Soul Survivors

by tcs1121

Summary

Summary: "We were ordinary people until we became part of a tragedy. We feel guilty for living when others have died. We come together because unless you've been through what we've been through, you can't understand what it's like to be us. We are the survivors."

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In the dark dreary nights, when the storm is at its most fierce, the lighthouse burns bright so the sailors can find their way home again. In life the same light burns. This light is fueled with love, faith, and hope. And through life’s most fierce storms these three burn their brightest so we also can find our way home again.— Author Unknown

Notes

My Artist: bflyw~~

Link to bflyw's Amazing Art: ~~HERE~~

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My Beta: Kee She never lets me take the easy way out. I don't know what I'd do without her. Thank you so very much, KK.~~

My First Reader: Special thanks go to SPN-J2Fan for her read-through, insights, and overall enthusiasm and kindness. Thank you, my dear. ~~

Special Thanks: To pennydrdful for expert assistance when I needed it~~
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Author's Note 1: Please understand that, right or wrong, people grieve in different ways.

Warnings: This is a story about survivor's guilt. Many people die in different and tragic ways—mostly off screen. Imagined graphic deaths of birds. Suicidal ideation. Religious overtones—no religion bashing. Jensen has a permanent disability.

Disclaimer: Untrue story. Character names are being used without permission. No money changes hands.

Title: Soul Survivors

Prologue

Jensen
Six Years Ago

The bus Jensen took from school to work was quickly loading up. Most of the passengers were
college students—like him—and the others were a mix of young parents with kids, teenagers out of school for the day, and retired seniors. It was after three-thirty in the afternoon, and while Jensen had gone overtime working on his schedule with Reverend Doctor Price, he still caught his regular bus and had plenty of time to make it to the restaurant before his shift started. He supplemented his student loan money as a line cook and salad maker at Davy's Pub & Grille. Even though he could make more money serving tables, his quiet temperament was better suited for chopping vegetables, keeping the steamed rice hot, and artistically plating glazed salmon onto beds of arugula.

The bell dinged, signaling that the bus would be stopping at the next corner. At this stop, more passengers would be crowding on than getting off. Jensen looked at his watch and sighed. He owned a car, but he had forgotten to get the oil changed after the recommended 3000 miles, waiting until the 8500 mile mark when the engine reminded him of his error by seizing up on him. Jensen was going to have to chop a lot of celery and sprinkle mounds of Feta cheese before he could afford to get his Kia back on the road.

He sat in the bench row at the way back of the bus with a good view up the center aisle. After the bus stopped and most of the crowd had piled on, a little girl in a plaid dress skipped up the bus steps. She was followed by her mother who was obviously pregnant and trying to juggle holding her daughter's hand with carrying a cake box from a local bakery. Jensen's stop was still several blocks away, but he stood for them as they headed toward the back. He smiled at the young mother with the bouncing youngster, and indicated his now empty seat.

"Gracias," she said. Carefully placing the cake box on the floor between her feet, she gratefully sat. She held out her arms and hoisted her daughter onto what was left of her lap giving Jensen a weak, but sincere smile.

Jensen tipped his head at the mom and winked at the little girl before heading to the front of the bus.

"Mind the white line, young man." The bus driver never took his eyes off the road but seemed to know exactly how close Jensen's toes were to the white line that separated the bus passengers from the bus driver.

"Shoot, and here I thought I'd be able to get away with stepping over it this time. I keep forgetting about those eyes in the back of your head, bus driver man."

"That's mister bus driver man to you, sonny." The driver snickered. "I got mirrors so I don't need to use my secret hairy eyeballs to spy on you." He quickly glanced at Jensen. "And don't you even think about stepping down the first step before I give you the all clear."

"Now, Jim. You know I would never try to exit the bus before it has come to a complete stop."

"You damn well better not." Jim smiled as he slowed to a gentle stop at the red light. "Also, remember to keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times."

"Absolutely," Jensen stated, solemnly. "I also know to keep my tray table up and in the locked position during take-off and landing."

Jim looked up from the red light and exaggerated a long-suffering sigh in Jensen's direction.

Jensen retaliated by softly singing, "Three cheers for the bus driver, bus driver, bus driver—three cheers for the bus driver, bus driver man."

Jim barked a laugh and let up on the brakes as the red light had changed to green. "You're a real
smarty pants, kid, you know that?"

Jim's voice was drowned out by the screech of tires and the bellow of failing air brakes. Time moved slowly, frame by frame. Jim stared up into his rear view mirror as Jensen turned around to look out the back window. Over the head of the young mother in Jensen's old seat, was the huge grill of a speeding truck. Jensen braced himself as the big rig plowed into the back end of the bus, momentarily lifting it off the ground. He wondered how he could read Sea to Shining Sea Van Lines among the chaos, as metal screeched, windows exploded, and the human wails of shock and pain filled the air. The unstoppable Kenworth tore into the back of the bus, shearing off pieces of the roof while shredding skin from bone, decapitating heads and amputating limbs as it charged up the bus aisle. The monster truck kept on coming, chewing up old women, teen aged boys and cake boxes.

The bus crumpled into itself with the momentum of the heavy semi pushing into it. Sparks flew like an acetylene torch from the aluminum and steel rubble scraping the asphalt. Rubble that used to be a city bus. The truck pushed the wreckage into the intersection and oncoming traffic. Jensen fought to keep hold of the hand grips, but was thrown to his knees by an unexpected sideways jolt. He was vaguely aware of Jim fighting with the steering wheel when the bus suddenly flipped onto its side, throwing Jensen into the stairwell—right before the Sea to Shining Sea moving van jack-knifed on top of it, crushing the bus with the weight of its cargo.

And then, it all stopped.

Jensen slowly became aware of the hissing silence, the stench of gasoline and battery acid, and the sudden, heart-stopping pain when he breathed in. Jensen was pinned on the bus steps deep down in the stairwell. With the bus on its side, the door lay against the pavement. He tried to breathe, but smoke and dust filled his lungs. He blinked hard trying to see, and was sorry when he did because his left leg was pointing the wrong way. Fortunately, a red glaze covered his eyes and darkness surrounded the edges. The blare of the bus horn echoed in his ears before the world he had once known ended in a black and suffocating haze.

