot it right now!” Jensen yelled, immediately moving to Matt’s side. “Danneel!”
The directions and responses that followed whizzed right past Jared as everyone ran to action with Danneel taking her laptop to the kitchen island to work on her own. Jensen hustled Alona through a series of social media posts and Matt sent the screenshots to every phone, tablet, and laptop in the suite.

“What? What’s happening?” Jared struggled to catch up with how quickly everyone dispersed to handle ... whatever was breaking before his eyes.

Jensen pointed at Matt as he hurried across the suite. “You get out and talk to the Post, the Journal, the goddamn Vermont Dispatch. I don’t care. Anyone who will listen to you, you talk.”

Matt gave a thumbs up in response then raced out of the room with the door clanging shut, yet it did little to disrupt the new flurry of activity.

Jared was stuck in place as everything whirled around him, without actually answering him. He crossed the suite to the dining room and tugged at Jensen’s shoulder, brought him close like in the bathroom. “What is happening?”

Jensen’s lips tipped up sharply; he was obviously delighted with whatever he put into play. Then he bit the corner of his mouth and barely shook his head. “Sorry, Senator. It’s Super Tuesday.”

“Jensen,” he stressed with a harsh look.

“Super Tuesday. Superstitious.”

“Really?”

He laughed a little, shuffling papers across the dining table until he spotted whatever he was hunting around for. With a few glances over his shoulder, he insisted, “You won’t be happy if you know.”

Jared sighed, already impatient and growing irritable. Like he was when he first appeared before Jensen this morning. “Okay, how about the Cliff’s Notes?”

“Danneel’s reworking your speech for the Commissioning Women of Vermont-”

He aimed a flat glare at Jensen. “Vermont Commission for Women.”

“Good catch.” Jensen dared to wink before running his mouth again. “Alona’s gonna light up your social media, and Matt is dropping sound bites with the writers downstairs. The biggest question on Super Tuesday will be if the voters appreciate Weatherly seeking campaign donations from less than savory parties.”

Jared sucked in a deep breath and held it for a quick count to five. No way could he wait the ten full seconds to ask, “How ugly are we getting?”

“It’s not about being pretty right now.” Jensen stepped closer, hand on Jared’s shoulder with a heavy warmth.

Jared did his best to ignore what he really thought about the way Jensen’s voice dropped low as he shifted close to whisper.

“It’s about making the most of Weatherly’s potentially illegal contributions. Campaign finance through his charity foundation will answer to the IRS, FEC, and ... whoever stills cares about the integrity of a presidential candidate.”
“There’s no way Alba tweeted that herself,” Jared said, ending on a question. He tipped his head down and aimed a look of concern right at Jensen. “Someone else had to do it.”

“Someone might be rogue. Or someone might have hacked them.”

For all that he was growing to trust Jensen, there was a thread of doubt unspooling in his gut.

“Do we have anyone who would turn on us?”

Jensen raised an eyebrow. “And here I thought you trusted me.”

“I did,” he returned immediately, then amended, “I do. But I don’t know everyone out here.”

“I keep the team around you small,” Jensen explained, voice growing softer. “Then I go to whoever else I need. I’m your dam, Jared. I keep all the dark waters at bay.”

On a harsh sigh, Jared nodded. He let the words flow over him with some sense of trust that, for all his rough edges and problematic character, Jensen had Jared’s best intentions at heart this whole time.

“Okay, Senator, one more time,” Jensen announced, pushing back on Jared’s shoulders before opening his mouth. “Deep breath in. Then hold for ten, nine, eight, seven, six …”

Just like in the bathroom, the stress of the campaign dissipated with each passing second. Jared suddenly had to consider what else was stewing deep in his stomach, twisting him up with fear and frenzy.

...

Jared couldn’t keep his eyes off the TV, no matter what ruckus was happening all around him. East Coast polls had closed, along with the Central Time Zone. Now they were waiting on the West, and results were slowly piling up for Colorado, Wyoming, and Alaska.

Jensen tweaked Jared’s tie, tugging at the tail and righting the knot. “Whatever happens, you’re still Senator Padalecki.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jared mumbled, not believing a second of it.

“So life doesn’t end. You go back to the Senate and wait for next year.”

“Maybe there’s a new life,” he murmured. He watched Jensen’s fingers deftly fix his tie and the neck of his shirt, then blinked at him when their eyes met.

That feeling building deep inside was dying to burst free, but he couldn’t put it into words. Never before, and not now. Surely not to Jensen, with his sharp tongue and acid words at the ready on a daily basis. Especially after he kept quiet the one time Jensen tried to dive below the surface and help.

If he lost ... if his showing on Super Tuesday was pathetic and forced him to concede, drop out of the race and go back to Texas, there was a high possibility that he could start over. He didn’t have to stay in office if he had no intentions of maintaining his promises, words spoken long ago to gain praise and win an election from voters who didn’t know who he really was or what he wanted to do with his life.
He wasn’t kidding when he told Jensen he had more to say, more to be. Yes, he believed in the financial constructs of the Republican Party, but nothing on the social side appealed to him. In fact, not only was he directly opposed to its values, but he’d fought an internal struggle for years now, and no longer wanted to stay silent. He believed in humanity, not in the church or the strict declarations of people who should love one another without judgment and open their doors with faith in their heart. He wanted the same rights for all, not just for the majority. And he yearned to lead the way to a better American destiny rather than follow the expectations set forth in others’ political aspirations.

“So what’re you gonna do?” Jensen’s voice brought him back to the present. “If this is it … What’re you gonna do first?”

“Go to Disneyland.” He smirked and was pleased when Jensen did, too. “Or maybe Disney World.”

“Why not both? Get a little sun on both coasts.”

Jared continued to smile at the thought and the ease between them in this moment. “That’s not such a bad idea.”

Jensen cleared his throat as he made one final adjustment to Jared’s tie. “I bet you’d tan up real nice.”

Words dragged up through a dry throat as he asked, “You think so?”

Jensen looked at him while smoothing down the ends of his lapels, surely trying to search out what he meant by that. A small part of Jared hoped he could see it; the larger part of his body was shaking with fear that he would.

Then Jensen glanced over his shoulder to the TV. The numbers remained tight with votes trickling in with a slim possibility to swing in Jared’s favor. Unless something big came through that would shock the entire party. Maybe the Democrats, too.

“Whatever happens in the next ten minutes, it was an honor to work for you.”

It was completely canned, and Jared wouldn’t touch it. Surely Jensen had said those very words to any number of clients over the years; the tone was practiced and the effect was likely better than it was in this moment.

“No, it wasn’t,” Jared replied with a short laugh.

Jensen was shocked into laughing himself. “Okay, fine. Not really an honor. But it was fun in the end.”

Jared nodded, biting his lower lip as he stood on the edge of political life or death.

“Jensen, you son of a bitch! I told you!” Jeff exclaimed, as the room erupted into explosive energy.

He fought to see through the jumping bodies. The TV screen was half full of a US map with Super Tuesday states colored one way or the other. The legend was in the far corner, but Jared could see his headshot taking up the rest of the space.

Someone turned the volume up as far as it could go, voices continued to shout over one another, and the whole time of celebration, Jared was rooted in place. Jensen, too, with one hand reaching up to grab at Jared’s suit jacket.
Words were impossible to absorb, but the sentiment was all the same: Jared had won Super Tuesday. With ten of the fourteen Super Tuesday states called for the Senator from Texas, he’d edged out Welling to establish himself as the credible nominee of the Republican party.

Newscasters broke down more details to fill out the whole picture. Weatherly’s campaign implosion, thanks to a wily junior social media staffer releasing the confidential information on Alba’s twitter, swung thousands and thousands of votes Jared’s way, nearly doubling his numbers in a majority of the states.

As the pieces fit into place, Jared looked at Jensen, who simply stared back. A small smile flitted across Jensen’s face before he moved away to join the celebration in front of the TV, leaving Jared alone and helpless.

His legs were still shackled to the floor as he considered the reactions of everyone in the room. Alona and Danneel were hanging on one another, jittery with hysteria, while Matt, Jake, Jeff, and others popped champagne bottles and overpoured glasses without much care for accuracy. Bubbly showers and cheers continued for the shocking upset, the room was lit up with celebration, and Jared still couldn’t move or even speak.

Madeline came into focus as she took a champagne glass and silently toasted him from the other side of the couch. Her smile gleamed like a proud politician’s wife and it left a sour feeling in his stomach. He couldn’t drum up a response to the melee as he continued fighting between the pride of winning and the worry over a prolonged candidacy.

More noise breaks out as the team gets back into gear making calls to sources, Alona and Danneel digging up the speech they’d written out of habit without any expectation for Jared to deliver it, Matt giving quotes to anyone on the other end of his incoming calls, and Jeff delivering orders for the rest of the team to get ready for the party down in the ballroom.

Then Jensen reappeared at his side, patting Jared’s back and gripping tight to his shoulder as he talked to someone on his phone, begging for more information, formal numbers out of the polls, and most importantly, the concession of Weatherly. And maybe even Welling.

“This isn’t what …” he trailed off as the room continued descending into chaos.

“Yeah, okay Jess,” Jensen laughed hotly into his phone. “You just let me know when your guy’s ready to call in the dead body.”

Jared opened and closed his mouth, fumbling to get any words out. “I didn’t think … It wasn’t …”

Jensen ended his call and stepped closer, holding onto Jared’s shoulders so they faced one another. “This isn’t what?”
Like any practiced politician, which Jared was for at least another month, he pulled himself together with a deep breath. Cobbled thoughts together in his brain before he let them out of his mouth. “This isn’t what I thought was going to happen.”

With a whistle, Jensen’s bravado shined through the flurry of everything else happening in the suite. “Gotta love this game.”

“I can’t,” he mumbled, flashing from one person to the next without taking in much more than their faces.

“Senator?” Jensen asked with worry creeping in.

“I can’t,” Jared repeated. The words sounded foreign, like they came from someone else. “I didn’t expect …”

“I don’t think any of us expected this,” Jensen laughed boldly. “A few states to keep you in the game, sure. But you did it, my friend. You won the night.”

There was buzzing in his ears, followed by muffled noises like he was drowning in deep waters. Jensen must’ve picked up on the trouble Jared was having in processing the news; he quickly shuffled folks out of the suite, Jeff leading them onto the next thing and insisting Jared be downstairs in ten minutes.

Once the room was emptied for them, Jared stared at Jensen. Everything else was muted: his words, thoughts, actions. Like he’d been dropped in quicksand, Jared could only move so much, and it took great effort to bring his hand up to Jensen’s chest, fingers twisting into the white cotton and holding on for dear life.

“What’s wrong?” Panic seeped into Jensen’s words, along with his eyes seeking explanation in Jared’s face. “Jared? Are you okay? You feeling sick? It’s perfectly norm-”

A sudden bolt of energy surged Jared forward, pushing Jensen towards the wall beside them and staring at Jensen’s lips, slowly edging himself closer. That feeling from before, the one building in recent weeks when Jensen showed Jared an ounce of empathy, had returned and he was no longer in control.

Leaning forward, he closed the gap between their mouths and was gratefully surprised when Jensen didn’t shove him away or protest. Jensen held tight to Jared’s upper arms like he was prepared to stop it at any moment, yet never did. Jared brought his hands up to hold Jensen’s face, tilt it just so and allow more access to slip his tongue deep inside.

Anxiety forced Jared’s heart to beat faster, and the adrenaline that brought them to this moment, with Jared running himself across the country and successfully gaining the support they so desperately wanted, overtook any sensibility to stop. And maybe Jensen was facing the same predicament of frenzied madness, because he suddenly charged into action. He reacted quickly, shocking Jared when he moaned and opened up wider to the onslaught.

Jared kissed him like his life depended on it. And maybe it did, because his future was set entirely in Jensen’s hands, timeframe yet to be determined now that he had a second chance to stay in the race.

Even when Jared supposed this was the worst time to make the move, he also felt himself break at the seams. He wanted to take this moment for himself, to dive into what he’d been dying to have after so many years without. The life of a Republican politician left little room for Jared to chase after what he really wanted, needed, to feel complete. To free fall into his hidden desires, now with the
one man he knew could hold his secret.

He pulled back for a moment to observe Jensen’s demeanor, to determine if they needed to stop; Jared really fucking hoped not.

Jensen’s eyes were dazed and lips raw from Jared’s mouth, cheeks pink, along with the tips of his ears. Jared softly smiled at the mess of this man who was always perfectly put together and restrained. His stomach twisted with the knowledge that he’d made Jensen this way with his kiss. He pressed in for a longer kiss, slotting their bodies together and feeling the slim lines of Jensen’s waist and legs, the strength in his arms and shoulders as he pushed and pulled at Jared while fighting through the kiss for control.

Jensen always wanted control. Over the campaign, the messages, Jared. And now Jared could seize it for himself by pinning Jensen to the wall with his own body, keep him in place as Jared dragged out the kiss and sucked at Jensen’s lower lip as he reached down to palm Jensen’s cock.

“Are you crazy?” Jensen gasped between rushed breaths.

Jared squeezed around him, exhilarated that Jensen was growing hard. It gave him the confidence to dare. “You want me to stop? Because I really don’t want to stop.”

“You’re crazy,” he whispered. “Certifiably crazy.”

“I’m guessing that’s a no.” Jared kept on course to undo Jensen’s belt and pants, bringing them down along with his underwear so he could get a hand around his cock. It was thick and hot, red and growing hard, and Jared fisted him quickly. He relished every choked-up sound dying to escape through Jensen’s mouth. Moving in closer, Jared kissed him and swallowed up Jensen’s moans. Smiled with the feel of Jensen’s flesh in his hand as Jensen’s hips reflexively rocked into the ring of Jared’s fingers. He let Jensen have this bit of control, because he could remain satisfied that he was doing this to Jensen, that Jensen was losing control at Jared’s hands.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Jensen rushed out. He nudged Jared back just a few inches and stared, eyes glossed over like he couldn’t focus on anything happening in the moment. Especially when Jared began stroking him with a steady rhythm. “I just fixed your shirt and tie,” he complained. “We can’t ruin it.”

“I really don’t care about that right now.” And he didn’t. Didn’t care about anything other than the feel of their bodies together, heat and adrenaline pumping fast, just like his hand trying to get Jensen to come.

Jensen nearly wilted to the wall, giving in with a twisted smile. “Dammit, Jared.”

He squeezed Jensen’s dick and yanked quickly. “I really don’t care about my shirt right now.”

“You’re gonna have to change,” he panted, and Jared smiled at how wrecked he was. “And then you’re gonna have to explain that to everyone.”

“I spilled coffee on my shirt. There, I explained it.”

“You are so stupid,” he whispered, even while pulling at Jared’s belt and getting his pants open enough to reach in for his dick.

Jared let out a gutted groan when Jensen closed his fingers around him. Lunging forward, Jared
kissed him hard, tongue sweeping all around his mouth and losing control far too quickly as they fucked into each other’s hands.

That pocket of time when they were latched onto one another’s mouths, hands fumbling together as they tried to race to the end, was more exhilarating than any other moment on the campaign trail. Jared was alive and real, frenetic energy running through every nerve, and he was sure there would never be another moment quite like this.

Then Jensen broke, crying out into Jared’s mouth and shivering through his orgasm. Jared chased after that feeling, sucking onto Jensen’s lips as he joined Jensen’s hand on his dick and pulled himself to the finish line.

They rested on one another with Jared’s weight holding them against the wall. Breathing harshly, chests pounding together, Jared pressed his cheek to Jensen’s and inhaled deeply trying to memorize the scent of Jensen torn apart, vulnerable, and sated.

It took some time until either spoke; finally, it was Jensen with one simple word: “Why?”

Then two words.

“How now?”

“How not?” Jared offered in lieu of a real answer. Because he didn’t have one. It just came upon him to finally act on the wants he’d buried his entire political career. Not to mention since Jensen walked into that hotel room all those months ago.

Jensen nudged him away and got to work straightening himself up, doing his best to avoid the mess of sweat and come on his hands. He got his pants up, before moving to the kitchen to wash his hands and grab a towel to dry. The terry cloth bunched between his fingers as he stared at Jared, blank of any emotion aside from confusion. And bewilderment.

Jared felt much the same with the thick tension brewing again.

“You should clean up and get downstairs,” Jensen suggested.

He followed the same route Jensen had in the kitchen, washing himself off, drying, getting his clothes back in place. Then Jensen brought him closer to rework his tie and shirt, just like he’d done in the midst of their good news. It was business as usual with Jensen’s brow tight and hands making practiced motions to put the tie and collar back to perfection.

He smoothed his hands down Jared’s chest, the first real touch in the last five minutes, and it created a ripple effect in Jared’s body. A shiver ran from his shoulders down to his knees and he shook a bit unsteadily. Jared needed Jensen to say more, even if it was to fight against what just happened. At the very least, he could tell Jared how terrible it was to have this kind of secret buried inside a Republican trying to climb the ladder and win over America. That Jared had no right to judge Jensen for being gay when he’d been hiding it all this time. That Jensen was right to demand Jared tell him whatever he was hiding that would ruin his career.

Jared had known that for years, especially in the last twelve months with the campaign. Travelling the country with Madeline beside him and putting on a show of love and marriage had only reiterated Jared’s true need to be as far away from a woman planting polite kisses on his cheek as possible.

The silence was deafening, overpowered by the pounding of his heart far too loud in his ears. Finally, Jared whispered, “Say something.”
Jensen cleared his throat and tugged at the edge of Jared’s tie. “When you go out there, smile. Use all your teeth. Don’t forget to thank all the people who voted for you.”

Jared frowned at the way Jensen dictated the instructions, like he would for any other candidate in the moments before an event like this.

“And try not to look like you just jerked off your political strategist.”