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Jared
10 months ago

"...because I want to surprise them, that's why." Jared snuck a peek at his watch; it was ten-fifteen AM. "Christ, Chad, you're the epitome of spontaneity. I'd think you of all people would understand." Jared listened a moment, then switched hands to put his phone up to his other ear. "Yes, I said epitome, and yes I said spontaneity. Hold on."

He hiked his drooping duffle bag high up onto his shoulder. "I gotta go, I want to catch this flight on standby. I'm at the gate now." He rolled his eyes. "Will do, Ma Murray, I'll call you when I land."

Jared tucked the phone into his pocket and walked up to Oceanic Airways gate 12B. Brandishing his ticket, he said to the gate agent, "Excuse me ma'am, I'm booked on a late afternoon flight to San Antonio, but I was hoping there was a seat available on this one."

"Oh, me too!" An identical ticket with a different seat number was slapped down next to Jared's on the high desk.

"Well, looks like you two have the same idea," the friendly agent said, turning to her computer terminal. "I'll see what I can do."
"Jared turned to his right. A pretty blonde girl with short, spiked hair and a blue unicorn tattooed on her left shoulder flashed Jared a brilliant smile. "Hi, I'm Robbie. Robbie Summer. Looks like we both want to fly early today."

"Looks like we do." Jared's smile matched hers. "I'm Jared Padalecki."

"Hi, Jared." Robbie held out her right hand where she had a pink and white Hello Kitty tattooed on the inside of her wrist. "Are you going home or just visiting?"

"Both," Jared said, shaking her hand. "I go to school out here, but my legal residence is still my parents' house. I graduate in a couple of semesters, though, and then I'll emancipate myself from my loving family and find my own place. What about you?"

"Going home. I tried living away from my family and friends, but I miss everybody too much. I guess I'm not ready to leave the fold." She smiled and said, "I'm going home."

"Good for you."

"Except there's a problem." The gate agent was scrutinizing the computer monitor. She clicked a few more times and shook her head. "I'm sorry, kids, but there's only one seat left on this flight."

"Oh, no," Robbie moaned.

"Guess you two are going to have to duke it out, unless..."

"Unless what?" Jared asked.

"Are either of you frequent flyers? This airline gives preference to frequent flyer passengers." The agent looked knowingly at Jared.

Robbie sighed. "No, I'm only a regular flyer." She looked up hopefully at Jared. "What about you? Tell me you're a regular flyer too so we can duke it out."

Jared had just started earning frequent flyer points, but didn't have enough to cover this flight. However, he could use them as an advantage over the bubbly blonde competition. He was just about to play his winning card and get in line to board the flight when Robbie honest-to-god batted her eyelashes at him and licked her lips.

"Please say you'll fight me for the seat, and then let me win," she purred.

Jared sighed, relenting to the force that was Robbie Summer.

Going in for the kill she said, "I'll buy you lunch on the River Walk. I'll give you my cell number." She reached into her hip bag for some scrap paper and scribbled on it. "And as a back-up, so you know I'm totally serious about feeding you," she scribbled some more, "here's my home phone." She looked up and blushed. "Sometimes, well, lots of times, I forget to use the charger."

"I don't know," Jared said deliberately slow. "The afternoon flight's not until four forty-five."

Robbie held out a crumpled napkin with the phone numbers printed in bright purple ink and waved it. "I'll buy you a fantastic lunch." It looked as though she was actually holding her breath.

"Okay, okay," Jared laughed. "How can I refuse? The ticket's yours."

Robbie sighed in relief. "Thank you so much, Jared. I really want to go home. Plus," she crinkled her nose like a little kid, "I hate waiting around in airports."
"I don't mind airports." Jared smiled.

Robbie smiled back and nodded to the agent who began preparing her boarding pass. "Use my phone number. I want to thank you." She handed it to Jared. "I mean it, I know a couple of great places. I'll let you pick where you want to eat."

He folded the napkin carefully and placed it in his wallet. "I'm warning you, I will hold you to that," he said.

"I'm counting on it." Robbie pulled out her pink phone and hit the speed dial. "Hey mom, guess what?" she winked at Jared. "I just charmed Jared into giving me his seat. I'm coming home early. You're buying me ice cream." She held the phone up, "Say hi to mom, Jared."

"Hi mom," Jared said, dutifully.

"Here you go, Miss Summer."

Robbie took her boarding pass from the agent, and ran over to stand in the boarding line, still chatting with her mother.

"That was nice of you." The airline agent smiled down at Jared. "I saw that you had a few Oceanic points you could have used."

"Aw, so what? Look at her. What's a few more hours to wait?"

Robbie was bouncing in line as boarding was announced. Right before entering the jetway, she turned and blew them both a kiss.

"You're a good guy," the agent said. "I wish I could offer you an upgrade or something."

"Don't worry about it." Jared looked around. "But I could use some caffeine, is there a Starbucks around here?"

Oceanic Flight 818 to San Antonio was aloft for two minutes and seven seconds when the jet unexpectedly encountered a flock of geese. The powerful engines ingested too many birds all at once for a safe shut down. The jet crashed to Earth exploding into a fireball that was felt for miles. All one hundred sixty-two souls aboard were lost.

~~~~Present Day~~~~

Jensen placed a sign on the door to the room they were using in the church hall.

Soul Survivors Support Group meeting—7:00-8:30 PM
"Thanks for coming in early, folks," Jensen said to the three other people milling about the room. "I got a message that we might have a visitor tonight and wanted to know how you'd like this meeting to go."

Andrew grabbed his jacket off the back of a chair. "Not interested."

"Not a visitor from the outside, Drew, a potential new member. He wants to see what we're like."

"I hate being on display."

"It's not for entertainment. Think back to when you were deciding whether anyone could understand what you went through."

"Who referred him?" Liz asked. "A doctor or a civilian?"

Jensen was aware that the group knew some of his referrals came from medical professionals, but some came through word of mouth. Either way, Jensen wasn't telling.

"I got a call from a source, and then a follow-up email from the potential member. He must be hurting if he needs a group like ours," Jensen reminded them.

"Must be hurting," Drew agreed. He draped his jacket back over the chair and sat.

Liz nodded and went back to filling the coffee pot and setting it up to brew.

Brett huffed but removed his pea coat and sat. "Mindy coming tonight?"

"Probably," Jensen chuckled. "She's supposed to. All I know is that I'm here, you're here, and Mindy's usually late. We can get started. The new person might not even show up, but if he does, Drew, would you mind doing some of the talking?"

"No, I don't mind."

"Good. Thanks."

Jensen slid the rolling computer chair to the middle of the room, unlocked his brace and gently sat, taking his hand out of the cuff of the forearm crutch.

In a fit of whimsy one night, Jensen's brother spiraled a rainbow sticker around the crutch making it look like an out and proud barber pole. Jensen came to like the statement. Besides, he had the other crutch at home, unspiraled, if he needed to look dignified.

"How 'bout pouring me a little coffee while you're at it, Liz?" He leaned down and placed the crutch on the floor next to his chair.

"Will do."

The other members pulled their metal chairs into a small semi-circle, with Jensen in the middle.

"Who has the topic tonight?" Jensen asked.

"I do!" A short, sturdy woman with dark blonde hair and a touch of gray at the temples, rushed into the room. She was in her early forties and clutching a brightly colored, oversized quilted purse. "Sorry, am I late?" She looked at her watch.

"Hi Mindy," Brett said, softly. "Naw, you're not late, we all got here a little early. Jensen said that
somebody new might be showing up tonight."

"Oh." She immediately went from happily rushed to sad. "That's too bad. It's got to be rough. Man or woman, do you know?"

"Male," Jensen answered. "Anyhow, get a cup of something and pull up a chair."

"I brought cookies." She turned to Brett, who set her chair next to his. "You like the peanut butter ones, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I do. Thanks."

Liz asked Jensen, "Do you know anything about the new guy?"

"No, and I haven't spoken to him. He sent me an email asking permission to sit in, and mentioned that he'd attended the state university so I figured he was young-ish. Maybe I'm assuming too much, but I felt like he was young. I do know he's a guy since he signed it "Jared P."

"We should probably go with a kind of structured meeting, don't you think?" Liz asked. "I mean, I don't want him to be put off by, you know, us."

"We're all cool," Brett said lightly. "Nothin' to be put off by, darlin'. We are what we are."

"I like that," Jensen said. "We are what we are. I also like the idea of at least trying to look like we're organized." He waited for Mindy to get situated. "Okay, we're all set. Mindy, go ahead with your topic."

Every member, Jensen included, took on a topic for discussion. This was purely a discussion group. No professionals were directly involved and Jensen had no professional training whatsoever. Sometimes, the meetings didn't even get around to the topic if someone had something they wanted to talk about.

However, a topic made it easier to get the meeting going. It could be anything—grief related or not. It could be a painful matter, or about the lunch they had that day. This group was formed to help ease the terrible isolation their guilt caused. Because, sometimes, just being around others who knew what it was like made the days bearable.

Mindy stood. "Okay, my topic for tonight is this poem that always makes me angry. I know it's supposed to be comforting but it ticks me off every time I see it on Facebook. The name of the poem is: Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep. According to Wikipedia, it was written by Mary Elizabeth Frye in 1932."

"Oh, I know this one," Liz said.

"I know. Everybody knows this one." Mindy unfolded a piece of paper. "Okay, I'm going to read it, so here goes:

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning’s hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die."

She tapped her foot then took in a breath through her nose.

"This whole poem burns me. It's so soft and lyrical and so full of bullshit it makes my ass itch. When you're dead you're not a bird in…" Mindy looked at the paper. "…uh, quiet birds in circled flight. And people should not be told not to cry. Dead is dead and sad is sad and I don't find any consolation in denying it."

Mindy's voice wobbled toward the end, but she took in another deep breath and held her head high.

"I've always liked that poem," Liz said. "It makes me feel like it's not all over when you die, that something else begins when this life ends. It gives me comfort to think that Lindy is a diamond glinting on the snow. I mean, I like to think that she's still around even if I can't recognize her."

"Then let's talk about how we do find comfort. This poem didn't work for Mindy as it obviously hit her buttons very hard," Jensen said.

"Yeah," Drew said. "It made her ass itch."

Mindy blinked her wet eyes and snorted.

There was a soft rustling at the door, but Jensen continued speaking.

"I like to think that we are living, not only our lives, but for the lives of the lost as well, so we have to be mindful to live well and with care. For them and for us."

"And that's comforting, how?" Drew asked. His tone was softer than his words.

"I find it a comfort to live well. Do the best I can with my life, as a way to honor theirs."

"Even though you didn't know any of them?" Brett's eyes were kind.

"Maybe because I didn't know any of them." Jensen turned to the young man standing in the doorway, noticing that he looked both frozen to the spot and ready to flee. "Welcome to Soul Survivors Support Group." In one fluid move, Jensen picked up his crutch and pushed up to stand, keeping the weight on his right leg. "You're Jared P., right?"

The four other group members stood and Brett approached Jared carefully. Jared took a quick step backwards. "Don't go runnin' away," Brett said. "'Cause it looks like this is where you need to be right now."