Slowly, Jared’s mouth tipped up into a small smile.

Jensen sighed, betraying the softness in his eyes. “Smug isn’t a good look for a presidential candidate.”

He capped the smile off and cleared his throat. “Yes, sir.”

Jensen pushed him out of the kitchen and led him into the hallway. They were calm and quiet on the way to the elevator with Jensen’s hand at the small of his back to direct him where they needed to go.

Down on the main floor, they walked swiftly to catch up to the sounds of celebration in the ballroom. Through the back door and down another hallway, Jared felt his spine stiffen and his shoulders rise with the anticipation of facing the excitable crowd of supporters awaiting him. Especially given what happened just ten minutes ago, far away from the throngs of people voting for him.

“Where’ve you guys been?” Jeff demanded as soon as he spotted them appear backstage.

Madeline hurried over from where she’d been waiting, annoyed as always and questioning their lateness, too.

Jensen waved them all off with a quick “Just a lil pep talk.” After a beat, he winked at Jared.

She nearly scowled at Jensen. Keeping herself together was a skill she’d perfected years ago, but Jared could read her better than most. He set his hand to her back and insisted it was okay and he was sorry for delaying them.

“You good?” Jeff asked Jared, who nodded back at his campaign manager.

“I’m good. Are they ready?”

“Yeah. Are you?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He glanced at Jensen to get a read on him. Maybe because of what happened upstairs, or perhaps for one last flash of confidence from the man who helped orchestrate the last few weeks to get them to this point. “Any last words of advice?”

Jensen repeated his words from upstairs: “Smug isn’t a good look on you.” And when he smirked, Jared had to as well, quickly reliving what they shared not too long ago.

And what Jared hoped they could share again very soon. The secret they needed to keep, or else.

With Madeline at his side, he stepped onto the stage to the roar of the crowd. He lifted his and Madeline’s hands up in the air, clenched tight together in solidarity. Maybe hers was more in frustration as fingernails dug into the back of his hand. Still, they had rehearsed smiles and waves for the supporters cheering them on, and he would deliver a rousing speech thanking them all for their belief in him. In what he wanted to do for the country. Who he campaigned to be for them.
In between every line, his mind flashed back to the hotel suite and the feel of Jensen’s hands on him, the taste of his tongue, and the harsh whimpering sounds they shared as they got each other off. It made concentrating on the teleprompter rather difficult and he fumbled through some awkward pauses as he gathered his wits. He drummed up as much poise as he could to carry through to the end when applause broke out with chants of Padalecki! Padalecki! Padalecki!

Madeline rushed to him and grabbed hold of his hands, pulling him down to kiss. She tightly smiled at him, then displayed her toothpaste shine of a smile to the crowd as she enthusiastically waved.

Jared stretched his fingers out and away from her hand, imagining the last person he touched with that hand. And how.

Soon enough, he could slip free of her and walk across the stage to point and wave at his supporters across the room. Mouthing excited greetings and tossing out thumbs up to all of the signs waving around.

Just weeks ago, he couldn’t wait to run from the stage after a poor outing; at that point, they were all poor outings. He couldn’t get back to his hotel room fast enough for a drink and welcome the news that his run for the presidency was going nowhere fast. Far too often, he was on the bubble, the next to be cut. Then Jeff brought Jensen in, and here they were: on their way up with growing crowds and voters flipping for him. In the past week alone, he’d seen more followers out on the trail than he had in the two months prior.

It should have been good news. Outstanding. Exhilarating to go from last place to the top of the Republican race.

Instead, his new position as the frontrunner would keep him out on the road with Madeline at his side. Reinforcing that thought, she appeared once more to hug him, reel him in tight for another kiss, and wave goodbye to the room as she led them off stage.

Once behind the curtains, she tugged at the middle of his shirt. “Why were you so late?”

“I had to … “ He dared not look at Jensen. “Change my shirt.”

“Change your … are you kidding me?”

“I spilled. Coffee.”

“You spilled - God, you are just – whatever.” Her face turned red with fury and she pushed him back a few steps. “Fine. just don’t do that again. Made me look like a fool standing out here by myself.”

Madeline continued to complain, going on about how she had to introduce him and the timing was shot, putting her in the terrible position of being on stage by herself. And if he ever did that again, the whole show would be over. They didn’t need another screw up when they were finally headed in the right direction.

Jared marched off with everyone trailing him. He wasn’t going to listen to it all when there were better things to be doing.

Still, in the elevator back to their floor, she continued to nag him. She insisted she’d done all she could to get him this far. It wasn’t the right time for any kind of misstep. There was only so much she could do. This was in his hands now and he was close to fucking it up for the both of them.

“Madeline,” Jeff interrupted. Or tried to, because she was not deterred from tearing Jared down in
front of the staff.

Jared was tired of fighting her and decided to let her wind herself up all so she’d waste her energy and go to bed without him. Which only seemed to aggravate her more.

“I cannot believe you would be so irresponsible,” Madeline continued on, “to show up late to an event. Especially when we were all down there. You sent us out of the room and said you were coming.”

“Maddie,” Jensen shouted.

That stopped her in her tracks, her head whipping around to scowl at him.

Everyone was quiet and tense, waiting for her to speak. When she did, her voice was tight and fierce. “It’s Madeline.”

“And it’s not your campaign,” he replied with the same level of heat. “You are not the candidate. No one is voting for you. They’re voting for Jared.”

“No if he keeps this up.”

The patented smug smile appeared. Any other time, Jared would also turn on him for the attitude, but at this point, after what happened between them in the suite, Jared was rather enthused with the bravado. “Why don’t you let me worry about that while you plan tea parties, okay?”

“And what were you doing when he was late appearing at tonight’s event?” Now Madeline was the one with the pretentious grin. “Wrapping up another deal with a shady congressman?”

The way she glared at Jensen with that pompous look unsettled Jared. Worse yet was Jensen’s face tightening up, seething rage bubbling to the surface.

“What is she talking about?” he asked, focused more on Jensen than asking Madeline to explain herself.

Jensen didn’t flinch at Jared’s question. He simply stepped up to her, his voice going low. The elevator car was deadly quiet so every word echoed off the mirrored walls.

“I don’t answer to you, sweetheart. And I wouldn’t even if you could afford it.”

Hours and dozens of interviews later, the excitement of the day had dissipated and Jared was glad when the team wound down their work. And most importantly, left the suite.

Jared was exhausted, run down by the adrenaline crash following the celebrations and commotion of the day’s success. Yet his body was thrumming, unable to fully relax. Excitement had carried him through satellite TV appearances, sit-downs with newspaper reporters and bloggers, and a pow wow with the team to discuss next steps.

Jensen was never much for letting time waste, so he gave orders about the next week in Ohio, then left Jeff in charge so he could escape. In the thirty minutes since, Jeff further dug into the details and fielded questions before releasing everyone for the night.

Jared thanked them for their time, then checked on Madeline, who was in bed and likely pretending
to sleep to avoid talking to him. He walked out to the kitchen, fussing around the island and trying to
determine how to manage the nervous energy still bounding through him.

“Can we get you something?” Jeff asked.

He tugged on his lower lip, lost in thought and completely unaware of what the answer should be.
Presently, his major concerns were how to deal with his wife completely losing her shit, having to
spend the morning travelling across Iowa with the whole crew stuck in the close quarters of the
campaign bus, and Jensen.

Really … just, everything Jensen. What happened before the speech. What happened in the elevator.
What was going to happen next.

He found himself at the door to leave before he realized it. “I’m going to check on Jensen.”

Jeff took a few stuttered steps and cleared his throat loudly. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t, but he still said it.

“Really,” Jeff said more than asked.

“Yeah.” He breathed deeply before looking at his campaign manager. “There were a few things we
discussed earlier that I want to iron out.”

“Like what?”

Jared didn’t answer, just left the suite without another word. At the end of the hallway, he stalled in
front of Jensen’s door. He brought his hand up to knock yet barely touched the wood. A few
calming breaths helped him gather the courage to rap on the door and wait for it to open. Long
seconds passed until Jensen appeared in the doorway.

Jensen had lost his jacket and undone the collar on his shirt, pulled the tie loose, and poured himself a
drink. Jared wanted to grab him immediately. Instead, he offered a nervous smile.

“Mr. Senator,” Jensen prompted with a quick nod. “To what do I owe the honor?”

Jared drew on the formality of the address and stood tall, pretended he wasn’t here for personal
reasons. “I thought we could talk about tomorrow.”

It took some time for Jensen to assess him before stepping back and motioning him into the room.
Jared wasn’t sure what he expected; he knew the staff had much smaller spaces than the expansive
suites Jared was afforded these days. Still, the room felt cramped with just the two of them and the
lamp on the nightstand on, magnifying the dark hidden secret they shared. The light shone on the
king bed and made the white linens bright and obvious compared to the shadows all around it.

“Drink?”

Jared turned quickly to Jensen’s voice right behind him, then shook off the nerves when he saw the
glass Jensen held out for him, freshly poured amber liquid. He was further calmed with a large sip of
the whisky and Jensen stepping back to lean on the desk.

“I should apologize-” Jared started just as Jensen interrupted.

“I’m sorry about this evening.”

“No, it was on me,” he quickly explained. “I should not have let it happen.”
“I didn’t do anything to stop it either.”

“It’s hard on her, too. All the pressure and being on display.”

Jensen drank and watched Jared carefully. “Yeah. That, too.”

Jared fiddled with his glass and asked, “What did you think I meant?” even when he was certain of the answer.

“I guess we’re talking about different things.”

“Or maybe they’re all the same thing.”

“I’m sorry I spoke to your wife that way,” Jensen said instead.

“Well.” Jared made a face, sipped some more. Felt the heat of the liquor slip down and spread across his chest. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it.”

“Now I’m curious what you’re talking about.”

Chuckling lightly, Jared dropped his head and his hair fell in his eyes. Surely, he was blushing and needed a moment to collect himself. With shaky legs, he moved back and sat on the corner of the bed. He wiped his face, tucked the loose hair behind his ears, and looked up at Jensen. “Why doesn’t she like you?”

Jensen lifted his eyebrows with an awkward smile, then turned to the desk to refill his glass. Remaining silent through every motion, even when he faced Jared again and drank.

“What did you do?” Jared asked, though he partly feared the answer.

“More like what I didn’t do.”

“Sleep with her?” he joked.

Jensen huffed a laugh. “She certainly tried. Along with a whole host of other things.”

His stomach dropped at the thought … of Madeline coming on to Jensen. Not to mention Jensen with a woman. Or anyone, really. Now that Jared knew how he kissed, what noises he made in the heat of the moment, how gorgeous his eyes were when blown wide with orgasm, it wasn’t easy to think of him doing that with any of the people in his life. Jared took a long drink, then cleared this throat of the warm burn. “What other things?” he dared to ask.

Jensen looked away and sighed. There was a hint of guilt in his eyes to go along with the tight line of his mouth. “Well, for one, her father’s retirement? It was his last because I got Omundson to force him out.”

Jared repeated the name and remembered him as Chief of Staff for Kurt Fuller two terms ago.

“Why’d you do that?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.”

Jensen pursed his lips before smirking and letting it all out. “Because James Wilson was a good ole southern boy who collected money from the NRA, Halliburton, and a number of confederate groups.”
“And?” Jared shrugged, surprised by the excuse from someone who always seemed so unscrupulous. “Lots of Republicans do.”

“Not when they’re Attorney General.” After another long drink, Jensen opened his arms and gestured emphatically, growing angrier the longer he spoke. “So he takes money from the NRA and he’s not going to get behind any real gun control policy. Halliburton? He’ll back down from any of the Senate Commission’s investigations of proprietary contracts. And the confederacy? I don’t think I have to explain what kind of trouble that creates across the country. Voter identification and registration in metropolitan cities for one.”

Jared sucked in a quick breath as it all settled in his mind. Sure, he knew his father-in-law was in with a lot of red state businesses, had friends in high places and regular offers to sit on the board of any of those organizations, and had plenty of outdated positions regarding rights for women, people of color, and so on. He’d never attempted to analyze it further than knowing it was there. When he married Madeline, her father was one of the most powerful men in the country. Jared had turned a blind eye to any of James Wilson’s questionable ethics to aid his own career.

Still, he couldn’t figure out why Jensen was so emphatic about it. “But why you? Why’d you do it?”

Jensen let out a harsh laugh “Because I could. I’d gotten Fuller into office and he trusted everything I had to tell him. Omundson, too. So, when they assessed cabinet members from the previous administration, Maddie’s father was first on the chopping block.”

“And Maddie. What did she have to do with it?”

It took some time to read the look on Jensen’s face. When his voice was quiet and cracked, Jared knew it was sympathy. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Jared learned over the course of their marriage that Madeline was more impressed with the draw of D.C. and its power than anything having to do with Jared. In the last few years, and especially once on the campaign trail, he’d decided to let it be, and they’d both gotten what they wanted from one another. Since being on the campaign trail, it’d been their shared goal to get Jared into the Oval Office.

Now, Jared wanted more than an unspoken agreement to be civil in private and over-the-top lovebirds to the public eye. In a way, he wanted the exact opposite so he could have support and affection at the end of the night when he was no longer on show, when he could open up and be vulnerable.

At the moment, he was nothing but vulnerable. And as much as it would tear him open from end to end, he wanted to know the full truth. So, he softly asked, “You said she tried to sleep with you?”

“You don’t want to hear about this.”

“Why not? It couldn’t get any worse.” Jensen avoided answering and Jared tried again. “When did that happen?”

“You don’t want to hear it,” he said more forcefully.

“When Fuller was in office ... that was eight years ago.” Jensen looked down at his glass, avoiding Jared. “We just had our tenth anniversary,” Jared mumbled. “That was early in our ...”

Jensen still refused to meet Jared’s eye, but his voice held more kindness than Jared had ever heard from him. “I’m sorry, Jared.”
“No, it’s fine.” He tried waving off. The weight of the news was heavy on his chest, but he forced himself to be realistic. “I mean, we’re not great together anyway. She wants to get to the White House as much as I do. If not more. Obviously, she’ll try anything.”

He nodded and finally looked at Jared. “Tried, yeah.”

“But you didn’t want to?”

Jensen flicked an eyebrow up in response.

“Because you’re gay.” The corner of Jared’s mouth tipped up, only somewhat subconsciously. He felt a flicker of comfort to know that Jensen hadn’t done anything with Madeline. And maybe also that Jensen’s muted response was a bit of a hat tip to what happened earlier between them. “I never knew about any of it. She never said anything.”

“Well, as far as she was concerned, I was just an asshole. Not gay.”

“Funny.”

Jensen narrowed his eyes, as if preparing to be offended. “What’s so funny about it?”

“That you’re actually both,” Jared teased.

He lifted his glass in a solo toast to himself. “Never tried to hide either.”

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he mumbled, his mind falling into the images of their time alone in the suite. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have;” Jensen agreed, but something in the way he continued to meet Jared’s gaze said differently.

“That’s probably why I was also an asshole to you.”

“Because you wanted me?”

Jared laughed to himself and smiled with a bit of shame. “Yeah. Didn’t want to get close to someone like you.”

“Like me?”

“Smart. Witty.” He made a face when he added, “Devious, and attractive.”

Jensen’s demeanor slipped from guarded into confident as he brought his glass up and smirked at Jared. “I can’t deny any of those things.” That smooth confidence only lasted so long until he cleared his throat and stared at Jared with a tense look, like he’d done any number of times when he wanted to order Jared around the campaign. “Does Jeff know?”

“Does Jeff know that you’re attractive?” he joked, deflecting the seriousness of Jensen’s question.

“Does he know about you? And this?”

It wasn’t so much that Jared froze; more like, everything moved in slow motion as he looked down at the glass in his hands. He thought about drinking to prolong answering Jensen. As much as Jared struggled with hiding that part of himself, wishing beyond anything that he could just be whoever he wanted to be, he found greater difficulty in saying it aloud. Especially to his campaign strategist.
“Jared,” he stressed. “Has he known all along?”

“No,” Jared whispered. “No one does. At least … not anyone who still matters.”

“What does that mean?”

With a great breath, Jared finally looked Jensen in the eye. He was fighting so hard against the impulse to be defensive and argue, push Jensen away and pretend nothing ever happened between them, or maybe even fire him. And yet, Jared couldn’t resist the pull of reliving those few minutes between them in the suite, when the election didn’t matter and they were just two men who found relief with one another.

“It means that the only people who know have been taken care of,” Jared started strongly. The gravity of the conversation got to him and he found himself nearly pleading as he explained further. “I’ve had affairs. They started when our relationship fell apart. She became so focused on what my career would be and I became focused on realizing I was gay. I didn’t want to make it messy by leaving. Neither did she. It would hurt her just as much if we split up.”

Jensen’s hard facade faded as Jared’s admission filled the quiet room. He rubbed a hand over his mouth and glanced around. “Does she know?

“No. I don’t think so. But I never told her.”

“Who were the other men?”

“I met them around D.C.” With a rueful smile, Jared pointed out, “I’m sure you know there are plenty of people there who deal with this sort of thing.”

Jensen nodded curtly. “I’m guessing there were non-disclosure agreements?”

“Not many. I mean, I didn’t do it a lot. Just when … ” He cleared his throat and tried to ignore how it explained why he came after Jensen in the first place. “When I needed to burn some energy.”

He pursed his lips, likely acknowledging they both had done that already. “What about during the campaign?”

Jared’s stomach turned. He hadn’t dared to even consider it until Jensen joined the campaign and his defenses fell brick by brick.

“I need to know everything, Jared.”

He nodded while answering no. Then explained, “I couldn’t. I didn’t want to get caught.”

“I don’t want you to, either.” Jensen took one last healthy drink and put the glass down. He rose to his feet with another firm nod.