He held out his hand. "I'm Brett." Slowly, Jared's hand came up and Brett shook it warmly. "Good to meet you, Jared P."

"Hi, Jared. I'm Liz Harrigan." She came and stood beside Brett.

"I'm Mindy." Mindy waved from her seat.

"Drew," he said, unfolding a chair and setting it to his right.

"And I'm Jensen." Jensen sat down, adjusting his leg comfortably. "Hey, Mindy. Do you mind if we continue your topic another night?"
"I don't know, because now that you know what I think, everyone will have time to gather ammunition against me."

Brett sat and leaned toward Mindy. "Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll all act surprised that you hate *Do Not Stand at My Grave.*"

"Then okay," she agreed. "Another night, then."

Jared silently took his seat next to Drew. He brought his thumbnail to his mouth and began chewing on it.

Jensen looked meaningfully at his group. "Jared, we know something terrible happened that made you seek us out, and I'm glad you came. We're all glad you came. We're here because something terrible happened to us, too."

"I don't think I want to talk about it, if that's okay." Jared stared at the floor, mumbling around this thumb.

"Any way you want to deal is okay. Just so you know, none of us are professional counselors, none of us are getting paid, and no one ever tells anyone about anything that's said here. In fact, that's the only rule. What goes on here stays here, and as long as you agree to that, and are respectful of the others, you can stay and participate—or not—as you choose." Jensen shifted his weight and straightened his leg to get as comfortable as he could. His back and knee were stiff tonight.

"I can do that."

Jensen looked at Drew. Drew gave a slight nod and turned to Jared. "Would it help if I told you why I'm here?"

Jensen watched a brief moment of panic flit across Jared's face.

Jensen said, softly, "Only Drew's story, okay, Jared? If you want to hear it. Then you can decide what you want to do. We won't say a word either way."

Jared took in a deep, shaky breath. "Yes, okay."

Jensen was the leader of this group and invited discussion from the group, but sometimes he asked a member to tell their story again which was why he'd asked Drew to be ready.

Mindys's hand brushed up against Brett's knee and Brett moved closer to her as Drew began speaking.

"Two years ago," he looked at the ceiling. "Closer to three years, now, I was in graduate school and working part time at Uncle Jack's Chicken Shack out on Highway 15." He jerked his head towards Jensen. "My God, Jensen, it's been almost three years. *Three years.*"

"Does that seem like a long time ago?" Jensen asked. "Or does is seem like yesterday?"

Drew bit his lower lip. "It was—it was a whole other life ago."

After a few silent beats, Drew continued, "Anyway, we were a close knit staff at the Chicken Shack. We each learned all the jobs at all the stations so we could rotate duties because, come on, working at a fast food restaurant out on Highway 15 wasn't the most stimulating job in the world. Rotating kept it as fun as possible. We were a fun group."
Drew grinned sadly. "All the food that came in was prepackaged and practically heat and eat. That afternoon, we had a big shipment of chicken wings and spare ribs come in. I was on inventory duty in the back, stamping the delivery dates and storing the food. It was a Wednesday afternoon."

Drew's eyes took on a faraway look. "A fucking Wednesday afternoon."

He looked up. Jensen sent him a small, encouraging smile.

"There…there were," Drew swallowed before continuing, "I found out later that there were three of them. They came up to order and after ordering, after ordering, one of them told Helena to empty the registers. Another one held open a fucking pillow case. Fucking idiots."

Drew stood and paced. "Do you know what another job at the Shack was? Every hour, take the receipts and lock them in the office, leaving just enough change in the drawer in case somebody used cash. So, no cash up front. When Helena opened the two cash registers and all they saw was a handful of bills, they opened fire. Not only on the restaurant staff, but on the handful of stragglers eating a late lunch. I heard the shots, I heard the shouts and screams and you know what I did?" He looked directly at Jared. "I hit the floor and hid behind boxes of potato skins and corn on the cob."

Jensen, Liz, Mindy and Brett kept their eyes on Drew, giving him their strong, silent support. Jared, however, hid his head in his hands.

"Four dead. Five wounded. One unscathed—me," Drew said. "And because I was so well-hidden, I never saw them. I only saw the footage after, so I couldn't even testify against them."

After a few brisk steps, Drew sat.

The room was quiet which was why Jensen heard it when Jared whispered, "Six."

Drew looked puzzled. "Six what?"

"No one was left unscathed. There were four dead, and six wounded." Jared's eyes were red. They suddenly opened wide in dismay. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry." Jared shot to his feet, apparently ready to run. "I should go."

Drew stopped him. "Don't go. Not because of what you said. Go if you want to, but not because of that."

"Jared, that's why we're here." Jensen tried to catch Jared's eye. "Not only to tell our stories, but to hear what happened to others as well. To know we're not alone. We don't know why you're here or what happened to you, but what you heard Drew tell us, that's why he's here, and we're here for him. Like we're here for you."

Drew spoke gently, "We talk, we listen, we remember and we live with what happened as best we can. Nothing is going to change the past, but having people around who understand, who truly understand, well, I found that it helps."

"That's the best I hope for," Liz said, quietly. "Not for the pain to go away, but for someone to know what that pain feels like."

"It hurts, but it helps," Drew agreed.

"Whatever happened, whether you ever want to tell us or not, we're here, and we've been there," Brett said. "We really have."

"The topics we discuss are just an excuse for us to get together." Liz looked pointedly at Jensen.
"You didn't think we didn't know that, did you?"

"I don't know," Jensen said, with a small smile. "I liked the discussion we had with your last topic about birthdays and anniversaries."

She caught her breath. "Because of the birthday cake?"

"Yeah, if it even was a birthday cake, and other things like the marking of time," Jensen shifted forward and stood. He hiked his hip forward to lock the knee. Now he could stand without the crutch. "I think talking helps. Being together helps. Sometimes I think it's the only thing that does. Drew nailed it: it hurts but it helps."

"It doesn't fix it," Mindy added. "But, it's not supposed to."

"You want to hear something fucked up?" Drew asked. "I don't think I want the pain to go away. Not entirely. If it does, it means I'm off the hook."

"You can't atone forever because you survived," Jensen said. "You can't keep hating yourself because you're here."

"That's easy for you to say," Drew said, gently. "You atone for the sin of your survival every day."

He handed Jensen his crutch.

Jensen choked back a reply when he saw that every eye of the little group was zeroed in on him, his locked knee and his forearm crutch.

He sighed, unlocked the brace again and slowly sat. "Maybe."

"And maybe that's enough for tonight, hey?" Brett asked. "Before Jared runs away screaming, never to return."

The mood lightened a little after that. Jensen was used to the topics becoming so heavy that the air had to forcibly be pushed into and out of his lungs. But Brett was right. Jared was new at this and Jensen wasn't sure Jared knew how to handle it.

Jensen glanced at Jared whose eyes were glued to Jensen.

"I don't—I'm not sure about this," Jared stuttered.

"It's okay, Jared." Jensen said. "It's up to you."

"I hope you do come back," Mindy reached over to touch his arm. "I still have all my deep thoughts to express."

"Actually, I come for the cookies." Brett bumped her shoulder playfully. "As well as the company."

Mindy smiled and blushed.

"Okay," Jensen said. "We'll call it a night. Jared, would you mind staying for a couple of minutes?"

"Yeah, you can help Jensen clean up," Liz said. "Hey, has anybody heard from Lorraine?"

"Oh, I have." Mindy reached for her sweater. "She'll be back from the Middle East in a couple of months."
Brett handed Mindy her bag saying, "She does lot of flying. Gotta hand it to her."

Jared blanched and looked away.

Drew said to Jared, "See you in two weeks?"

"Maybe. Probably."

After the others said their good-byes, Jensen said to Jared, "Thanks for staying, I won't keep you long, I promise."

"I don't have anywhere I need to be so it's all right."

"If you could push the chairs in and roll mine over to the desk there, I'll rinse out the coffee pot." He left his crutch on the floor and slowly lumbered over to the sink carrying his coffee cup.

"I know that first meetings are sometimes overwhelming. Liz left after the first two minutes and didn't come back for a month. You did well tonight."

"I didn't do anything."

"You came and you stayed. That took guts."

"I don't know how much longer I would have stayed if you hadn't cut it short." Jared looked up. "I hope I didn't ruin it for them."

"Of course you didn't." Jensen said, as he rinsed out the coffee cup and pot. "You know, Jared, I meant it when I said that you never have to say a word if you don't want to. Nobody will push or pry, and you won't have to lead a topic if you don't want."

Jared asked, "How did you know I'd be here tonight?"

"I didn't. Not really."

"But you knew I might. I didn't specify in my email when I wanted to come."

"Yes, I knew someone could show up tonight because there are a couple of psychologists and psychiatrists that refer this group specifically to their patients. When they do, they give me a heads-up."

Jared spun around, eyes wild.

"Don't worry, I don't know a thing about you—not even your last name—only that Dr. Morgan hoped you would come." Jensen put his hands up in a calming gesture. "Whatever you want us to know, you'll tell us. I promise I won't dig for it."

Jared remained silent, but his breathing slowed.

"In the meantime," Jensen continued. "I'd like your phone number in case I need to cancel and I'm giving you my number in case you need to talk. Feel free not to use it." Jensen held out his phone.

Jared hesitated while Jensen waited calmly.

Jared sighed and traded phones with Jensen.

"Does it get better?" Jared asked, softly.
"Not all better, never all better, but better." Jensen took his phone back. "See you in two weeks?"

"Yes, okay. Do you, uh, do you need a ride home or anything?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you, though."

Jared eyed Jensen's braced leg and colorful crutch. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes, but even this is better." Jensen shifted his weight to his left leg. "Not all better," he forced a smile. "But better."

"Thanks, Jensen. Goodnight."

"Good night, Jared."

Jared didn't know how he felt about the meeting. On the one hand, Brett's suggestion of running away screaming and never coming back sounded great. On the other hand, Jared thought that maybe these people did understand, and could possibly suggest how he could get through the rest of his life. He particularly liked Jensen's honest response that things get better, but not all better. He didn't know if it would be worse to feel like this the rest of his life or to feel nothing.

His phone buzzed, as it was still on vibrate, and he half expected to see Jensen's number on the caller ID. It was not.

"Hey, dude, you home yet?"

"Yes, Chad, I'm home."

"How'd it go? You good?"

"I can't talk about it."

"You can talk to me."

"No, I really can't. One of the rules is that we don't talk about things outside of the group."

"Sounds like an AA meeting." Chad crunched something. "Or Narcoleptics Anonymous or something."

"I don't know what an AA meeting is like, and I don't know what Narcoleptics Anonymous is at all, but tonight didn't seem like a twelve step program to a grief-free life." Jared wiped his eyes that seemed perpetually wet for the past ten months.

"I know, man, I'm sorry," Chad said. "I am sorry."
"Stop saying that. Just stop it."

"Jare, you're so sad all the time."

"Don't feel sorry for me. Don't you dare. I'm here and she's not. Feel sorry for her. For her family. For the future she'll never have." Jared knew his reaction was irrational and wrong, but he couldn't stop himself. And that was one of the problems.

"Yes, I do feel sorry for her, but I didn't know her, I know you. You're my friend and I'm sorry you're hurting and you can try to push me away, try to make me forget about you, try to get me to stop caring but it's a no go, man. So, suck it up and realize that I'm your friend and I care. Did you eat today?"

"Chad, man, stop."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to another meeting?"

"In two weeks."

"I'll be around, want me to take you? Want me to come with you?"

"No and no." Jared sighed.

"Want me to come over now?"

"No, I'm okay, Chad, I'm okay." Jared breathed in and out. His mind flashed on Brett and Drew, Mindy and Liz and on Jensen and how awful it was that these seemingly nice people had bad things happen to them.

"Jared?"

"You know, I think maybe…"

"Think what? Maybe what?"

"I know it's only one meeting, but I think this group is a good idea."

"Something has to help, man. You can't keep dying every day, every day, every day."

"Shut up, Chad," Jared croaked. "Please."

"I'll stop." Chad swallowed something. "But only for now. It's because I love, that you hate."

"I don't hate. I'm—I don't hate."

"But you're miserable." Chad softened his voice. "I know your life isn't the same, you're not the same, but I'll still rag on your ass and drag you around with me even though you cramp my style."

"Gotta go, Chad."

"No you don't, but it's okay. Hey, Jare?"

"What?"
"I do know that things are different now, but I'm not. I will, you know, always be the same."

Jared blinked back sudden tears. "I know, Chad. Thanks."

"You know it. Smell you later." And the phone clicked off.

Jensen exited the cab and entered Benny's Tavern. Jensen could drive, but he'd rather drink. Friday night and everyone was out, glad that the weather was warming up.

"Over here, Jensen." A handsome, dark-haired man with a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard stood up by a table in the back.

Jensen raised his hand in greeting as he single-crutched his way through the bar.