“Jensen,” he tried, but was immediately cut off.

“Mr. Senator. It’s getting late.”

Jared stood as well, trying like hell to not cross his arms over his chest or sulk with the quick change in the mood. “You’re kicking me out.”

“I’m suggesting that it’s late and we have to get up early tomorrow.”

Slowly, carefully, and with building momentum, Jared stepped forward. “Are you going to kick me
“It’s late,” Jensen said quietly. He tried backing up, but was stopped by the desk. “We have to get up early.”

Jared recognized that he had control again, the upper hand to continue creeping closer to Jensen and get in his personal space.

Jensen wasn’t even trying to move out of the situation or push him away, so Jared refused to back down when this was within reach.

“What if we never went to sleep?” Jared whispered. “Then what?”

“Then you’re gonna be a mess in Cleveland.”

“I’m always a mess.”

“I know,” Jensen mumbled, completely distracted by Jared’s face coming within an inch of his own.

Jared smirked as Jensen’s eyes crossed while trying to watch him up close. When Jensen inhaled sharply and his chest pressed into Jared’s, Jared reached up and closed his hands around Jensen’s biceps. “Are you kicking me out?”

“This isn’t right,” Jensen said, yet the low volume of his voice did little to stop Jared from dragging his fingers up and down the back of Jensen’s arms. “You have too much to lose.”

“I’d say I have a lot to gain.” Jared licked his lower lip and held his breath. “I’d say we both do.”

Jensen sucked his bottom lip in, teeth dragging along it when he released it again, and Jared took that as his notice to proceed. Jared slid his lips across Jensen’s and didn’t have to wait for any reaction like before; Jensen immediately breathed deeply and pushed a hand through Jared’s hair, fingers settling deep and twisting around the strands.

Jared ran his arms around Jensen’s back, hands pressing tightly to hold them against each other. He dragged his palms down low, one inching over the roundness of Jensen’s ass and squeezing. His heart was pumping impossibly fast with the feel of Jensen’s long, firm body against his own.

He wanted to live in this moment for the rest of the night, with their tongues tangled together, insistent and wanting, as hands grabbed anywhere they could reach. Then Jensen pushed Jared back, creating a cold shock in Jared’s veins that he was putting an end to it all, until Jared fell onto the mattress. He stared up at Jensen and felt the downward tug of his lips fighting against the facade he tried to keep in place that he was okay, that he wasn’t devastated to be far from the warmth of Jensen.

Jensen’s chest moved quickly with his staccato breath as he slowly moved closer. “You know this is a terrible idea,” he murmured.

Jared ran his hands up Jensen’s thighs once he was near enough to touch. Slipped his palms around to grab and pull him even closer. “I know that I really don’t care right now.”

“It’s late, Jared . . .”

“Can we not worry about tomorrow?” he pleaded, fingers squeezing tightly. “Cause I’m not thinking about tomorrow. Right now, I’m thinking about you. And how I can’t stop thinking about what we did. What else we could do.”
Jensen cupped Jared’s face and sucked in a deep breath. “You are really, really devious.”

Jared felt a burst of confidence, especially with the roughness in Jensen’s words, like he could no longer hold his composure. Nor could Jared, as he pulled Jensen down to the bed with him, then turned them over so he could settle down on Jensen’s body. He kissed him, diving in deep when Jensen opened his mouth, and tangled his legs with Jensen’s. They got frantic rather quickly, much like earlier, with no words or directives. Jared wrapped his arms around Jensen and pushed him into the mattress, rocking their hips together.

Jensen moved along with Jared, grabbing at his shoulders and back, wrapping a leg around Jared’s thigh as they thrust together. Jared quickened his hips, emboldened by Jensen’s hushed moans and the tight hold of Jensen’s leg around his.

Jared rose up enough to pull at his shirt, yank it out of his pants, and get his belt undone. Then he got to work on undressing Jensen with their hands fumbling together to reach heated skin and get as close as possible. He held himself up with a hand on the mattress while wrapping the other around both their dicks and watched the heads of their cocks rub together, sliding through the ring of his fingers.

Their rough moans filled his ears as he jerked faster, harder. Jensen’s hands ran across Jared’s arms and held on tight to his biceps as they both fucked into Jared’s fist until Jensen came, spilling over Jared’s hand and on his own stomach and shirt. Jared whimpered and let go of Jensen so he could quickly finish himself off, not caring for finesse when he came with a loud shout.

Jared slumped against him, head tucked tight beside his. The high wore off when Jensen’s hands fell and held loosely at the sides of Jared’s shirt. Like he no longer needed, or wanted, to hold Jared and was doing the bare minimum to avoid making it awkward. He should have been prepared for Jensen’s next words, but they still shocked him like ice in his veins.

“We can’t do this.”

Took some time to find his voice, and all he did was whisper “Yeah,” against Jensen’s neck.

One of Jensen’s hands dropped on Jared’s back, fingers patting a few times. “I can’t be good at my job if we ....”

“Yeah,” he repeated.

“And it could make things difficult with the others.” His palm slid and curved with Jared’s shoulder blade. The caution in his words contradicted his touch, but Jared wasn’t going to argue. “Now we both have a secret we’re keeping.”

Jared rose to his knees and shifted back so he wasn’t trapping Jensen in. He wanted to stay close for this part of the conversation; to him, it was more personal than addressing the election. “Are you going to tell Jeff?”

Jensen pushed himself up, leaning back on the headboard. “Are you kidding me? I can’t tell him that we … that this …”

“About me,” he clarified. “Are you going to tell Jeff that I’m gay?”

“No,” Jensen replied immediately, voice low. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“You let it out that Pileggi had prostitutes.”
The way Jensen flinched told Jared that the words stung far worse than he’d intended.

“I’m just saying,” Jared continued, his worries bursting from his mouth without pause. “Your job is to find weaknesses and advertise them. Why wouldn’t you consider the same of me? You wanted to know what skeletons I had and now you know. You have to plan how to hide it or respond if it gets out.”

“Jared, stop,” Jensen insisted. “You want me to tell Jeff or the others? Imagine that conversation. ‘How did you find out, Jensen?’ Well, I realized it about the time he shoved his hand down my pants. ‘And what did you do?’ I returned the favor.”

A blush overtook Jared and he dropped his head, hiding behind the hair covering his face. Shame burned him up from the inside and he wanted to run. From Jensen, the room, his whole life. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

He slumped and shook his head. “For putting you in this position.” The apology was just as much for Jensen as it was himself.

Jensen shuffled forward, setting his hand to Jared’s neck and nudging him to look up. With a pitiful smile, he said, “I didn’t argue much.”

Jared shared the sad smile, but couldn’t dare meet Jensen’s gaze. “I didn’t give you much of a chance.”

Slowly, Jensen brought his hand around the back of Jared’s neck and pulled him in. Set a gentle kiss to his lips and rested his forehead to Jared’s. “It’s not that I don’t want to do this again. But we really shouldn’t.”

The intimacy in Jensen’s touch and his voice struck Jared in the center of his chest. For so long, intimacy was just sex, and sex was a means to an end for him. With Madeline, it was to keep up appearances. And with men, it helped him relieve the pressure that built up when working so hard to keep that part of him buried deep. This quiet moment of tenderness soothed his soul, a greatly needed reprieve from the life and career he’d built on lies.

“Can I just stay a little longer?” Jared mumbled. “Before I go back.”

Jensen answered him with another gentle kiss, which led to another and another until they stretched out on the bed and stayed close together while Jared weathered the anxiety wracking his bones.
Chapter 4

202 days until Election Day

The Outcast: Jeffrey Dean Morgan

It was two decades ago when Jeff and Jensen had worked together to get Jim Beaver into the Minnesota Governor’s Mansion, but Jeff remembered it like a recent memory that never dies.

Jensen was young and eager then, a little green behind the ears; though that was only obvious to someone like Jeff, who had time and experience on him. Beaver was warm and friendly, and sometimes a bit too melodramatic for what he wanted to do in the state. He’d come up as a county sheriff and quickly made a name for himself in larger political circles, but Jensen helped him connect with the local community.

He’d helped polish the rough-around-the-edges lawman into a folksy friend who was readily available to answer his residents whenever they stepped foot into the Sheriff’s Office, or when Jensen paraded him across Minnesota to meet his constituents on their turf.

Back then, Jeff and Jensen knew they had to make Jim Beaver the focus of the campaign with his downhome humor and approachable communications style. There were no fancy words, tailored suits, or big donors. But there was Jensen, who had raced to the front of the line and kept Beaver at the forefront of the state race. He also put himself right in front of the sheriff and commanded his audience and attention whenever there were decisions to be made.

At some point, Jeff was more like window dressing than campaign manager. Instead, Jensen, with his wild-eyed youth and enthusiasm to get Beaver to make public appearances with any-and-everyone they could, stole the show and indebted himself to Beaver’s success.
At the time, Jeff had chuckled at the young prodigy he was coaching. Clearly thankful that the young blood he promoted from junior staffer to invigorate the sluggish campaign had paid off, Jeff got his own kudos for that decision and a dozen more when he called on Jensen Ackles to breathe new life into more political races.

Every time since that first run, Jensen had proven himself an invaluable partner to play behind the scenes, mobilize staff, and leverage sources across the large gamut of media to not only obtain juicy tidbits of political scandals, but plant them as well. Jeff never would regret bringing his mentee on board.

However, he was consistently surprised when Jensen was able to slip ahead of Jeff and gain the full trust of the candidate.

Considering how Jared had behaved when Jensen first appeared in that hotel room three months ago, Jeff had thought it would not happen this time. For weeks and weeks, Jensen fought their candidate to heed every warning and follow directions. In turn, Jared boldly pushed back or walked away and insisted Jeff remain his confidant and intermediary with Jensen working behind the scenes.

Yet, there Jeff stood, watching Jensen lead Jared around the back of the stage and to the side. They stopped right before the stairs to the risers, opening up to the large gymnasium that was cheering for Jared, crying out for him to show up. Jensen had his hand on Jared’s shoulder, pulling him down and whispering in his ear. Jared nodded multiple times, while mumbling his responses, and Jeff remained just on the outside of the precious circle of Jared, Madeline, their two children, and Jensen giving the Senator his final orders before he appeared in front of the awaiting voters.

Once the Padaleckis were up on stage to the roar of the crowd, Jeff stepped up to Jensen’s side and bumped their shoulders together. “You did it again.”

“Did what?”

“Won over the client. Took a while this time, eh?”

Jensen made a face, then took out his phone and busied himself by scrolling through Twitter at a sickeningly quick rate. There was no way he could actually read any of the words flying by.

“So he’s over the thing?” Jeff asked, continuing to watch Jensen’s face, hoping to spot some reaction that clued him into how Jensen suddenly had the ear of the Senator.

“What thing?”

“The thing with his father in law.” Jeff faced Jensen and waited for him to respond. When he didn’t, Jeff added, “Or with Madeline.”

Jensen finally looked up, considering Jeff for a few seconds. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m just wondering how he finally trusts you.”

“He just does,” Jensen said flippantly and went back to his phone.

Jeff didn’t back off, continuing to stand close for this hot topic. “He told me he knew. About James Wilson. Madeline, too.”

He stopped scrolling. “When?”

Jeff smiled at having Jensen’s full attention. “This morning over breakfast. He mentioned it.”
“And?”

“And he asked me if it was true.”

Jensen let his hand drop to his side and met Jeff’s gaze. He didn’t seem mad so much as unsettled, skeptical. “And what did you tell him?”

“I told him the truth.” Jeff pursed his lips and wondered how tense this conversation was going to get with them staring each other down. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him the truth.”

“Even about Madeline? What’d he say?”

Jensen took a moment, as if parsing out the right words. Jeff wasn’t sure he felt any better when Jensen had to think about it. “He wasn’t happy. What do you expect? He finds out his wife is just another D.C. devil and he’s supposed to be okay with it?” A beat later, he asked, “Why is this a thing now?”

“Because he asked me about her and her connections.” Jeff sighed, glancing over his shoulder. Instinctually, he knew the family was still up on stage, but he suddenly felt tense talking about it when at an event. Like they should be discussing it in the corner of a dark bar. “And he wanted to discuss how to keep her at arm’s length.”

Something like guilt flashed across Jensen’s face and Jeff had to dig into that. No matter how comfortable and friendly their relationship was, something didn’t sit right with this situation, especially with Jared suddenly believing in and following Jensen without question.

“You know anything about that?” Jeff asked with a bit of attitude.

He glanced over Jeff’s shoulder towards the stage and any real concern was instantly gone from Jensen’s face. “It’s not a terrible idea.”

“Was it yours?”

“Surprisingly, no. But she is toxic. Could help everyone out if we only had one person to manage every day.”

Jeff hummed in thought, then rocked back on his heels. “What else did you tell him that night?”

Jensen went back to his phone, now checking emails from headquarters and trying to show a few to Jeff. “What night?”

“After you and the Mrs. got into it in the elevator? After Padalecki went to your room.”

“Nothing,” he answered immediately, but it wasn’t convincing.

Jeff let the silence between them draw out as the crowd erupted into cheers for Jared, signalling that Madeline’s introduction was complete. Now, the Senator would deliver his speech in support of a new economic policy that focused on tax breaks for manufacturing and trade businesses in exchange for opening new facilities in communities with opportunities for job growth.

Jared’s voice rang out through the speakers with the easy cadence he’d picked up in recent weeks, kicking into high gear with Danneel’s prepared words rolling off his tongue like he’d been saying them since the day he was born. “He’s been incredibly good since that night.”
“Maybe because he finally trusts me.”

“I noticed that. Which is why I asked him what happened that night, too.”

“Over breakfast? This morning?” Jensen asked with a quick look.

Jeff nodded with a smug smile.

“And what did he say?”

“He admitted he always wanted to do it himself.”

Jensen shook his head in confusion. “Do what?”

“Give her what she deserved.”

Jensen stared back and Jeff wanted to break into his mind. One of Jensen’s best weapons was his poker face; he could bluff anyone into submission. And could also deny, deny, deny like any of the pros on Capitol Hill.

His silence was eerie, but Jeff had nothing else to question. So he waited and continued watching Jensen, even when he put his phone away and fully focused on what was happening up on stage.

“Maybe that’s all it took to break through to him,” Jeff suggested tightly. Everyone working in the field with the campaign knew Madeline was difficult, but they also knew she could perform like a trained actress. Still, Jeff didn’t like the idea that Jensen was trying to shove a wedge into the marriage just to gain Jared’s acceptance. “Piss off his wife and you’re his new best friend.”

“Nothing unites people like a common enemy,” Jensen replied, and when Jeff glanced over, there was a slight curl to his lips.

“Was that your play all along to win him over?”

Jensen huffed and scowled. “I actually had no plan for dealing with him hating me so much.”

Jeff shrugged, frustrated with Jensen’s icy responses. He thought they were closer than this, able to shoot the shit about any candidate without censoring themselves. “He rather likes you now,” he pointed out.

“Well, I have a way with words.”

“It’s too bad you hate politicians. You’d make a really good one.” Jeff shrugged when Jensen looked insulted at the suggestion.

“I’m sure there are plenty of reasons I wouldn’t,” he laughs. “Least of all enjoying my current paycheck.”

“Line up with the right lobbyists and you’re set for life.”

Jensen set his hands in his pockets, eyes on Jared up on stage. “Need I remind you where this conversation started? James Wilson. What I did to him was a hell of a lot more fun than being on the other end.”

Jeff fell silent and paid attention to Jared’s delivery, holding his breath for moments meant to elicit audience reactions. And they did, right where Jensen and Danneel had planned with mentions of expanding job markets and blue collar jobs for the very people whose shoulders the country was
The Senator really had come a long way in the time since Jensen showed up. Jensen knew how to whip folks into shape and bolster their strengths while hiding weaknesses. Before Jeff brought Jensen in, there were far too many weaknesses to manage and little in the way of strengths. Which made Jeff remember a number of frantic discussions with Jensen over the last few months. “So while you were making friends with the Senator, did you figure out what his thing was?”

Jensen kept his eyes on the stage, a small smile playing around his lips. The guy sure was proud of what he’d been able to accomplish in bringing Jared this far. “What thing?”

Jeff nudged Jensen’s arm and stayed close, lowering his voice to ensure absolutely no one - not even from their team - would overhear. “You were convinced he was hiding something. Did you ever find his skeletons?”

His reluctance to answer troubled Jeff, though neither of them commented on that matter.

“You found them,” Jeff prompted.

Jensen blinked and Jeff could see the knot in his throat when he swallowed. “Yeah, I found them.”

Jeff’s stomach dropped. There was no telling what it could be in the world of politics … bad money, shady political connections, rough sex … any number of things could bring someone down in the middle of a presidential election. Jeff had witnessed them all, from both the other end of the news story and the front line. He wasn’t ready to face another scandal with someone as promising and pure as Jared Padalecki. Not when they’d gotten this far and just about secured the nomination.

“And?” he finally asked.

Jensen sighed, puckering his lips in thought. “And they’re gonna stay in the closet.”

... 

A month later, they were in the home stretch with one final debate granting the voters a one-on-one conversation between the two remaining Republicans. Jeff ushered Jared into their green room backstage at the University of Colorado’s theater, while Madeline and the kids took their seats in the audience. It was the final debate before the last run of primaries when the delegates would be cast for the final Republican nominee. Jeff was jittery after the last few days of debate prep left a sour taste in his mouth.

Even now, as he watched Jensen take his new place at Jared’s side, there was tension when Jensen pushed the Senator to tighten his answers and rehearse the stats, promising that numbers would drive Welling to insanity. Sure, Jeff wanted to see Jared come out on top that evening, but he wanted it to be done while proving Jared’s validity as a future President instead of picking away at the competition.