Setting it aside, Jensen took off his lightweight jacket and draped it over the chair before going through the process of sitting.

"Hey, JD," Jensen greeted. "You getting me one of those?" He pointed to the nearly empty glass of pale ale sweating in Jeff Morgan's hand.

"Thought you were a Guinness man, Ackles."

"I'm both, especially if you're buying."

A waitress appeared and set a plate of onion rings on the table. "What can I get you?"

"I'll have a black and tan, please." Jensen happily dipped an onion ring into the Ranch dressing.

Jeff emptied his glass and raised it to the waitress. "A black and tan for my friend, and another one of these for me."

She was back shortly and they both clinked glasses and sipped. Jensen wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "How's it going, Jeff? I'm glad you asked me out tonight, I need a little unwind time."

"Hard day?"

"No harder than usual."

"My door is always open, and you know my office takes your insurance."

Jensen laughed. "Don't I know it." He plucked another onion ring off the plate and popped it in his mouth.

"How's the group?" JD asked.
"Good. Getting new members all the time." Jensen raised his glass and took a long swallow.

Jeff looked visibly relieved and Jensen knew why, even though they couldn't discuss it directly.

"How's the shrink business?" Jensen asked.

"Psychology is a valuable and worthy occupation even if it takes an act of God to get some insurance companies to part with a buck."

"Good thing you've got a rich wife, then." Jensen licked his fingers and grinned.

"Very true. The Lexus doesn't pay for its own oil changes, you know."

"I know," Jensen replied, thoughtfully. "Hey, maybe someone should tell that to the insurance companies. Doctor Morgan needs the allowables raised in order to service his luxury vehicle."

"Good idea," Morgan laughed. "The insurance guys with their Acuras and BMWs might actually take pity on me."

The two friends ate greasy dinners, drank a little too much—but only a little—and talked about ball clubs, vacation plans and European politics. After a while, Jensen looked at his watch and reached for his wallet. "I'm not as young as I used to be. Better be getting home and into a hot shower." As he stretched both arms high, his phone vibrated in his front pocket, signaling that a text had come in. Jared's name was on the caller ID.

*I may not say much. I may never know how, but thank you. I've been thinking a lot about the group and I will be there next time.*

"Everything okay, Jensen?" Jeff asked.

Jensen held up his index finger in the universal "wait a minute".

You're welcome. Any time, Jared. See you then. Jensen texted back.

"Everything's fine, JD. Hey, let's plan on watching some major sporting event at your house with your surround sound, hot popcorn, cold beer, and your wife's famous spinach and crab dip." He stood and readied himself to walk.

Jeff threw some bills beside the ones Jensen left and pulled out his keys.

"You're on. You're also in luck, my paycheck came in and the aforementioned Lexus is all gassed up. I'll drive you home, you're on the way."

"You're full of shit. I'm nowhere near on the way," Jensen smirked. "But I'll take the ride."

Jeff's gray Lexus sat faithfully at the curb a block away. Gassed up and ready, Jeff drove Jensen home.

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"Okay, everybody, this is the first Monday of the month, and I'd like to make us official."

Jensen sat in his usual rolling office chair in the center of the semi-circle. He was pleased that Jared arrived a little before seven.

"I'm glad you're here tonight, Jared. We meet every other Monday and last month had three
Mondays. You hit us on the third. Every first Monday of the month meeting we reaffirm why we're here and the reason for our group."

"Like a mission statement," Mindy supplied.

"Yes, sort of." Jensen smiled at her. "So, I'm calling to order the First Monday Meeting of the Soul Survivors Support Group. We were ordinary people until we became part of a tragedy. We feel guilty for living when others have died. We come together because unless you've been through what we've been through, you can't understand what it's like to be us. We are the survivors."

Jensen looked around. "Does anyone have anything to add?"

"I come here because I'm tired of people telling me to cheer up and feel grateful that it wasn't me," Mindy said.

"I come here because y'all don't tell me to cheer up and be happy." Brett blinked twice. "I guess that's kinda the same thing."

"No one has the smallest hint of what my life feels like. No one but you," Liz said, somberly. "No one but us."

"I'm alone out there." Drew took a breath. "In here, I'm not so alone."

"Yes," Jensen said. "In here, we can be alone together, and it helps. It helps me."

He gently asked Jared, "Do you want to tell us why you're here?"

Jared took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm lost and I'm sad all the time. I used to be so happy. The survivor's guilt hits me so hard sometimes I can't breathe." Jared looked at Mindy. "You're right, people keep telling me to cheer up and get over it." He looked at Drew, "And when I'm not feeling unhappy, I feel alone." Jared ran his hand through his hair. "Those are the only two things I feel and nobody cares anymore."

"Anymore?" Jensen asked.

"When it first happened, everyone said, Thank God it wasn't you and, I'm so glad you're here. Everyone telling me how lucky I was, how close I came, how much I meant to them. They cared until they realized that I was broken by the...the...it, and now they don't know what to do with me. I don't know what to do with me."

"It could be that they don't know how to talk to you—what to say to you. I'm sure they still care," Liz said. "Maybe you could tell them?"

"You're not broken," Brett said. "None of us are broken," he looked directly at Jensen. "We were beaten down by what happened and may never be the same, but we are here and we're fightin' and we're tryin'."

Brett made a small turn in his chair and said, "I haven't told my story for a while, if it's okay with the rest of you, I'd like to."

Jensen looked all around. "To be clear," he said, kindly, "we all grieve in our own ways and are not here to judge or be judged on how we make it through the day." Jensen addressed Jared. "If you don't want to listen to Brett's story, you don't have to. Feel free to get some coffee or take a short walk."
"I want to hear it." Jared's voice shook.

"Okay," Jensen said. "Go ahead, Brett."

Brett took a moment before starting. "I'm ex-military. When I served in the Army, I was deployed to Fallujah. Charlie Company, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, yes sir, best group of guys there was." Pride shone in Brett's eyes as he chuckled to himself. "We fought hard, and we played hard and none of us could carry a tune to save our lives. Karaoke nights were a living hell. My Company ended up serving side by side with the troops from the 101st Airborne."

"Y'all don't need to know all this 'cept, when my last deployment was over, I opted not to reenlist but stayed on in Iraq and accepted a job as a civilian, working for a private military contractor. Early on, it was plenty dangerous for the civilian contractors in Fallujah and the surrounding areas. Lots of 'em got ambushed, killed, kidnapped or worse. So the military took to escorting the contractors in convoys. Things got much, much safer after that. That's the reason I was on a truck in the desert that day. I knew that our escort, troops from 101st Airborne, those were the guys I fought next to. guys I knew, would keep us safe."

Brett's knee started bouncing. "You all know what an IED is, yeah? An improvised explosive device is a fancy word for booby trap. A mean fucker of a homemade bomb made with military ordnance or packed with rocks or nails or ball bearings or anything that could tear you up. They were vicious motherfuckers. The road we were on was lousy with them. Our truck's right front tire hit one of 'em. The tire was blown out, the radiator gutted and the windshield got shattered. After the smoke cleared and we realized that the truck was disabled, a small band of terrorists lined up on the horizon. With the sun glaring in our eyes, they fired down at us blowing the whole military escort unit away. Terrorists didn't know the 8th Cavalry was on our six. Them boys came to our rescue and took 'em all down."

"Not one of us contractors was lost. But all the boys from the 101st and one boy from the 8th didn't make it home. Those boys died to save my sorry ass so I could complete a fucking business deal. And those troops from the 101st? I fought alongside them the first time. I hid behind them the second time. They died. Every last one of 'em."

"I tried seeing a military shrink for the guilt, but that didn't work. I tried going to a group specializing in PTSD, but it's not post-traumatic stress, it's survivor's guilt. The docs say it's the same thing, but it ain't. Not to me, 'cause when I tell them I feel like I should be dead, not one of them groups or one of them doctors agreed with me."

"They told me it wasn't my fault, it was the troops' job to protect and to serve, it was this, it was that, and aren't you fucking lucky you didn't get killed and that they didn't die for nothing? Yeah? Well, tell their families that every Thanksgiving."

Brett stilled. "You guys never tell me ain't it grand they died so heroically. You never tell me that those soldiers knew what they were signing up for. You never tell me I shouldn't feel like I should be dead 'cause everybody in this room feels that way. That's why I'm here every other Monday."

Mindy put her hand on Brett's knee and patted him gently.

Jensen cleared his throat. "Does anyone have anything they want to say?" He looked at Jared.

"I don't belong here." Jared stood, looking at the door. "I have no right to be here."

"What? Jared?" Jensen lurched to his feet, only to drop back down in the process. "Please stay, it's okay."
"You," Jared pointed to Brett. "You were fired upon by terrorists. And you," he pointed to Drew, "your place was being held up at gunpoint. I don't belong here." He grabbed his hoodie.

Jensen tried again to stumble after him but fell back hard into his chair because he couldn't lock the brace in time. "Jared, wait."

Mindy rushed over and stood blocking the exit. "Stop, just wait."

"Please," Jared's eyes were wet. "I've got to go."

Mindy said in a rush, "I smoked all my life, gave myself lung cancer, even though I knew the risks. I beat the odds but all the cancer victims in my cancer support group died."

Jared was panting wetly. "What? Oh, no, Mindy."

"Yes, I had a cancer I could have prevented while my support group-mates died of breast cancer, pancreatic cancer and liver cancer. I am the sole survivor of my group. The lung cancer was my doing. I was guilty because I made the stupid choice to smoke and yet, somehow, I lived. They were innocent and, through no fault of their own, those good people died."

Jared's shaky hand landed on the door frame.

"Mindy, I don't know what to say." Jared looked like he did the first time he arrived. Feet bolted to the floor, yet ready to take off.

Mindy turned to Liz and cocked her head.

Liz walked up to Jared. "I don't know what happened in your case, Jared. But in all the cases in this room," she looked from face to face. "In all the cases, lots of people died...except mine. In my case, only one girl died. No guns, no lingering illness, just one stupid night of trying something "everybody did" and one accidental overdose. She was my identical twin sister, Lindy. And I am so alone, so torn from the one person that was my true other half, that I can barely stand to wake up in the morning. But I come here because whether it's one person, a support group, a platoon, or your co-workers, no one's grief holds more weight than another's. That's why we're here. Not to compare who has lost more, or who has more reasons to feel guilty at being left behind. Our grief is our own. I work every day trying not to join my sister. And it helps coming here. It doesn't make the pain go away, but it helps to know that we, here in this room, all know. Please, Jared. Give us a chance."

The room was silent with only the muted street noises wafting into the room.

"I killed a girl," Jared whispered. He appeared mesmerized by the speckled linoleum tiles.

Jensen and his group knew to wait for the rest, because didn't they all feel like they'd killed someone?

"There was one seat left and it was mine. The ticket agent knew that seat belonged to me. But Robbie was cute and sweet and sparkly and wanted to go home so badly. She flirted with me even though…" Jared's eyes drifted to Jensen's rainbow crutch and then back to the floor. "She was going to buy me lunch on the River Walk."

"What happened?" Jensen hoped his question, and his current immobility, would draw Jared back into the room.

Jared finally looked up. "Flight 818 collided with a flock of geese. When the pilot lost control and
the jet fell out of the sky, they estimated it was traveling at least 180 miles per hour. Nobody survived." Jared pulled away from the door and rejoined the circle.

"Less than a half an hour after I met her, Robbie Summer had seat-belted herself into my place on that plane and died in a fiery crash along with one hundred and sixty one other people, and I can't help but think that it should have been me."

Almost imperceptibly, each group member huddled closer to one another.

"None of us are going to tell you that you shouldn't feel that way." Jensen said.

"Good." Jared's voice was calm, as he sat and leaned back into the metal fold up chair.

"What I might tell you, though," Drew said. "Is that I don't blame you for Robbie's death even if you blame you."

Jared shook his head. No.

"I want a show of hands," Jensen said. "How many of us feel that what we did, or what we didn't do, ended up causing someone's death."

Drew's hand went up first, and then one by one all hands in the circle were raised until Jensen was the only one with his hands still in his lap. Slowly, he raised them both high and said, "And no one here better tell me otherwise."

He dropped his hands and leaned forward, "But, while I feel my sins every day, and I know they are mine, I also know, deep down on a primal level, that I was not to blame." Jensen kept his voice steady. "The brakes failed. I didn't do that."

He shook his head to clear it. "We all know that the things that happened, happened around us, not because of us. We just, I don't know, got out of the way in time."

Brett muttered, "But our intellectual brains and our emotional hearts don't agree. I can't believe they ever will."