Jared seemed to feel the same when he decided to nod and move on to Jensen’s suggestions, putting a stop to any discussion.

Jeff knew Jared was skittish about the debate and the prospect of facing Welling on his own. Previous debates featured the rest of the field and Jared was able to coast under the radar of the
louder personalities trying to make waves. Now, it would just be the two of them, legitimate contenders for candidacy, and Jared had to show his real political prowess.

Near the end of yesterday’s prep session, Jared finally broke, and the two had bickered for ten solid minutes. No one dared to interrupt as they both pushed buttons, Jared insisting a debate inferred discourse and creating a dialogue to express one’s thoughts. Jensen had mocked the whole premise and argued that Jared needed to memorize his talking points and stick to them. That the American public didn’t want to see an amicable conversation between two grown men.

After that, Jared had demanded to see Jensen in another room and they returned twenty minutes later having declared a ceasefire. Jensen had remained quiet through most of today’s prep, and Jared had figured out a number of talking points for the economy, social security, and education.

Taking advantage of the calm before the storm, Jeff sat down with Jared on a couch in the green room along the far wall. He patted the Senator’s knee and gave him a calm, warm smile.

Of course, that’s when the hurricane hit with Jensen rushing into the room and declaring, “Weatherly is backing Welling.”

Jeff and Jared both were confused and each asked, “What?”

Jensen read from his phone with an angry bite to the words. “If America wants to keep the tradition that has made us a powerful nation rooted in history and beliefs, then there’s no other choice than to vote for Tom Welling.”

“What’s this from?” Jeff asked, rising to stand over Jensen’s shoulder and read alongside him.

“Transcript of Rosenbaum’s podcast.”

“He has a podcast now?”

Jensen looked and sounded bored when he explained, “He’s parlaying it into a Facts First online channel. It doesn’t air until after the debate, but someone sent me the transcript.”

“You have an advance on the podcast?” Jared asked, getting up and irritably rocking from one foot to the other.

Jeff couldn’t decide if he wanted to run interference so Jared didn’t hear any more or strangle Jensen for bringing it to them just before the debate.

“It gets even better,” Jensen laughed angrily and continued reading. “You ever see Padalecki’s voting record in the Senate? He will cater to people who offer him the best deals for what he wants. He is not for the people of Texas, let alone the American people. And I think that’s pretty obvious when he has no clear message and never has, but here we are and he -”

“Wait,” Jeff interrupted. “Is that Rosenbaum or ...”

“Nope, good ole Michael Weatherly. The patron saint of shady campaign funding.”

Jared turned nearly white as he stared at Jensen. “Are you serious?”

“Hell hath no fury like a Republican scorned,” Jensen replied flatly.

“We have to do something. Get your guy on the phone for a response,” Jeff told Jensen.

“No. No soundbite. That’s all they want. That’s all that Rosenbaum wanted in asking Weatherly to
Jeff sighed and glared at him. Jensen’s modus operandi had always been to strike before the full impact of a hit can be felt. Yet here he was, arguing for the exact opposite. “You can’t let that sit out there for long. You can’t let it hit the web without an answer.”

“We can and we will,” Jensen insisted. “Weatherly is just a piece of shit on the bottom of the party’s shoe. No one will care what he has to say at this point. They all know he’s as bitter as a ditched prom date.”

After a bit of arguing, Jared asked, “So, what are we doing?”

“Giving a quote,” Jeff replied just as Jensen said, “Do nothing.”

“What kind of quote?” Jared asked, looking confused and concerned at once.

“Denouncing Weatherly and calling him out for trading against the party.”

Jensen laughed. “Really? Like Jared isn’t trading against the party with his education plan? You don’t poke the bear in the cage. Let him do his thing. In the meantime, we go after Welling tonight.”

“He’s fine,” Jeff insisted, gesturing towards Jared. “We’ve been through this a hundred times today and we have our plan down.”

Completely disregarding Jeff, Jensen stepped up to Jared with a new plan. “Go after him on homeschooling.”

“What?”

Jared chimed in with his own confusion. “We said we’re dropping that.”

Jensen shook his head with a tight smirk. “Not anymore. Weatherly and Rosenbaum, and all the others on Welling’s side, say you don’t have an agenda. Especially not where education is concerned. But your mama taught for over forty years. Why ignore that?”

“I don’t want to bring her into this.”

Jeff agreed and said as much, though Jensen was focused solely on getting his point across to Jared.

“You go after Welling on homeschooling and how it robs public education, which robs children who need access to real schools.” Jensen pointed beyond Jared as if the stage was right there. “When you’re up there, you start firing at him like he’s closing every school across the country, which means underserved neighborhoods don’t have schools and can’t afford to pay to be homeschooled.”

Jared’s brow furrowed and he glanced to Jeff, who was ready to dismiss the notion they create a new plan 20 minutes before the debate started. They hadn’t practiced for three days just to rip up the playbook and start from scratch. But then, Jared turned back to Jensen and they shared a long look, something going unsaid that Jeff desperately wanted to know.

He didn’t get a chance to ask; Jared simply nodded even as he had a sour smile in place.

“Okay, alright,” Jared conceded. “Get me the numbers and I’ll look ‘em over.”

“In twenty minutes?” Jeff exclaimed. “How the hell are you going to memorize these stats when you’ve been struggling for three days to talk about the economy?”
Jensen grinned and said, “Our boy has a mind like a sponge. You get him hard numbers and he’ll nail them to his brain.”

Jeff attempted to be heard, while Jensen had the Senator’s attention. Like a horse with its blinders on, ready to hit the racetrack, Jared was only going to listen to his new trainer. Suddenly, Jeff knew what it felt like to be the competition in any election Jensen worked on. To witness Jensen turn on him like this, ignoring the last three days of prep, was mesmerizing and completely terrifying at the same time.

He wondered what that meant for the next five months. If they’d make it to Election Day in one piece.

165 days until Election Day

The Competitor: Tom Welling

Tom Welling had been governor of Indiana for nearly a decade when he made his intentions clear: the White House or Bust.

Homegrown in Indiana, Welling was All State his junior and senior year at Carmel High School, before going on to play wide receiver for the Army’s Division I football team and graduating West Point among the top of his class. He earned the state’s adoration for his success in sports as much as his commitment to the armed forces and his good looks. His father was a farmer, mostly corn, and his mother led homeschooling lessons for the kids in their community. He was crisp and clean with the perfect hair and smile, and blessed with crystal clear blue eyes.

As Tom rose through local and statewide government, he made few enemies, at least on his side of the aisle. Republicans loved him and some Democrats, too. They couldn’t ignore his easygoing nature and proud cadence when he spoke.

So, facing Jared Padalecki in the debates was the matchup of the campaign. They’d faced off in previous rounds with the whole host of clowns escaping the Republican clown car.

There wasn’t much heat between Padalecki and Welling, aside from the fact that they were vying for the same job. They both came from small towns in big agricultural states, supported agricultural subsidies, tax reform, and job growth. Whenever Tom had crossed paths with Padalecki, it was under the most civil of circumstances, which meant the odd tension in the room tonight, and Jared’s direct attacks on Tom’s history in politics, came as a complete surprise.

“I think what the Governor from Indiana is trying to say,” Jared began with a smug smile. “Is that homeschooling worked for him and thus it could work for all. In the end, that means diverting funding for boards of education into private education groups, and then closing public schools all
across America, like he did in his home state. Then you have an educational system that only serves families with parents who can afford it, not to mention leaving the workforce to teach their own children. What happens when parents are working full time, some two or three different jobs, just to put food on the table. Now they have to purchase the right for their child’s education.”

“Untrue,” Tom insisted, fighting for the right defense without appearing to drown in insults and pettiness. “Indiana saw an uptick in alternative education processes. Many families are taking advantage of new opportunities that fit their lives.” He knew he couldn’t follow the rabbit down the hole and get stuck arguing the merits of homeschooling or charter schools. There was no time to fully make his case, so he pivoted to stats that would better represent his success. “Look, in Indiana, we are very proud of our education systems. Nine in ten adults in Indiana have graduated high school and over 25 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. How’s Texas?”

“You want to talk stats? How about Texas’s 89% high school graduation rate, setting us at number four in the nation. There are another 10 states between Texas and Indiana, but that’s not the point I’m trying to make. The point here is that the state you’re responsible for is on its way to shutting down public education, meaning only the most privileged children can learn how to read, add, or write.”

“That is not ….” Tom stopped and gathered his thoughts along with a calming breath. He had prepared all week, between stops at local diners and universities and hospitals, to display the same cool composure he’d exhibited since he first announced his candidacy. He was so close to topping the Republican Party as their nominee, yet here he was, fighting someone who failed to do much beyond survive an open conversation or debate, delivering pre-written speeches instead and hiding behind his campaign managers. Well, it was more than a little concerning.

Jared took over from there, and Tom was stunned into silence as the Senator dashed into his stump speech. “What we need to do in this country is back our children - our future - with the best technology in schools, the brightest teachers to inspire them and recognize their capabilities. We need strong education initiatives such as expanding financial aid to high school graduates so they can thrive in college, providing the proper funding to schools and teachers so they can bolster our children. And we need to support communities struggling to make ends meet while their children walk to and from school in waist-high snow, worrying if their homework will survive the storm.”

“A lot of snow in Texas, Senator?” Tom shot back before he could stop himself.

“I’m not looking only at Texas, Governor Welling. Or just Indiana. But to all of America. To all fifty states that need more help to lift up the next generation so it can be smarter, more driven, and more prepared than the ones before. That is what America needs right now. Not another budget that pays for uncertified education then cuts school supplies for every teacher working at public schools. We already underpay teachers, and now they’re buying folders, markers, and glue out of their already slim pockets. Everyone in this cycle needs more, and it is my mission to make education a priority in this country.”

Tom was struck speechless, unfortunate timing for a debate. And everyone knew it … the media, everyone in Spin Alley, and the voters. Not to mention his own campaign, who could barely look him in the eye when he came off stage after the slaughter was over.

“Where the hell did that come from?” he exclaimed as soon as he was out of view of the audience.

“It wasn’t that bad.” As his campaign manager, Justin Hartley was the smoothest political act Tom had ever encountered. Ever the optimist, Justin did his best to stay upbeat, no matter the real score.

“You say that from down here, but I was up there.” Heading back into the green room with his staff all around him, his wife and kids trailing behind, Tom continued complaining. “Since when does a
Republican advocate for more money for education? And I know Texas has homeschooling. Nearly half a million kids are registered for it.”

“If only you’d said that,” Justin said with a little smile. “You know the numbers. You could’ve knocked him out with the facts about his own state.”

“I didn’t have a chance to talk? He just kept charging.” He huffed before taking a water bottle from his wife and swallowing half. “So I ask again, where the heck did that come from?”

“His mother is a school teacher.”

“And he’s a goddamn Republican for Christ’s sake.”

“Tom, language,” his wife insisted, while pulling their two sons along with her.

“His mother is a school teacher,” Justin repeated. “Of course he’s going to attack homeschooling and tax cuts.”

Exasperated, Tom threw his arms up. “But to say it out loud? And on TV? He’s playing dirty now.”

“We’ll fix it.”

“How’s that?”

“Spin Alley,” Justin said plainly. “We already have our guys out there talking to the press, telling them there’s no way Padalecki could make it happen and he’s just doing to it trick the voters.”

“Yeah, sure, play dirty when he’s already the golden child of the night.” Tom rolled his eyes and turned away from Justin to look at anything but his face. “Alright, what now?”

“We put this behind us, move on to Florida, and return to the message. You’ve run an entire state while he is one of a hundred senators that can’t get any legislation to the President’s desk.”

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled. “Let’s get back on track tomorrow.”

164 days until Election Day

He’d put the kids to bed, reading a book his daughter brought with her on the trip. Madeline fell asleep soon after and Jared headed back into the living room to watch TV.
It was well after midnight, but he couldn’t sleep. Between a whirl of images from the debate and CNN’s scrolling text detailing results based on informal voting, Jared fought to pay attention to one thing. MSNBC had similar numbers, along with Fox News and a host of newspapers filling their websites with the fact that Jared had crushed Welling tonight.

Early reactions stated he was harsh on the Indiana Governor, while others waxed poetic to Jared digging into the jugular and creating a greater divide between the two. Welling’s performance met the expectations of the hard right, but Jared now piqued the interest of the rest of the TV audience. CNN called him a social liberal, and analysts predicted it could make him a formidable nominee who could shift with the changing social landscape. Maybe Tom Welling and the Republican Party had strayed too far to the right and needed someone like Jared Padalecki to pull them back in.

Jared couldn’t agree with them more, not least of all because his party no longer looked like the one he’d sworn an oath to three decades ago when he registered to vote.

Truth be told, he wasn’t even sure he was much of a conservative at all. He believed in education, communities growing together, common sense gun control, and that many of the freedoms bestowed upon white men should be afforded to all ages, sexes, and creeds.

Not to mention his sexual preference.

Being a Texas Senator meant he would follow the party line and represent those who put him in office. Now, he hoped he could gather a whole new bench of supporters to bridge the gap between the right and the left. Unite the country and get some shit done.

In the meantime, he’d have to follow Jensen’s direction to get there.

Speaking of Jensen … he wondered what his Chief Strategist was doing at the moment.

It didn’t take long to get moving and leave the suite, nodding to the bodyguards stationed outside his door, then head down the hall and around the corner to Jensen’s room.

There was still that flutter of nerves in his stomach when he knocked, but it quickly disappeared when Jensen opened the door, looked around him to see if anyone else was there, then smiled as he let Jared into the room.

“You did good tonight, Senator.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ackles,” Jared replied with a short bow. “Thanks to you.”

Jensen lifted an eyebrow in interest. “You should thank Tom Welling for sputtering in surprise. Told you it would work.”

“You did,” Jared replied loftily. He followed Jensen further into the room and to the desk, where Jensen was pouring two glasses of bourbon. “I should listen to you more.”

“You did,” Jared replied loftily. He followed Jensen further into the room and to the desk, where Jensen was pouring two glasses of bourbon. “I should listen to you more.”

“You’re just now realizing that?” Jensen put a glass in his hand, eyeing Jared the entire time. His lips began to curl up; Jared wasn’t sure if Jensen was satisfied with saying I told you so or with the chance to be alone and share a drink. “Everyone is more concerned with Welling’s short fuse than the fact that you turned on your party to denounce tax cuts.”

Jared clinked their glasses together and smiled. “If nothing else, I made my mama proud.”

“You’re making a lot of people proud.”
“Yeah?” he asked, stepping closer. “Like who?”

“You’re really dying for my approval, huh?”

“I wouldn’t mind it.” Jared easily slid forward and reached for a kiss. Jensen accepted it even if he didn’t otherwise move, a moment later chasing after Jared’s mouth when he slipped back to look at Jensen. “So,” he prompted as he dragged his hand down Jensen’s side to his thigh. When Jensen did nothing to stop him, Jared cupped him through his pants, fingers gliding along the fabric as he felt Jensen coming to life. “What do you say?”

Jensen’s eyes fell closed and his lips opened on a weathered breath.

Jared leaned back in and spoke right at Jensen’s parted mouth. “What do you say?”

He finally answered, whispering gently, “I’d say I approve of a lot of things you do.”

“Is that so?”

Jensen pulled on Jared’s tie, coming back to life with all the confidence he exuded on a daily basis. “Definitely. And you stick with me, kid … you’ll be in the Oval Office in no time.”

Jared wrapped his arms around Jensen, kept him held tight, and walked back to the bed until his knees hit the edge and he fell onto the mattress. Jensen tumbled down with him, then climbed up to sit astride Jared’s waist, pushing his hips down into Jared. All while holding tight to Jared’s face and kissing him slow and deep.

Jared no longer questioned how bad it was to continue visiting Jensen in his hotel room. Not when Jensen never turned him away and they’d fallen into a comfortable routine. Jared felt like he finally had the confidence he needed to continue touring the states with hundreds and thousands of handshakes and smiles daily.

If anything, Jared’s continued success in the election meant he and Jensen had more time together. He tried not to think that was the only thing driving him lately, but Jensen was the only thing on his mind at the moment.

The room quickly turned warm, and Jared tugged Jensen’s shirts off before they fought to remove his own. Jared flipped them over then manhandled Jensen to his stomach and sat across his thighs. He rocked down so his clothed dick lined up with the crest of Jensen’s ass, perfectly round to fit in Jared’s hands as he palmed Jensen’s ass cheeks. It didn’t matter that they still had their pants on; he’d take care of that soon enough.

First, he wanted to take pleasure in the smooth planes of Jensen’s back, letting his hands roam up and down the heated skin. Then he dragged his mouth across Jensen’s shoulder blades, all while continuing to slide his hips along Jensen’s ass.

“Jared,” Jensen murmured, “Just do it.”

“Alright, alright,” Jared laughed. “Don’t have to be so demanding.”

“It’s in my bag.”

He leaned over Jensen and kissed his cheek then ran his mouth over the shell of Jensen’s ear. “Not even a little foreplay or pillow talk. Just get right into it, huh?”

Jensen smirked, teasing, “Oh, sweetheart, I definitely need you to get into it.”
Jared grinned, too, as he sat back and smacked Jensen’s ass. “I know you’re being facetious, but now I’m just going to punish you for it.” He got off the bed to retrieve lube and a condom from the deepest inner pocket of Jensen’s luggage, where he’d taken to storing it for these occasions. When he returned the bed, he was amused to find Jensen hadn’t moved except to rest his forehead on his crossed arms. “No argument against punishment?”

“Not from me,” he mumbled into the blanket. “Just patiently waiting for you to take your sweet time.”

Reserving any smart comments for later, Jared helped Jensen out of his pants, yanking them down one leg and freeing him to spread out on the bed. With lube dripping down his fingers and onto Jensen’s ass, Jared pushed the tip of his middle finger inside Jensen. His heart pounded with the whimpers Jensen couldn’t keep to himself, and he worked his finger in deeper whenever Jensen seemed to be comfortable enough to take it.

Jared tucked his index finger alongside and pushed in and out to stretch Jensen, massaging Jensen’s asscheek with his free hand. “You feel so good like this,” he whispered, not intending to be heard. But Jensen arched his back and pushed onto Jared’s fingers, like the words triggered an anxious response.

They didn’t talk much during sex; Jared figured it was because they spent every moment day in and day out talking - to packed high school gyms and outdoor rallies, reporters, the team. They didn’t need words here, not like Jared needed to be with Jensen. To be seen as something more than a politician painted red and living his life according to the conservative handbook.

When Jensen eagerly rocked back onto Jared’s fingers, Jared knew they were ready. He also knew he had to say, “You’re gonna feel even better now.”

Jensen’s hips hitched with a stuttered breath. Then he muttered, “Fuck, Jared,” and Jared was assured Jensen knew it, too.

He got his own pants low enough to pull his dick free, lube and a condom in place, then lined up to Jensen’s ass. As he pushed forward, blood pumped quickly and tiny lights burst behind his eyelids. When he was fully seated inside Jensen, his breath caught deep in his chest and he was certain he would come right then. Being fully surrounded by Jensen, all the way down to the base, was too much for his patience. He began to move in earnest, losing himself in the quick beat of his pulse pounding in his ears and his temples.

Jensen set his palms to the headboard and planted his knees so he could rock back. He kept his head down, forehead on the pillows, but Jared could hear every strained noise coming from his mouth, every harsh breath and broken call for Jared.

Jared picked up the rhythm with his hips smacking sweaty and quick to Jensen’s ass. As he felt himself building up to his orgasm, he reached beneath Jensen to grab his cock and jack him at the same rate they were moving. And yet, as much as he was chasing that high, he wanted to hold out and thought about slowing down.

Jensen, however, had other plans and brought his hand around Jared’s to jerk faster and tighter until he came, shivering and moaning beneath Jared. The sharp arch of Jensen’s back, muscles stretching and rippling across his shoulders, was enough to send Jared over the edge.

He collapsed on Jensen, yet tried to keep from crushing him with his elbows in the mattress on either side of Jensen’s head. Resting his forehead down to the back of Jensen’s head, Jared breathed deeply and found the salty smell of Jensen’s body and a little of whatever cologne he dabbed on in the
morning. Woodsy and musky with a hint of sweetness. Maybe vanilla. He breathed in again to commit that scent to memory, just in case that didn’t happen again.

Jensen mumbled, “This shouldn’t happen again …”

Jared laughed and shook his head against Jensen’s. “You say that every time.”

“And I mean it.”

Shifting to his side, Jared propped his head up on his arm. “Do you though?”

“What do you think?”


“I think,” he said loftily as he pushed himself up and over Jared, forcing him to his back and hovering above. “That you are smart and compassionate.” Jensen leaned down and teased a barely-there kiss to Jared’s lips, remaining close as he continued. “And unfairly gorgeous and sexy. But also terribly dirty in how you keep coming to my room.”

“You could always say no.”

“I could.”

Jared smiled as he thought about the fact that Jensen had yet to do so.

114 days until Election Day

In spite of his cutthroat demeanor on the campaign trail, Jensen found elections truly representative of the democratic spirit. Sure, he spent most of his time twisting perceptions and producing candidates that catered to the American voter, but he also loved the energy of folks heading out to their polling places and casting their vote to round out the government that served them.

The Republican National Convention, held in Charleston, on the other hand, presented more than its share of brutal political maneuvering amid the electricity of the delegates delivering statewide support for a candidate. He loved and hated it simultaneously.

Witnessing the slow descent of the Welling campaign had been entertaining, at the very least. It happened gradually, with the last few weeks of primaries falling Jared’s way as the Indiana Governor fought for the national spotlight. The two campaigns covered each of the coasts; Jensen
parading Jared all down the Pacific coastline with smiles as brilliant as the sun and Welling struggling to put any air in his sails.

Making the cross-country trip to South Carolina, there had been time to debate the narrow field of picks for running mate.

Jensen sat back in the corner of the couch while the team gathered in the hotel suite to debate their choices. He had his own suggestion, but knew they had to consider all possibilities before he could make his case and convince Jared. And sure, he knew he could have these conversations in private; they continued to find time to be alone and he knew he'd gained Jared’s trust implicitly.

Yet, as their … arrangement … became more and more complex, Jensen fought against taking advantage of it. Especially with Jeff keeping a close eye on them and brushing Jensen off with cold shoulders when trying to handle something as simple as a press release.

So, Jensen took a back seat for the time being, registering how the tension between him and his mentor began to affect the rest of the staff. That fact was highly evident when Jeff took a stool from the kitchen and sat as far away from Jensen as possible without leaving the room, and then the rest of the team carefully selected seats to avoid any favoritism for sitting too close to Jensen or Jeff.

“Let’s remember,” Jeff announced, “We’re considering anyone and everyone. There are no bad ideas. We’ll get the names up on the board then whittle it down.”

Matt wheeled in a white board and prompted the group by writing a few names across the top as Jeff recited the most obvious choices with instant advantages for increased votes.

John Glover, U.S. Representative for Maryland’s 7th District, covering Howard and Baltimore counties. He’d led initiatives to rebuild Baltimore’s economy by offering huge tax breaks to corporations looking to expand. The city’s campaign to become Amazon’s second headquarters in a country-wide contest put him on the map as a formidable conservative economist, which could bolster Jared’s economic plan to relocate top companies in urban markets seeking a facelift.

Amanda Tapping, Minority Leader of the United States House of Representatives, Arizona 1st District, Sedona. One of the first women to rise to her position, she’d repeatedly staked her campaign on immigration reform. Arizona shared nearly 400 miles with the Mexico border, after all. But Jensen wasn’t keen on setting Jared so close to the polarizing topic.

Benito Martinez, U.S. Senator from Florida and one of the first to publicly plead for FEMA to declare a state of emergency during last year’s string of hurricanes striking the Gulf of Mexico and Florida Keys. That garnered him plenty of support from his residents, many more in dire need of flood protection as storms wrecked the coastlines. Better yet, he could bring the Hispanic vote, a crucial category as the largest minority group in the country.

Partway through his assessment of the field, Jeff loudly interrupted.

“You got any ideas, Jensen? Or you just gonna sit there and watch.”

“I heard he likes that,” Jake joked, winking at Alona.

Jensen shrugged with a crooked smile. “Just enjoying the company.”

Then he noticed Jared had moved from his armchair to the window behind the group. Arms crossed and leaning against the glass, Jared also seemed to take a backseat to the conversation, just letting it unravel before him.
“What do you think, Mr. Senator?” Jensen asked.

Jared looked right at him, biting the corner of his mouth as he considered him. Or the question. Maybe both, because he replied, “I also like to watch,” then winked at Jensen.

“A sense of humor!” Jeff declared. “If I’d known you had one, we would have put you on more TV shows.”

Jensen slanted a smug smile at Jared before turning back to the discussion.

“Stephen Amell?” Matt suggested and the room immediately booed. Danneel even threw an empty water bottle at him. “Jeff said there were no bad ideas!”

“It’s worse than bad,” Jensen complained.

“Now you have an opinion?” Danneel asked.

Jensen aimed his smug look at her. “About Amell? I’ve always had an opinion.”

“He has some pros,” Matt challenged, spinning the marker between his fingers as he waited.

She rolled her eyes. “Name one.”

“Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. He has foreign policy experience and is next in line for Committee Chairman.”

“It goes on the board,” Jeff announces. “Who’s next?”

“How about A.J. Buckley?” Alona offered. “Secretary of the Navy and former Navy SEAL. He’ll bring in the military votes.”

“So will Welling,” Jensen pointed out, finally joining the conversation.

Matt’s hand froze on the ‘y’ in Buckley and looked over his shoulder at Jensen, who now had the full attention of the team. “Welling?”

Jensen rested deeper in the cushions as he nodded. “Welling. Indiana Governor. You may remember him from the primaries.”

“Yeah, but we beat him.”

“Badly,” Alona added.

“And in case you forgot,” Matt reiterated, “we beat him.”

“Meaning he was the party’s second choice,” Jensen pointed out. “He was leading most of the race for a reason and people will vote for him again.”

Jake laughed. “At that point, you could argue for Weatherly.”

“We’re not putting Weatherly on the board,” Danneel said. Then, “Are we?”

“Absolutely not,” Jeff insisted.

But Alona stuck it to him when she said, “No bad ideas, remember?”

Jeff sputtered to respond then changed direction. “Alright, hang on. No one from the race. We made
a lot of enemies to get to the National Convention and we’ll have to eat a lot of crow to get any of them to say yes.”

Matt checked the board and circled names with the most legitimate advantages. “Glover, Martinez, and Buckley for top three?”

A number of questions and answers filled the room as they picked apart each name.

*Can we spin Buckley’s time as a SEAL as foreign policy?*

*He oversees all naval bases, internationally, too.*

*Is that a yes?*

*What about Glover?*

*Is he too middle of the road?*

*That could help us with the undecideds.*

*We’re already too close to the middle of the road.*

*Are we really dropping Tapping? The only woman on the list?*

*You want to touch her immigration record right now?*

*Martinez helps us the other way. He can bring Latinos to the booth.*

*Will republicans like that he’s pro-climate change?*

As they carried on, Jensen glanced back at Jared. He still had his arms crossed and the same unreadable look on his face. Then he began walking closer to the group, looking to Jensen.

“What’re you thinking?” Jensen quietly asked.

Jared stopped just behind Jensen, resting on the back of the couch, and Jensen tipped his head back to watch him.

If they weren’t having this discussion, let alone surrounded by the rest of the campaign team … well, Jensen had half a mind to reach back with a light touch when Jared was this close to him. His hand came up for a quick tap on Jared’s elbow, just one finger on the skin just below the rolled cuff of Jared’s shirt.

Licking his lips, Jared dropped his hands to rest on the back of the couch, fingers grazing Jensen’s shoulders as he stood above him.

“I like Welling,” Jared announced, breaking up the conversation that had carried on without either Jensen or Jared’s input. “Jensen’s right. He was the party’s second choice, satisfying the people who still didn’t want to vote for me after the debates.”

Jensen chuckled and smiled up at Jared.

“Plus, he has military experience, brings Indiana and maybe Ohio.”

“And he’s further right than Jared,” Jensen pointed out, before continuing on with all the reasons the Governor was the only one on his list. “He’ll carry the conservative vote, farmers, military. Basically,
“it reinforces the small town politics we were playing to get here.”

“Are we not playing small town anymore?” Matt asked, worried and confused.

“We got here on small towns,” Jeff points out.

“We have to go bigger now. It’s the national stage, and if we keep Jared on the easy side of conservative, we can reach the undecideds or even the moderates who think Collins is too far left.”

Jake chuckled. “Is there such a thing as too liberal?”

“Collins is out there,” Jensen replied. He gave Jeff a look and he could tell they were on the same page when it came to the Congressman from Washington. “A lot of folks on the left are already in love with him. We have to pick up everything else. Welling gets us the far right and we pick up the middle.”

Danneel agreed with them, nodding enthusiastically. “It’s the best choice. We don’t have to introduce an unknown to the campaign. Voters already know him and he’s always polling well on likeability and trust.”

“Then that’s it,” Jared said firmly. “Let’s get Welling here.”

“You really think he’ll say yes?” Jeff asked, eyeing Jensen.

Jared was the one to answer, ending the conversation with certainty. “He has to.”

Jensen nodded. “Especially if he’s not ready to give up his hopes for the Oval Office. He’ll be next in line for the job.”

“Then it’s decided, ” Jared declared, putting an end to the conversation. “Call the Governor.”

Glancing up, Jensen smirked at Jared, impressed with his firm stamp of approval. Everything was going as he’d hoped.

…

With Welling secured as Jared’s running mate by the end of the first night of the Convention, Jensen insisted they watch the Governor deliver his speech in person the next day.

He stood backstage beside Jared as they wished Welling good luck on his way out to the stage, and then they were alone. As alone as they could be in a convention center full of 2,700 delegates and thousands of voters there to support the Republican nominee. With Jeff taking Matt, Alona, and Danneel, among other staffers, around the arena to observe the convention with their own eyes, Jensen could have this moment to witness Jared’s exhilaration for himself.

“What do you think of the Senate?” Jared asked.

“There’s no way it’ll turn blue.” When Jared glanced over in confusion, Jensen clarified, “They won’t change enough seats in November. It’ll stay Republican.”

“No, not that…” he looked down, working through whatever his question really was. “Jeff suggested leaving the Senate.”
Jensen considered the issue as well, offering, “Probably wouldn’t change things. You haven’t exactly been doing that job lately.”

“When would I have to decide?”

“Sooner rather than later.”

“You haven’t mentioned it yet,” Jared pointed out.

“I honestly wasn’t sure what the right answer was.” And he didn’t. Jensen knew of many politicians who held onto current titles until absolutely necessary, or were lucky enough to return to office in the event of losing an election. Others walked away if they couldn’t face public office again.

Jared snorted. “I mean, it only matters if I lose, right?”

“And if you do, you want to go back to that life?”

“No,” he answered firmly.

Jensen was sure it was more than just politics. His mouth twitched, something like pride bubbling to the surface. Jared’s greatest struggle of late had been representing himself, not just the State of Texas, and it sounded like he was reaching a new resolution. “Then I think you have your answer. And when you win, it won’t matter.”

“I never imagined this,” Jared whispered, taking in the spread of the large audience. Thousands of faces indistinguishable from one another. More people than Jared’s ever spoken to. “Not for me. Not with how this all started.”

Jensen leaned closer, hoping others considered the lack of personal space to be more indicative of the need to talk closely with Welling’s voice booming throughout the hall than anything else. Tried to ignore that he rather enjoyed taking advantage of the moment to be near him. “You’re here now. You did this.”

Jared glanced over with a dazed smile. “No thanks to you.”

Huffing a laugh, Jensen looked away and watched how the audience responded to Welling calling for continued support for their armed forces so America could have the strongest defenses in a global landscape that saw deft changes in technology and enemies. It was one of the biggest pieces of Welling’s platform and one of Jared’s weakest, and they need him to secure the military vote.

He could tell Jared was still looking at him and he wondered for a brief second what life would be like when he wasn’t at Jared’s side. When the campaign was over, no matter the outcome, and Jensen had his next candidate to manage.

It wasn’t realistic to fall down that slope; Jensen knew he would only create a large problem if he let himself think of anything beyond Election Day. He’d already spent half the year with that deadline at the forefront of his efforts; with fewer than four months to go, he had to remain steady with that purpose.

“This is good,” Jensen said, “Welling’s strong here. We should get him out to Joint Base Charleston while we’re here for photo ops and rallies. Continue to drum up the military support.”

“Yeah, we should,” Jared replied, though it didn’t sound like he was fully committed to the idea.

“You don’t think so?”
“We should.”

Jensen looked at him and regarded him for a moment. “You don’t sound so sure.”

Jared shook his head. “I said we should. If you think it’s right, then do it.” He finally turned away and appeared to be paying attention to Welling shifting topics to the economy and running through the main points of Jared’s economic plan.

Yet Jensen could tell he wasn’t registering what was being said on stage, his eyes never rising high enough to see Welling, the crowd, or anything else beyond the immediate area. He nudged Jared. “What’s wrong?”

After some time, Jared opened his mouth then sucked in a deep breath. “I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“About actually winning this thing.”

Jensen smirked and nudged him again, keeping his shoulder tight with Jared’s. “Don’t look so terrified.”

“It’ll be another four years of politics and speeches, not to mention an even crazier schedule.”

Jared’s flat voice did little to assure Jensen that they weren’t backpedaling in this moment. Over time, he’d come to understand Jared’s freak out all those weeks ago on Super Tuesday had to do with the fear of living as a prisoner in the shell they’d built around him, told where to be at every minute of the day and what he could or couldn’t say, no matter what he truly believed.

He shifted around to face Jared then leaned in. “Think of all the good you’ll do. The highest seat in the U.S. and you can make real change happen.”

Dropping his head, Jared’s temple rested against Jensen’s for brief moments. When he looked away, he reached for Jensen’s hand and squeezed around his fingers, making the most of a quick moment of intimacy. “And what about Collins?”

Jensen allowed them these seconds hidden away from all the ruckus of Welling’s speech winding down and the crowd bursting into cheers. He imagined - hoped - anyone in the area would only see a campaign strategist delivering orders to his candidate, rather than two grown men sharing a brief display of affection. Moving closer, he slipped his hand inside Jared’s suit jacket and rested his palm on Jared’s hip. “Don’t jinx it just yet. You worked your ass off to get here and you should enjoy it.”

Jared’s hand came up to Jensen’s back and Jensen could feel the warmth of his fingers spreading wide. “I couldn’t be here without you.”

He rubbed Jared’s hip for a second then slid back to avoid lingering too long. They shared a smile that held more secrets than it should, and Jensen needed to shake off the sudden pressure in his chest, a mix of warm satisfaction and dread.

It was never his intention to get this close to Jared, not back when he joined the campaign or even when they first started up this thing where late night visits to Jensen’s hotel room were more than just a quick schedule update. His experience told him this could explode in their faces if it clouded Jared’s judgement and ambition to push forward and fight for the presidency. And his own intuition told him it could create a greater explosion if he dared treat this as anything more than a secret fling that would end come November.
Jensen wiped his mouth to erase any signs of that intimate smile and grounded himself in the moment. They were at the Republican National Convention to accept the nomination and confirm Jared’s trajectory to the Oval Office.

They had four months to Election Day; it wasn’t too late to realign his priorities and take emotion out of equation.

If only he truly believed he could.
37 days until Election Day

The Nominee: Jared Padalecki

“When do I start filling positions?”

“You’ve filled this position rather well,” Jensen murmured without opening his eyes. Half asleep and plenty sweaty, he was lying stomach-down on the mattress as the high of another round wore off.

Jared chuckled and turned to his side, resting alongside Jensen. He slipped his arm around Jensen’s waist, tugging lightly. Leaned down to kiss his temple like he had the freedom to be completely open and out. In this life, he was constantly walking the fine thread between success and utter disaster. Especially in the final months of the campaign when every sound bite could kill his chances. With one step, Jared could either fulfill the expectations of public service or he could crash and burn in the spotlight.

As success continued to carry him forward, keeping their numbers within swinging distance of Collins in the polls, Jared needed to escape more than before. Seeking refuge to Jensen’s hotel room in the middle of the night when no one knew he’d escaped his suite, he could pretend anything was possible. Like having Jensen in his arms, or speculating on his first steps post-election.

“Seriously, though. Is it too early?”

Jensen shifted a bit more comfortably, a leg sliding against Jared’s and his hand between the pillow and his face. “It wouldn’t hurt to think about it.”

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of that. Danneel should join for communications. She could continue to write for me. Or do you think she could lead press conferences?”
Jensen closed his eyes, startling Jared for a moment. As if Jensen didn’t want to be a part of the conversation. But he had a small, thoughtful smile on his lips and Jared considered the fact that it was three in the morning and they both needed sleep.

He knew he should leave, head back to the suite before anyone suspected anything. Jared had already been gone too long and surely Penikett and Bamber had thoughts about the evenings Jared escaped to Jensen’s room. Or when Jensen stayed longer than the rest of the staff when Madeline and the kids weren’t around. Their secrecy was invaluable when Jared most needed to break from the mask he wore in the daylight.

With time running out until the election, Jared needed it more than ever. He shifted closer and tightened his arm around Jensen’s waist. Whispered, “What do you think?”

“I think she can do a lot of things,” Jensen mumbled sleepily. “The question is what she wants to do.”

“You think she doesn’t want to be here anymore? You think she’s done?”

“I think you should ask her yourself.”

Jared rested his cheek on the pillow so he was inches from Jensen and could watch him float just above sleep. “So she probably wouldn’t settle down for a regular position? If she hasn’t done it already.”

Jensen shrugged a little. “People like us, sometimes we don’t want to settle down. We just want to keep running races.”

“You’ve been doing it a long time.” Jared thought on that for a bit. In his career, there was always the next step. Local politics to the Texas State Senate, to U.S. Senate, and then committees and finally running for President. He supposed, after this, there wasn’t anywhere else to go, but at least he had goals to race towards. Jensen didn’t seem to have the same kind of trajectory when working behind the scenes for so many years. “How long do you want to keep running races?” he asked, partly to uncover what Jensen wanted for his future and if he’d be a part of Jared’s.

Jensen chuckled. “As long as I can?”

Jared licked his lips as the question sat the back of his throat. He didn’t know why he was so nervous to ask, but he supposed the promise of extending what they had together - in the public and behind closed doors - was dangerous and thrilling in equal measure. “What if you had an offer you couldn’t refuse?”

“You got an offer I can’t refuse?”

He rushed to say, “Chief of Staff,” before he could take it back.

Jensen full out laughed, tsing at the end. Fully awake now, he flipped to his back and stared at the ceiling with a tense set of his brow and lips. “Why would I do that?”

“You’d be running the country,” Jared pointed out.

“You’d be running the country.”

Jared swallowed thickly. As much as he hadn’t expected Jensen to pounce on the idea, this quick rejection made every muscle in Jared’s body tense up. Still, he went on to explain, “We both know the Chief of Staff is the one with the real voice. The real power. Behind the scenes and moving the
“They had sex. You do that already.”

“So why would I do it on a government salary?”

“Because we’d be doing it together.”

“Jared –”

He was looking at Jared now with an ominous, dark look in his eyes, but that didn’t stop the thoughts from spilling out. “Think about it. It’d be just like this. Everything, just like this. You’d be the voice behind the leader of the free world. And we’d be side by side for the next four years.”

“Jared –”

“Maybe eight. Two terms, and and we could stay like this. Together.”

“Jared” he said more forcefully.

“We could,” Jared insisted, feeling petulant like a child. He knew he’d have to convince Jensen this would work and now he couldn’t stop himself from begging.

“We could not.”

Jared rose to his elbow, feeling the fight rise to the surface. “Why? We’ve got this now and we can continue. I’m better out there when you’re with me. You know everything changed once we started this.”

Jensen pushed himself up to sit, face twisting with anger and his voice growing louder. “First off? You couldn’t have this while in the White House. There are people and cameras everywhere. More folks watching your every move. Reporters diving into every single step you take.”

“We’d find a way. Keep Tahmoh and Jamie to protect us.”

“Secondly, you’re married.”

“I’ll get a divorce,” Jared said quickly. And he would. He’d started to think about how to get Madeline out of his life. Campaign life had been much easier the less she was around, especially after he learned the truth from Jensen, and he figured his political life would be even easier once it was over.

Jensen laughed and rolled his eyes. “Are you kidding me? You can’t do that.”

“I can and I would. Will,” he corrected.

“Third, you can’t cheat on your wife. Not even with a woman.”

Jared sat up to look Jensen in the eye and argue this matter on even ground. “What about Kennedy. He had all sorts of women in the White House.”

“It’s a different world, Jared. Twenty-four hour news cycles and social media would eat you alive in one day.”

“Clinton,” Jared offers, though he knows he’s running out of speed the longer Jensen pushes him away.

“He was impeached for office sex.”
“And he’s still regarded as one of the best presidents in recent years.”

Jensen raised his voice to shout, “Jared!” and stop Jared’s continued verbal downfall. Jared was almost thankful for the break, except Jensen poured cold water on him when he admitted, “That’s not the kind of person I want to be. I don’t live in the public eye, Jared.”

“It’s not the public. It’s the White House.”

“It’s the most public house in the world!” Jensen cried out as he threw off the blankets and rolled out of bed. “Jesus Christ, Jared.” He hurried to get his clothes on: suit pants, undershirt, the rumpled blue shirt Jared nearly tore off just an hour ago.

Jared got up to his knees and pulled the sheet over his waist. Suddenly, being stark naked in that bed while Jensen covered up was embarrassing. Not to mention, it made him completely vulnerable, if he wasn’t already. “Where are you going?”

“I’m not built for the civic life, Jared,” he argued while buttoning his shirt. “I’m not built for living under a microscope.”

His heart beat wildly, threatening to break out of his chest if he couldn’t get Jensen to calm down and stay in the room to fix Jared’s mistake in bringing this up in the first place. “Jensen! Where are you going?”

“There’s no future for me that exists where I end up in the White House. You, yes. You go to the White House and set the new standards to be a social liberal wrapped up in a Texas flag. That’s what you do. I do this. I get people into office and that’s it. I don’t work there.”

“This is your room,” Jared pointed out, trying to stop him from leaving.

Jensen shoved his feet into his shoes, stomping to get them in place without messing with the laces. He furiously shook his head as he fought his shoes, but didn’t answer.

One more time, Jared asked, “Why are you leaving?”

“Well, it’s that or I kick you out of bed,” he exclaimed, then threw his arms up. His hands landed on his head then slid down hold the back of his neck.

“So why don’t you?” It wasn’t a dare so much as wonder, and the silence that followed was of little comfort.

In the far reaches of his mind, Jared knew there was no way to hold Jensen down. He lived for the race and that quick pump action of running from place to place, chasing numbers, and knocking out the competition. Four years in D.C. were impossibly long compared to what Jensen faced with each assignment. And Jensen wasn’t built for that kind of commitment. Or any commitment, really.

Jared knew all of that. Had expected it, really, yet he’d dreamt of a better reaction. Jensen could have at least taken longer to consider, been touched by the offer rather than act insulted at the idea of being nailed down. Now, Jared was the one insulted that Jensen’s reaction was instantaneously harsh.

Jensen stared back as he fought to answer.

“So why don’t you kick me out?” Jared pushed, daring him with a sharp look.

He still refused to answer, fiddling with with the tails of his shirt.
Quietly, Jared asked, “You can’t kick me out, can you?”

Slowly, Jensen stepped to the bed and sat on the mattress, fingers twisting into the wrinkled white sheets.

Jared thought about those sheets, and the ones in all the other hotel rooms they’d messed up since they started whatever this was. The stories they would tell if anyone knew enough to ask; Jared wouldn’t have had to jam his foot in his mouth by asking Jensen to stay on after the election. The race would be over and they would slink far out of sight, together. In some perverse way, Jared continued to hope it would happen, but he wouldn’t hold his breath.

“Because you don’t want to piss me off?” Jared suggested. As if he wasn’t already pissed off. But the thought that Jensen was fighting the notion brought a bit of relief to the pain in his chest.

“I don’t want to piss myself off,” Jensen admitted. “Not any more than I am right now.”

“So what now?” The question wasn’t just about tonight, but the dozens of nights between now and November. The hundreds that would follow Election Day.

Jensen shook his head and stared at the pillow he’d been using only a few minutes ago, before Jared tossed them down this slope. Jared was sure Jensen was doing his best to not look at him, avoiding the weighted question sitting between them.

Jared buried the need to continue the conversation; he doubted there was a way to recover from falling so spectacularly on his face. He doubted he’d recover, let alone in the next ten minutes or even an hour. “I should go back,” he mumbled and got out of bed to gather his clothes.

“Yeah,” Jensen sighed. “It’s late. We both need some sleep.”

When Jared returned to the suite, there wasn’t much sleep. And not over the next few evenings either, when he fought the impulse to visit Jensen.

They were back to square one, when Jared couldn’t bear to listen to Jensen, let alone look at him. He’d have to rely on Jeff to carry him to Election Day.

25 days until Election Day

The Loner: Jensen Ackles

On the eve of the second Presidential debate, the team assembled for a long night of practice in one of their hotel’s meeting rooms. With three hours behind them, they’d nailed down Jared’s answers for his economic plan, the education system, and immigration.
Continuing with the set theme of *America at Home*, Danneel read the next question from a depressingly long list on her notepad.

“Let’s turn to affirmative action. Senator Padalecki, you have been vocal with your opposition for affirmative action. As the cost of higher education continues to rise, are you open to the possibility that underprivileged, minority students should be given greater opportunities for college and post-degree programs?”

Jared nodded, winding up for his one-minute answer. “I am open to any discussion that seeks better answers to how we educate our children. I am also open to listening to the American people, of which seven in ten say that preferential treatment based on race rather than merit still promotes a system that leaves students behind. As the son of a school teacher, I care greatly for expanding access to better schools with well-equipped teachers in order to produce students that don’t need affirmative action and will easily prove themselves by merit, not their nationality.”

“We should tighten the pivot,” Matt suggested. “When you turn to ‘son of a school teacher’, you’re not expanding access to schools but making schools better.”

Scribbling notes on scratch paper on the podium, Jared nodded at the feedback he received from the room.

“The last line,” Danneel prompts, “prove themselves by merit and not their race is a bad twist. You should end on merit. ‘By their own merit.’”

“Alright, got it.” Jared looked up and around. “Anyone else?” Jensen raised a hand for attention and Jared flinched before licking his lips and flatly saying, “Yes, Jensen.”

“‘Producing students that don’t need affirmative action’,” he recited.

“Okay. And?”

“We’re not producing students like a manufacturing facility. You’re taking it out of the students’ hands and minimizing the issue. Students need good teachers and good schools. You have to put the children first.”

“I am putting them first.”

Carefully, politely, Jensen disagreed. “Not with that sentence structure. You need to put them at the front.”

“I’m putting them first,” Jared contended and Jensen let out a quick breath.

“With due respect, you need to reorder the subjects in your sentence to put children at the head of your answer.”

Jared continued to appear annoyed, but he eased up when Danneel spoke.

“What about … students are more important than diversity numbers and we need to give them every opportunity to succeed. This means funding schools to equip teachers with a wealth of supplies and state-of-the-art tools to expand the classroom so that every student can have access to higher education based on each child’s full potential.”

A rumble of excitement told them all that Danneel’s response nailed the real message that would reach parents as well as college-aged voters at home.
“How about children are more important than statistics?” Jensen asked and many in the room agreed.

Except Jared, who shooks his head. “The question is affirmative action in college. Why not reference students and diversity?”

“Because children is more powerful. And if you continue to say diversity then you’re going to continue to remind everyone that you don’t care for diversity.”

“I care for diversity,” he argued.

“In affirmative action, you don’t.”

Jared rubbed at his mouth, possibly covering up a number of expletives given the angry set of his jaw. “What’s the next question?”

Jensen dipped his head, pretending to take notes rather than admit he was simply drawing a large circle in the margin of his legal pad. Over and over and over again.

The first half of debate prep hadn’t been much different, with Jared fumbling through long, winding answers and Jensen offering language critiques to highlight buzzwords that would register with the home audience. And each time, Jared tensed up and disagreed with a variety of petulant I didn’t say that excuses.

Jeff’s little ticks, like scratching at his eyebrow or clearing his throat, told Jensen when to drop it. And so they found themselves pushing Jared to the 75% mark on each answer before changing topics.

He wished like hell that Jeff had better plans to tighten up the language in the morning, because while they had touched on each of the six topics for this debate, they hadn’t completed a single one with full confidence.

Alona chimed in with another question. “Senator Padalecki, the Federal Assault Weapons Ban prohibited civilian use of a class of semi-automatic firearms, including AR-10 and AR-15 assault rifles, many of which have been used in frequent mass shootings in the last three years. With nearly a decade passing since the ban expired and multiple unsuccessful renewal attempts, the Violence Policy Center advocates for a renewed focus on the regulation of such firearms.”

“Is there a question in there?” Jared asked.

“What is your position on renewing the ban when a number of studies show that there was little impact on criminal activity?”

“There it is,” he chuckled, as did a few in the room while Alona sheepishly smiled. “Numerous studies do show that weapons bans do little to curb criminal activity. These studies also show that many criminals at the center of mass shootings were in fact previously noted as violent offenders and many have been diagnosed with severe mental conditions. A ban on weapons won’t stop criminals from obtaining weapons when they already exist on the streets.

Jensen lifted his hand while delivering the following up question. “Are you then willing to support more stringent regulations to keep these weapons out of the hands of violent offenders and people with severe mental conditions?”

Jared clenched his jaw at the challenge. “I think there are real benefits to considering the condition of the person behind the gun before we halt all gun manufacturing.”
Jeff groaned and Jensen knew it was a weak answer.

“Let me try again,” Jared sighed. He shook out his arms then settled down to a firm stance behind the podium. “Alright, from the top … Yes, studies continue to prove that weapons bans do little to reduce criminal activity. And these studies illustrate the delicate mental state of many violent offenders who will obtain a weapon whether they’re banned or not.”

“So guns don’t kill people,” Jensen summarized. “People kill people.”

“That’s not … no.” Jared sighed again. “I’m not saying that.”

“You’re not not saying it.”

“Jensen,” Jeff warned.

He put his hands up in surrender and let Jeff talk Jared through a tighter answer. Hopefully something that didn’t point fingers at the mentally ill.

It didn’t take Jared but ten words to trail off into the deep end of blaming people over blaming an abundance of guns and the absence of proper regulations. This time, Jensen wasn’t going to let him off easy.

“You have got to get to the point!” he harped. “The gun lobby doesn’t play nice and neither do you.”

“Now is not the time,” Jeff insisted.

“Do you know how many mass shootings-”

“Not the time,” he repeated, but Jensen plowed on.

“There were 362 mass shootings last year and 2,012 wounded with 557 killed. Not to mention April’s shooting at the Alexander Junior High. And if we wiggle away from the conversation then the voters are going to think that you don’t understand-”

“That I don’t understand?!” Jared yelled. “Do you think I don’t understand?”

“I know you do.” Before Jensen could say more, Jared rolled right over him.

“My children don’t do tornado drills. Growing up in Texas, you worried about tornadoes and you crowded into the hallway and stayed away from windows in case they broke. You know what my kids do? Now my kids get ushered into a closet and locked down, pretending that someone is coming for them with an assault weapon. Nine out of ten schools run active shooter drills and my kids attend one of those schools. I think I understand what the issue is.”

“Then say that!” Jensen exclaimed. “Say that, as a father of two young children, you understand better than anyone the kind of threat an assault rifle poses without the proper regulations to certify gun owners and track the damn things.”

“And we lose the NRA,” Jeff complained.

“That’s fine,” he shrugged. “I didn’t want them anyway.”

“It’s not your campaign, Jensen,” Jeff fired back. “And you can’t run on the Republican ticket and not have the NRA at your side.”

“I’m just saying -”
“You’re always just saying,” Jared huffed.

“I’m saying that we can bring people over to our side if we make a stand for common-sense gun control. I know you want it,” he fired at Jared. “I know you can’t stand to take checks from the NRA, so why keep doing it?”

“The party will revoke my card. I’m not touching gun crime.”

“We’re keeping it ambiguous,” Jeff insisted. “We keep it ambiguous and let Collins run with it on his own.”

Jensen rushed out of his seat, gesturing wildly with his legal pad. “There’s no harm in agreeing with the man. This is a national crisis, why shouldn’t we recognize that? This is more than partisan politics. This about basic human decency. Now’s the time we say the important things that really matter to all of America.” He looked at Jared to be sure he could meet his gaze, and said, “I know you want to say a lot of things. So say them.”

“Jensen, that’s enough,” Jeff warned, but it was Jared’s flat voice that stopped him.

“I’m not saying it.” Jared stared back, otherwise blank of any expression. “And don’t ask me about it again.”

“Alright, alright, let’s take a step back.” Jeff put a hand on Jared’s shoulder, which was quickly shoved away as Jared stepped away from the podium. “Jared, let’s just—”

“I’m done for tonight.” On his way out, he crumpled his scrap papers into a ball and tossed it into a garbage can at the door.

Jensen sighed, falling back in his chair with the continued frustration that they weren’t getting anywhere. Not with Jared and debate practice or with the team pushing Jared to find the best answers without letting him off the hook if he didn’t like it. And most definitely with Jared’s continued hostility whenever Jensen spoke.

Jeff stopped him at the door, pulling on his arm to put space between them and the rest of the team on their way to the elevators.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Jeff whispered harshly. “With you. Or with you and the Senator. Or you with everyone else here. But it’s stops now.”

Jensen tugged his arm away and frowned. “Are you giving him the same speech?”

“He’s not the one trying to turn our platform upside down.” His voice was surprisingly calm, quieting Jensen instantly.

“I’m not,” Jensen replied. “I’m trying to do my job.”

“Well, your job isn’t really working right now, is it?”

Any sensible reply was stalled as Jensen recognized that it was the first time his mentor had come at him with that kind of attitude, let alone the suggestion that Jensen wasn’t doing the work.

“Whatever’s going on, it stops now,” Jeff demanded with his hands slashing through the air. “Whether that means you fix it, or forget it, or leave, I really don’t care at this point. But it’s not working. Not for the Senator, not for you. And it’s doing the team absolutely no favors to sit through your bullshit, petty arguing.”
Jensen fell back a step with the wind knocked out of him. It took a few moments to gather his wits and recognize the threat Jeff levelled at him, and another to realize that Jeff was gone.

Completely dazed, Jensen walked to the elevators and rode a car up to their floor, stunned enough that he didn’t realize he’d arrived until the doors tried to close again.

At the suite doors, Bamber let Jensen inside and swiftly closed the door behind him. The mechanized lock was loud as it fell into place, startling Jensen. Jared, as well, who suddenly appeared in the doorway to the bedroom and quickly glanced around as if searching for a third party to alleviate the immediate tension.

“Jared,” he greeted with a short nod.

Jared’s shoulders slumped and he glanced back into the bedroom like he considered escaping. Then he picked his head up and straightened his back. “Mr. Ackles.”

The formality hit as intended, and Jensen rethought his choice in words. “Mr. Senator, I apologize for earlier. But I think that we’re missing our opportunity to-”

“I think we’ve practiced enough for the day.”

“I know, but I was hoping we could just talk it through.”

“I’m done,” Jared fired back with a cold stare.

Jensen nodded slowly with the realization that Jared wasn’t going to budge from what was said in the practice room, nor was he willing to have what Jensen had hoped would be a civil conversation to bury whatever bitterness Jared harbored towards him.

Then he realized that Jeff was right in pointing out that the tension between them did more harm than good.

“I think I should resign,” Jensen said, words tumbling out before he could fully consider the idea.

Jared blinked and Jensen thought he spotted a momentary flash of alarm. Just as quickly, Jared recovered with a deep breath that he held before letting it out to speak.

If Jensen dared to count, it might’ve been to ten.

“You can talk to Jeff about that.”

Jensen nodded, understanding that Jared was deflecting the conversation. Still, he continued, “If I’m no longer any help for you, then it may be for the best.”

“I believe your arrangement is with Jeff, not the campaign.”

Jensen swallowed, trying like hell to alleviate his dry throat. “It’s through him, yeah. But-”

“If you have another offer, I’d hate for you to turn it down.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Jared ran a hand through his hair with a tiny nod. “You’ve done a lot for the campaign already. It’s understandable at this point that you move on.”

The words struck a sharp chord, sure. But it was Jared’s flat delivery that stung the most.
“I’ll stay if you feel I’m needed,” Jensen offered with one last dash of hope. Jared hadn’t yet told Jensen to walk, but he hadn’t asked him to stay.

The silence was grueling as Jared thought about his answer.

When it came, it did little to comfort Jensen.

“You can talk to Jeff.”

Defeated and torn open, Jensen took one last deep breath, before nodding and turning back to the door.

When Jared offered a quiet Goodnight, Jensen, he looked over his shoulder to see Jared slipping into the bedroom and shutting the door.

Jensen was frozen in place. Unable, or unwilling, to leave the suite until he could catch his breath. He took one last look at the closed bedroom door and accepted that this was as civil as they were going to get.

2 days until Election Day

The final Sunday of the campaign, Jensen heaved a satisfied sigh when the bus pulled up the drive to their hotel.

After Tuesday, he could disappear from the breakneck speed of the campaign and live quietly. He’d sleep past dawn and fall into bed - his own bed - before midnight, and eat something with more substance than granola bars and lukewarm take-out. Keep his feet on the ground longer than a hour before running off to the next city or another state. No longer be surrounded by staffers, reporters, and cameras whenever he turned around.

As if there wasn’t enough stress on the team, they had to get used to Mrs. Padalecki’s presence again. Staffers swallowed pride and accepted the verbal lashes as punishment for benching her for so long. Everyone blamed Jensen for her attitude, since he’d been at the table when it was decided to keep Madeline as far away for as long as possible. He tried not to take it personally when the likes of Matt, Alona, and Jake took it out on him. Shit rolled down hill, after all.

He took their anger in stride and did little to argue with the decision to bring her back. He knew the American people needed to see the family unit heading into the election. Besides, he was avoiding controversy of any kind following the debate prep blow-out and he kept his distance from the Padaleckis as much as possible, coordinating with Jeff and Matt as needed.

Jeff had granted him a short leash for the remainder of the race after hearing about his last conversation with Jared. There was no beating around the bush when he had asked, “So, you quitting then?”

Jensen had stumbled to answer frankly: “I mean … I wasn’t. I didn’t intend to.”

“It then bury whatever you have to and move on.”

It turned out that a night of sleep did them all some good. They’d carried on with the rest of the week, status quo had returned, and Jensen waited in the wings until called upon.

Over the final weekend, they traipsed across Ohio, chasing support in the ever-elusive swing state.
It’d been Jeff’s idea to keep Welling and Jared tied at the hip in the final days to illustrate the camaraderie between the two Republicans, reinforcing their ability to lead the country as a unified pair. That also meant a full caravan of two buses carrying all of Tom’s family and staff, along with Madeline returning with the children for the final push.

At least Jensen had been right to stop at a number of Air Force bases and promote Ohio’s legacy as the Birthplace of Aviation. Not to mention capitalize on Governor Welling’s continued fervent support to enable the armed forces with the best tools and training available.

The latest statistics demonstrated that the Padalecki-Welling ticket was strong when it came to the military, and it was the biggest sector Welling could deliver, along with Indiana’s 11 electoral votes.

The tour bus pulled into the winding drive of the hotel’s entrance and Jensen spotted the press waiting for their arrival. Another one of Jeff’s ideas to keep Jared’s smiling mug in front of the cameras, thus giving America regular photos to share across all social media platforms.

Jensen had laughed at that; Misha Collins had an eager social media following that they couldn’t compete with. He’d wanted to insist that they leave Collins to the millenials running Twitter, while continuing to build Jared’s connections to communities far away from metropolitan centers that skewed liberal. But Jensen didn’t get far into the discussion once he’d decided to no longer pick fights and further divide himself from the rest of the team.

It had been easier to push his agenda when he and Jared were in each other’s pockets, when he had Jared’s full attention and trust. They were amicable these days, but the magic was gone from Jared’s eyes when Jensen offered advice.

Jake headed off the bus first, with the main staff following to check into the hotel and get keys sorted out for everyone.

Jeff clapped for attention and called out, “You ready, Mr. Senator?”

Jared, however, was looking out the window at the gaggle of reporters waiting to see him and barely flinched when Jeff spoke. He patted Jensen’s shoulder as he passed by on his way off the bus. In seconds, the press pounced on him and unleashed a barrage of questions.

Jensen couldn’t make out the questions, but he could hear the calm, confident rumble of Jeff’s voice when he answered. From his seat across the aisle, he watched Jared lost within his thoughts. He wasn’t certain what was consuming Jared’s mind, but he guessed it had a lot to do with the final hours of the campaign ticking away until he faced the rest of his life, good or bad.

Part of him wanted to grant Jared as much time to himself as possible. The other part wanted to sit here on the bus for the rest of the night, even if neither of them said a word. The thick pane of bulletproof glass was a barrier between Jared and the outside world that didn’t know how intelligent, witty, and caring this man was. How passionately he prayed to be himself while also fulfilling every promise he’d made on the road over the last twelve months. How sentimental Jared could be when he had his guard down, when Jensen did, too.

Jensen knew all those things, even if he couldn’t allow himself to fully appreciate it.

Despite all that Jensen wanted - for himself, and for Jared - they had two days left to see this through to the end. And as much as Jensen had taken second chair over the last month, he couldn’t bear to see Jared fall apart now.

“You ready?” he asked quietly, unsurprised when Jared didn’t answer.
“Jared?” he tried a bit louder.

“No,” Jared answered with a subtle headshake.

“No, what?”

“No, I’m not ready,” he admitted.

Against his better judgment, Jensen moved across the aisle and took the seat facing Jared. He set his hands on Jared’s, which rested on his knees, and leaned forward. “Just two more days,” he assured him. “Two days and then it’s over.”

Jared finally looked at him, eyes tired and glossy. “You don’t think I’ll win.”

The fragile look and broken words hit Jensen in the gut and he immediately forced a smile to comfort Jared. “I think you will. I think there is a very real possibility.”

“How? Collins is everywhere.”

Jensen squeezed Jared’s hands and his smile grew strong. “We’ve got all the red states locked in. You just have to see it to the end.”

Slowly, Jared turned a hand over to hold Jensen’s. The heat of his skin spread quickly and Jensen hoped Jared felt the same familiar warmth they’d shared during so many nights together. Reassuring him that for all the tension and struggles of the last few weeks, Jensen still cared very much about the feelings all jumbled up inside of the both of them.

He was damn proud they’d gotten this far and now he wanted to see Jared make his way to the finish line. It wasn’t even about Jensen and his job anymore. For all that he pushed Jared away when things turned serious, Jensen’s feelings had planted deep roots, and it meant more to him that Jared got what he deserved than whatever Jensen could want of him.

“You know what tomorrow is?” Jensen asked with a sudden joyful tone. “Tomorrow is the day we go to San Antonio and the Texan son returns home.” Jared’s mouth turned at the corner and Jensen playfully tugged his hand. “Twenty-four full hours home. I’m getting you the largest plate of barbecue you’ve seen in your life.”

Jared let out a startled chuckle, as if the joy of returning home surprised him. “I want ribs,” he insisted. “I don’t care how messy it’ll look.”

Jensen winked. “A full rack, my friend.”

Jeff called for them as he came back up the steps. “You guys coming?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” Jensen replied.

“Alright, good.” Jeff agreed. “Jared, you’re gonna take a few questions. Collins finally announced his military plan to expand recruiting for the gay community.” Then he looked at Jensen. “We have to keep Welling quiet on that and let Jared stay in the middle. Avoid polarizing the undecideds.”

Jensen looked to Jared, whose eyes were clearer than a moment ago. It was promising, even if he knew Jared’s personal position was more in line with his competitor. “You good with that?”

Jared stood and nodded, looking past him to Jeff. “Yeah, I know what I want to say.”

Jensen stepped to the side to allow Jared ahead of him. “Let’s go. You’ve got this,” he assured Jared.
with a firm hand on his shoulder.

There was great purpose in Jared’s steps as he walked off the bus and entered the circle of reporters firing questions his way.

Picking out a local writer asking about his day in Ohio, Jared smiled easily for the cameras. “Ohio is truly the ‘heart of it all,’ and I’m always excited to spend time with the good people who represent the heart of the Midwest. And seeing the many businesses choosing to call Ohio home is proof that there’s a hearty economy here to continue building. I’m excited to evaluate the many opportunities here in the Buckeye State to support some of the nation’s largest manufacturing and health sectors.”

“Senator! What do you think of Collins’ announcement that his first executive order will be regarding the LGBTQ community and the U.S. Military?”

Jared stepped further into the circle towards the hotel and the press followed. Jensen was edged out of the crowd, set to watch Jared’s response from what would be only five feet, but equaled a whole world away.

“Well, as you know,” Jared began, pausing to look around at the people around him, waiting for the sound bite that should reinforce the ideals of his party.

When the seconds ticked by, Jensen felt his stomach turn with worry that Jared would fumble the answer.

“We live in an ever-changing world,” Jared continued, picking up steam the longer he talked, “Society is more open than it was when I grew up, and so I think we also need to be more open and accepting.”

Jensen clenched his jaw, along with his fists at his sides. He couldn’t get close enough to shut Jared up, but he sure did try. He even flagged down Jeff to step in, signaled Bamber and Penikett to get Jared into the lobby.

It was no use. Jared’s words rallied the media to shout follow-up questions, and now he was off and running.

“Can you expand on that?”

“Are you supporting gays in the military?”

“Is Governor Welling in agreement?”

Jensen fought through reporters to reach Jared, but they pounced on the breaking news of Jared’s statements.

Jared announced to the crowd, “We achieve nothing when we leave marginalized groups behind …”

The press fell silent and Jared continued to insist he believed the government had to change along with society and accept anyone who wanted to serve in the military. And he vowed to support policies to make it happen.

Jensen shoved his way through and all but pushed himself in front of Jared like a human shield against the onslaught of follow-up questions. He put on his best smile for the cameras and shut it down: “I’m sorry folks. We’re on a very tight schedule.”

“Jensen!” someone shouted from deep in the throngs of people. Another continued, “Is this a new
angle for the voters?” with a third adding, “Is it too close to the election to matter?”

He sucked in a deep breath and tugged at Jared’s elbow just before replying firmly. “The polls open in thirty-six hours and, at that time, the American people will let us all know what they think matters.”

“That’s not an answer!”

“Is the Republican Party behind this announcement?”

Jensen shouted above the noise. “We can only hope they continue to support Senator Padalecki as they have for the last year. Thank you. Good night.”

Gritting his teeth, Jensen dragged Jared across the lobby with as much grace as possible, while trying to reach the elevator as quickly as possible. All without grabbing too much attention for the abrupt exit.

Once in the elevator with the doors shut, just barely edging out Jeff and Matt, not to mention Madeline and the kids coming in behind them, Jensen covered his face and shouted, “What were you thinking?”

When Jensen dropped his hands, Jared was unrattled, boldly declaring, “I’m thinking that’s what people wanted to hear.”

“What people, Jared?”

“Everyone. It’s what I’d want to hear.”

Jensen’s laugh bordered on hysteria and he considered throwing himself against the wall. He thought about throwing Jared, too. “What about your supporters? The Republican Party? Remember them? They’re all right-wing conservatives who have made it pretty fucking clear they don’t want that kind of change.”

“I was thinking about the American people,” Jared argued emphatically, voice rising to beat out Jensen’s. “The American people who are looking for a better world. Or the people in those communities who need someone to publicly support them and promise to take steps to make it possible to—”

“You are not that someone! You are the Republican candidate. You are not someone who can support them. Not vocally.”

“Us,” Jared said plainly.

It stopped Jensen in his tracks and his anger made him shake. “What?”

“To support us,” he corrected. “You said them. But it’s us. Because we’re part of that community, too.”

“Oh Jesus Christ, Jared.” Jensen threw a hand in the air. He couldn’t believe the words coming out of Jared’s mouth, especially this late in the game. “I swear to God. You cannot do this. Not now. Not two nights before the election.”

Jared’s face twisted with anger. “When would be a better time for you, Jensen?”

“Once you’re in the White House and I’m - ”
“And you’re not around,” Jared finished for him. “Once you’re off on the next campaign and nowhere near me.”

Jensen let out a loud huff and tried to bring himself back to something resembling sanity. If Jared refused to think straight at the eleventh hour, then he had to. “When I’m not responsible for what you do and say anymore.”

“You haven’t been for a month,” he fired back and the insult hit as squarely as Jared intended.

The ding of the elevator distracted Jensen from answering, and once the doors opened, Jared marched into the hallway. His long legs carried him away quickly and Jensen rushed to catch up.

“We were so close!” he yelled.

Jared continued down the hallway refusing to answer.

“You were so close. You know there’s no recovering from that!” Suddenly, Jensen stopped when he realized they were coming around to the elevators again. Jared continued on a second lap and Jensen shouted, “Where are you going?! It’s a circle!”

“It’s not a circle!” Jared returned from around the corner. “It’s a square!”

“Oh my fucking god,” Jensen growled just as another elevator arrived.

Jeff and Matt nearly fell out of the car, stumbling when they ran into Jensen.

“What the hell was that?” Jeff snarled. “Where is he?”

“He’s taking another lap,” Jensen replied.

“What?”

“Here he is,” Matt called out when Jared came around again.

“Where’s my key?” Jared asked, bypassing the crazed looks on their face.

Matt turned to Jeff and Jensen, but they were both too bewildered to say anything.

Jensen was done talking unless it was to order a drink, which he badly needed five minutes ago.

“Jake’s on his way up,” Matt explained. Another look to Jensen, silently questioning what to do next.

Jeff stepped up to Jared and placed a hand on his shoulder, but Jared pushed it away. “Jared, you have to -”

“I’m not talking!” Jared yelled. “I’m tired of talking about everything.”

Jensen fought the flippant response to point out he was talking anyway.

Then Jared’s voice broke, “I’m just tired. Okay? So we’re not gonna talk anymore tonight.”

Jensen looked at Jared and the pain was palpable. Like a shot to the gut, Jared stared at him with wide eyes watering and his nose turning pink as he held the emotion in. Jensen could feel his own cheeks heating up and the pressure behind his eyes as they filled with tears.
Phones began ringing, surprisingly coming in later than Jensen would have assumed given the swift blow Jared delivered to his own campaign. Jeff and Matt immediately started taking calls with worry and impatience forcing their voices to echo loudly in the hallway.

Jensen slumped against the wall, hands in his pockets, and pulled in a ragged breath. Suddenly, he wanted to be locked behind a door with Jared to grab and shake him, then hold him and assure him that he was complete and beautiful as is, even if he’d just totally fucked up his whole career. That someday they’d both recognize it took more courage to speak those words than to keep them bottled up for the sake of votes.

In all his years in politics, Jensen had never witnessed such a swan dive, especially this late in the game. But when Jared did anything with his heart, he did it spectacularly.

He suddenly smirked at the image of Jared’s graceful leap off a cliff and wondered if he would’ve followed him down. Maybe if they were in a different time and place.

*I’m sorry*, Jensen mouthed, hoping Jared could read the depth of his apology. For his outburst tonight, for keeping his distance over the last few weeks, and for forcing the end of whatever had been building between them.

Jared tipped his head with an emotional mix of shock and curiosity on his face. As if he never dreamed of Jensen apologizing, let alone at the end of this sort of travesty.

Jensen brought his hand up to his chest, holding the palm over his heart while looking Jared in the eye. Jared did the same and Jensen felt a quick kick to his heart for reaching even an ounce of understanding.

The moment broke when another elevator opened to reveal Jake and a host of other team members dishing out keys and room assignments.

He waited for the hallway to clear, everyone settled in their rooms except Jeff, who followed Jared into his suite. There was only a sliver of surprise when Jensen wasn’t invited to join them, but he didn’t want to be part of Jared’s death march, anyway.
1 day after Election Day

The Reporter: Bob Singer

The biggest twist to the Presidential election didn’t happen at the polls.

As was well documented and predicted, U.S. Representative Misha Collins (D-Washington) has gained a new title: President-Elect. With 370 electoral votes, Collins bested former Senator Jared Padalecki’s (R-Texas) 168 votes in one of the largest margins in recent elections.

The real shock came from the Senator late Sunday evening when asked about the President-Elect’s position on gays in the military. “We live in an ever-changing world,” Padalecki said to a crowd of reporters outside his hotel in Phoenix, Ariz. “Society is more open than it was when I grew up, and so I think we also need to be more open and accepting.”

When asked how specific he was willing to get on the subject, he continued: “We achieve nothing when we leave marginalized groups behind. The world, and its people, are evolving with how they want to be represented and how they want to represent themselves. Whether that’s feminism or queer and trans, government has to change with its people. I would be proud to sign any piece of legislation that helps us open our doors and let everyone have a seat at the table.”

Adding more shock to Padalecki’s revelation, voters came out in droves to support that very message. Just not with the Republican candidate.

Padalecki garnered support in the red states, handily winning Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Alabama, among others. Florida turned in favor of President-Elect Collins in the final hour of the count, with most of the West and East Coasts bringing the progressive independent to a total of 370
electoral votes.

It was a slow start for Padalecki when he joined the race. After the new year, his campaign picked up speed, as did Padalecki, thanks to the addition of political strategist Jensen Ackles and speechwriter Danneel Harris. Ackles is well known in political circles for his ability to resuscitate and energize lagging campaigns with his aggressive, proactive style. Tapping Harris’s prowess with the pen, Padalecki’s public speaking engagements became must-see events with insightful commentary on education and the economy drawing crowds far too big to fit the venues.

The solution? More speakers. Harris has a long track record of injecting passion into the written word. Her speeches often balance truth and emotion with political progress, all of which helped Padalecki forge a path towards receiving the Republican nomination.

After the National Convention, however, Padalecki failed to capture the nation with the same fervor and empathy as his competition. With a show of conciliatory grace and respect despite the high-margin loss, Padalecki afforded the President-Elect a number of compliments and threw his full weight behind the victor.

“No matter how wide the spread tonight, I think America truly wants, and needs, Misha Collins in the White House,” Padalecki said from the stage of the Marriott Riverwalk in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas.

The crowd was not as supportive as Padalecki was, forcing him to calm the group with assurances that they would be in the best hands for the next four years. “He has developed a strong plan to lift up underserved families and is dedicated to new immigration policies that aid those seeking asylum so they can succeed in their new nation. And, not least of which, Misha Collins will be a favorable advocate for marginalized communities, such as people of color, women seeking equal rights, and our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.”

His latter statement reflects the remarks made over the weekend regarding his position to support communities that have been traditionally minimized in Republican discourse. Many are reevaluating his choice of words; specifically, it’s a fair question if Padalecki intended to say “our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters” in a show of solidarity or if it’s further signs that he is stepping further away from the platform he ran on.

One has to wonder: where does this leave Padalecki with the Republican Party? And where does that leave the party without Padalecki?

30 days after Election Day

The Consultant: Jensen Ackles
Jensen had left early the morning after the election. There was no need to witness the pity party, lost souls wondering how they could’ve fixed it. He wasn’t built for that type of emotion. And he wasn’t getting paid for it anyway.

For the next few weeks off, he escaped to his cabin in the woods of Northern Maine. Between each campaign, he’d take much-needed rest and relaxation up here, sometimes just a week or so before an offer floated his way. This time, he’d need more than seven days to recover.

The serenity of the icy lake beyond his back porch was enough to calm him as he thought about what lay ahead rather than in the grave behind him. As much as it was a disappointment that the Padalecki campaign tripped on the final nights and fell to Misha Collins, Jensen had to admit that it was still a success story. He didn’t know many who would beat a progressive like Collins, not on the cusp of the societal shift the world was facing, with movements toward equal rights for all genders, races, and sexual orientations.

In the end, maybe Jared had achieved exactly what he wanted: opening the conversation. And now he’d broken down the door for Collins to write the next phase in history.

Not least of all, a bumbling, sweaty, insecure Senator from the middle of Texas rose to the national stage in less than year. Everyone knew his name, that bright smile, the enigmatic personality waiting to fly free.

No one would forget him.

Least of all Jensen.

...

A full month passed before he heard from anyone.

Rob Benedict emailed for help in righting the mess of a state senator in Reno, Nevada, who was facing a public relations nightmare due to a gambling addiction. Irony, thy name was Olsson.

Sterling Brown slogged through the snow with hopes that Jensen would be interested in the Chicago mayoral race. He’d promised the democratic ticket was wide open with education and crime being a priority for the Windy City. And hell, look at what you did with Padalecki and schools, he’d laughed.

Kim Rhodes called regularly to tempt him into joining her at a K Street lobbying firm. Said they could use a big gun like him in D.C., which only made him think of that mess of debate prep and Jensen’s own beliefs on smarter gun regulations. When she appeared on his doorstep to make her case in person, he flatly told her told he didn’t want to work for the guys flipping politicians with fat paychecks.

He wasn’t making friends these days, so he didn’t mind when she left without further conversation.

Then, he showed up.

Jensen stood at the window watching the Lincoln Navigator pull into the drive. He slowly sipped his morning coffee and wondered how early the flight had to be to make it here before noon.
The approach to the cabin was methodically slow, made with gradual steps up to the deck and an even longer walk around the side of the place. Jensen wondered if he was looking for alternate exits in case he wanted to flee. Or maybe he didn’t believe someone like Jensen, with a Tom Ford wardrobe and sharp mouth, would actually live here.

When the footsteps wound back to the front, Jensen finally moved. Keeping his coffee cup clenched in his fingers, held close to his chest as if it would protect him from whatever mess was showing up on his welcome mat, he went to the front door and pulled it open before a single knock landed.

They blinked at one another, Jensen unsure what to say, Jared seemingly in denial that he was actually standing there.

Jensen swallowed as he assessed the version of the former Senator that stood before him. Gone were the shiny black shoes and fitted suits, the vision of precision politics. This Jared fit into the great outdoors far better than Jensen really could, with his rugged boots and jeans, navy parka and plaid scarf wound neatly at his neck, and of course the weeks-old beard covering the sharp lines of jaw.

The wind blew gently through his hair and Jensen found it rather unfair that Jared had just suffered career suicide yet came out the other end looking like he’d just walked off a North Face photoshoot.

Jared finally spoke, though it was a forced, “Surprise,” followed by an equally awkward chuckle.

Jensen held his breath, counted to ten, then released it with a bit of a laugh himself. “I really thought Jeff would be first.”

Jared attempted to smile, but Jensen could see how empty it was; he instantly regretted the joke.

“You want to come in?” Jensen offered just as Jared spoke.

“It’s beautiful out here.”

“You want the tour?” he suggested, recognizing it was better to ease into whatever conversation Jared came all this way to have than plunge into being stuck inside the cabin.

Jared seemed to perk up at that, though neither one of them moved for quite a few seconds.

“I’ll grab my coat.” He suddenly put his coffee down on the nearest surface and tracked down his jacket, if nothing else than to avoid staring silently at Jared. “You should get the tour.”

They marched around the property as Jensen pointed out a couple of his favorite spots: the dock a quarter-mile down where he launched a kayak when the weather’s right, the spot where the lake thinned out to a nearby river abundant in small and largemouth bass, and then the barely-there walking path into a privately owned path of forest where timber was harvested.

As they walked in that direction, Jensen rattled off a number of stats about the private market up here. “The roads are privately owned and maintained just for the lumber companies. The whole operation up here is nearly 15 percent of the state’s employment.”

Jared nodded thoughtfully and Jensen continued for the sake of filling the space between them.

“Over a billion dollars in just timber harvesting. You’d never think that was a real thing, but this whole place was built on it. So there’re about nine or ten companies who own all this, and then they opened some of the spaces for campers and hunters. But you gotta be careful of the trucks coming up and down the hills.”
“Jensen,” Jared said with a light laugh.

“I’m serious. They get the right-of-way and it ain’t a suggestion. They will run right through you without blinking.”

Jared stopped in the middle of the trail, hands still tucked into his jacket pockets and hair waving with the breeze like a goddamn shampoo commercial.

Just looking at Jared made him want to break apart at the seams as images ran past him. Jared grinning at him during events, planning in closed door meetings, and working late at night under the dimmed light of a hotel room - Jensen couldn’t not think about him, no matter how much he tried to focus on the peace around him.

“Just stop for a minute,” Jared said quietly.

And he did, without question. Stood there among the trees reaching up to the sky and looked at Jared. Heart thumping against his ribs with the anxiety of having to talk. About anything. Everything. Nothing. It didn’t matter; Jensen was completely unravelled with Jared in his presence.

For all that it was Jared’s blunder with the reporters that night, Jensen took on the blame. He knew that his sudden discord with Jared wanting their arrangement to be more, something with a real future, was the first snowflake in the avalanche that followed.

Escaping to New England gave Jensen space and time to work through his feelings. He hadn’t made much progress, but he didn’t have to face it as fully as he did right now.

Then Jared appeared completely out of place, idly shuffling away and back, and glancing at the snow covering the bed of the forest. “This is not what I thought you’d be doing.”

Jensen tilted his head in question and Jared shrugged.

“When I heard you were in Maine, I figured you’d be holed up in a Hyatt or Westin with your mind on the next race.”

“Not a lot of hotels up here,” he pointed out.

“That’s not what I-”

“Maybe a few down in Portland, but up here? Not a lot of campaigning going on for the forest.”

“Jensen,” Jared said forcefully, contradicted by his bright eyes and light smile.

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “Never knew when to shut up, huh?”

“Sometimes you did.”

Jensen was surprised by the crooked smirk on Jared’s lips, along with his next statement.

“I heard about a guy in Chicago who’s campaigning for public education.”

The shiver down his spine could easily be blamed on the cold, but Jensen knew better.

“Sounds like my kind of thing, don’t you think?” Jared asked with a hopeful smile.

Jensen snorted and looked away. “A guy from Texas can’t run for Mayor in Chicago.”
“I’m not trying to run. I want to help.” Jared took a few lazy steps forward, dragging his toe through the snow. “I was thinking, a couple of friends could go in and make a real difference.”

His eyebrows rose. “There’s no such thing as friends in politics,” he joked, deflecting Jared’s proposition.

“We’re not just acquaintances,” Jared pointed out with a knowing look. “Besides, I’m out of work. You’re between jobs. And I heard there’re some good people in Chicago trying to change things.”

He wasn’t wrong; Jensen knew Sterling Brown from a Senate race in Illinois fifteen or so years ago. They’d worked together on the campaign of a young black man who ran with transparency in government and an open health care system as the foundation of his platform. Both were clean politicians who truly wanted to improve the lives of all Americans and looked to unite the parties. All inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s *House Divided* speech.

Jensen bit his lip as he considered that joining an altruistic campaign with genuine people could be the kind of change he needed after the last year. Still, he said, “I already tried helping you into a job. We failed, remember?”

Jared shook his head. “You didn’t fail. I did.”

“And how’s that?”

“I’m the one who said it. Not you.”

“It’s not just about that night,” Jensen insisted. “It was everything else.”

Jared heard none of it and fully owned the demise of his campaign, asserting, “I spoke out and said what I needed to say.”

Jensen cracked a smile as a dozen past conversations filled his mind. “Like you always wanted to do.”

Nodding, Jared projected a clarity of self unlike any politician Jensen had ever met. These last two months obviously meant more to Jared than anything before it. “Like I always wanted to do. It wasn’t about politics. It was about my conviction.”

“And how did it feel?”

“Pretty damn amazing,” Jared replied with a burst of nervous laughter. “What was it like to watch?”

“At the time?” Jensen thought for just a second, then admitted, “Pretty damn amazing.”

Jared grinned. “You were so mad.”

“Because you didn’t listen to me,” Jensen reminded him with a laugh. “That was rule number one.”

“What if you listened to me for once?” he suggested, hope obvious in his soft look.

“I don’t mean to put a damper on things-”

“But,” Jared interrupted with a slight frown.

Jensen wasn’t positive he wanted to hear the answer, but he sure as hell didn’t want to find out some other way. “What about Madeline? And the kids?”
He clenched his jaw then forced a tight smile. “She left, which is fine. Good, actually, which I’m sure you understand.”

Jensen tried not to smile, but he knew Jared was better off, even if he wasn’t facing the aftermath of the campaign.

“And she took the kids, which isn’t as fine, but we’re figuring it out.”

“Is this you just …” Jensen fought the words, finding it troubling to talk real facts about Jared’s life like this. He didn’t want to discredit Jared’s guts to not only find him up here, but also show up. Still, Jensen wasn’t fit for running into a fantasy. “Are you here because you didn’t know what else to do?”

“No,” Jared returned emphatically. He shook his head and repeated, “No, I said what I wanted to say and then … Jensen, everything changed for me.” His brilliant smile returned as he continued, “And I’m ready to move beyond the campaign. To forget all of what’s in the past and who I was campaigning to be. That’s not me anymore. I have to take advantage of this. It’s like I’ve got a new lease on life.”

Jensen couldn’t react, frozen in place with that cold chill creeping into his bones again.

“So, what do you think?” Jared asked.

“I’m sorry about Madeli-”

“About Chicago,” he pushed back. “What do you think?”

He shrugged and admitted, “I think that you could do a lot of amazing things in Chicago.”

“You’re saying I should do it?”

Jensen shook his head, trying like hell not to jump to any fantastic ideas. Then Jared stepped forward again, closing the space between them and Jensen’s voice cracked. “I’m not paid to tell you what to do anymore.”

“Not as an advisor,” Jared suggested. “I’m asking you about Chicago.”

The facade holding Jensen together began to slip and he picked at the flaws in Jared’s idea. “You’d have to talk about gun violence.”

“I always wanted to,” Jared agreed.

“Chicago’s raising the minimum wage.”

“Everyone needs a little help.”

“You’d have to abandon the Republican Party.”

A few more feet forward and Jared smiled. “I really don’t care.”

“Register as a Democrat?”

“Where do I sign?” he teased.

With a quick count to ten and a long release of all the tension rattling him, Jensen finally smiled. Authentically smiled and looked right at Jared. “I think that you know what you want to do. And it’d
be incredible to watch.”

He now stood just inches away, watching carefully as Jensen’s walls crumbled to ash. “And as an advisor, you’d say?”

“I’d say it’s career suicide.”

“I’ve lived through that before.” Jared ducked his head to meet Jensen’s gaze. “Came out a little better on the other side.”

Jensen nodded in agreement because this version of Jared was far more human than the one manufactured for the Republican Party.

“Wanna take the plunge with me?” Jared implored. “You could work with the good guys for once. Get real shit done.”

He felt himself leaning forward, drawn in by the sincerity in Jared’s eyes. “I did work with a good guy.”

“You wanna do it again?”

Jensen blinked and looked all around, taking his time to absorb the calmness of the forest and the warmth of the sun through the trees. He knew better than to jump when he still felt there was more that needed to heal, but there was something pulling him away from what he’d always relied on in dirty politics.

He realized right then that the last year wasn’t just about Jared discovering himself. Jensen had to find himself, too. And when Jared slid his fingers into Jensen’s hand, he knew they had a hell of a lot left to explore. Together.

Finally, Jensen slowly surrendered to his feelings. “I’ll call Sterling. Tell him we’re coming.”

Jared shifted even closer. “I hope not right now.”

“In a little while.” His gaze fell to Jared’s lips, impossibly close yet still so far away. “Maybe tonight,” he mumbled just before Jared brought his hand up to Jensen’s neck and reeled him in for a kiss.

Yeah, maybe tomorrow.

Jensen had a feeling they would have a lot of promising tomorrows in their future.

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