"Maybe they won't," Liz said, "but it helps to know it. Sometimes," she wiped her eyes, "I even let myself believe it. But, God, I wish I'd been there. I was invited to that party. I believe, in my heart, that if I'd been there, Lindy would be alive today."

"Twins are still two people, darlin'," Brett interrupted, gently. "Two separate minded people. Unless you're physically joined together, and I ain't being sarcastic, then one is going to be apart from the other. That's the normal way to be."

Liz dropped her head and wiped her eyes again.

"And if I never smoked, never got cancer, those same people still would have. I know that. I know Jensen said it happened around me, but it happened around me, and now I'm the only one left. I feel responsible for them." Mindy looked up apologetically at Jared. "We're a mess."

"No, we're not," Brett said, quickly. "We're not. It's just so damn hard."

"When I let myself off the hook," Drew interjected, "when I explain to myself that I didn't make up the schedule for that day, I have a whole different kind of guilt."

"Who'd have thought there'd be so many ways of feeling like shit?" Brett asked.
"I accept how you all feel," Jensen's voice was intense, "how we all feel, but I am going to tell you that it's okay to face this truth every now and then. The truth that we weren't responsible. We are so used to feeling one way, that the hell you know—the guilt of surviving—is at least, familiar. The guilt of letting go of the guilt seems like the bottom rung of a very tall ladder."

"Haven't we been climbing rung after rung, ladder after ladder, just trying to keep our heads above water?" Liz asked. "How much more climbing can we do? And what's above the surface? Is it even worth it?"

"It's worth it, Liz," Jensen said, earnestly. "It is worth it, and that's why we keep going. We go up and up until breathing gets easier and if we're lucky, we get a peek at the sun. We'll slide down sometimes, but get back up because there's hope above us. Enjoying the colors of fall leaves, the sound of rain hitting the roof, a salty, warm breeze, it's all there, but out of grasp right now. Dear God, I want those back and that's what keeps me climbing. Otherwise, you're right, why are we here?"

"I guess if you can climb, I can climb with you," Liz said.

Jensen threaded his arm into the cuff of his crutch and stood up. "I am ready to try again and again."

"We'll be here if you fall," Mindy said.

"I know." Jensen raised a hand. "Except that you won't, because you'll all be coming up with me."
Jared sat in a plush overstuffed chair reading *Car and Driver* magazine. That red Tesla Model S was sweet.

*It's nice to be able to think that*, flashed into Jared's head.

"Doctor Morgan will see you now, Jared."

"Thank you, Ellie."

"Have a seat, Jared. Want some coffee? It's decaf." Jeff Morgan sat behind his desk and held up his mug.

"No thanks."

Jared sat in front of Jeff as the doctor blew on the surface before sipping.

"So, tell me what's going on."

"That red Tesla is a great looking car. I would love to see one in real life someday. Electric energy is so clean, and you know I'm all about being green."

Jeff stopped and stared. Grinning widely, he put his coffee down and said, "That's great."

"I knew you'd appreciate that. As I was reading about it in your waiting room, I realized that something was—nice. I know it's only a car, but, you know." Jared blushed.

"You saw something red, Jared. Not gray, but red and you thought it was pretty. I get it."

Jared smiled, but then looked down, nervously.

"What else is up?" Jeff asked.

"Doc, I know you referred me to the support group, but I also know that you spoke with Jensen about me."

"I never mentioned names, and I didn't give out details."

"I know, he told me. I was upset at first, but not now."

"Why did it upset you?"

"Truthfully? I was afraid you were sharing my secrets with strangers. At first, I didn't want to go to the meeting, but I needed to try something. Then, I found out Jensen knew about me and I didn't know what to do."
"We both knew you needed to try this group out." Jeff said. "But, I hope you know that I would never violate our confidentiality."

"I know now."

"And neither would Jensen. He has never, ever contacted me about any of the patients I've referred to him, even though there were times when he really should have. Do you believe that?"

"For now."

"Fair enough." Jeff sat back comfortably. "You've gone to two meetings. How do you feel about the Soul Survivors group?"

"I'm going to give it a chance. The first meeting, I didn't tell them why I was there, you know, specifically. But this second time, when I started to run away, they chased after me. I told them about Robbie and I'm glad I did."

"I'm pretty sure Jensen didn't do the chasing," Jeff said, gently.

"No, he kept falling back into his chair when he was trying to follow me. He's, he's amazing."

Jared had, indeed, seen Jensen topple back into his rolling chair during his mad dash for the exit. It slowed Jared down enough for Mindy to catch him.

Jeff pursed his lips and asked, "How does it feel being part of a group like that?"

"They know what it's like. On the surface, our situations look different, but underneath we're the same. It's…it's good."

"I hear a "but" in there." Jeff sat back and crossed his legs.

"I'm confused, Doctor Morgan." Jared pressed lips together. "After I told them about Robbie, and one member said that he didn't blame me for her death, I expected to feel angry." He looked up. "I always feel angry. I thought I would have told Jensen to shut up when he said that the events happened around me and not because of me. Doc, these things are the same things people have been saying to me since day one and I shut them out."

Jared looked intently at his psychologist. "Why did I accept it from them? And why am I thinking that maybe some of Robbie's death wasn't my fault?" He sighed. "God, it hurt to say that."

"Jared, you've met this group of people, and even though you don't know them well, you already feel that they're good people, blameless people. People like you who had horrors visited upon them. I'm hoping that when you see how hard they struggle to forgive themselves, you'll fight with them to forgive yourself. You are as innocent as they are. I want you to see that."

Jared's voice was whisper thin. "Jensen talked about having hope and maybe living in the sun again. Do you think that's possible?"

"I believe it is possible."

"I hope so." Jared pressed his eyes with the pads of his fingers.

"Are you still going to Mass?"

"Occasionally, yes."
"That's good. Your church can be a big source of comfort. Finding peace and seeking forgiveness—allow your priest and your congregation to help you when you can." Morgan uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, "But remember it's you, and only you, who can let yourself off the hook, and when you do, there'll be a different kind of guilt to deal with."

Jared cracked a small smile as Jeff unknowingly paraphrased what Drew had said.

"It'll be worth it, though," Jeff continued. "I'll help you every step of the way."

Jared unconsciously brought a hand to his chest and rubbed along the sternum. "I can see it in them. They're trying so hard, living with the blame but determined to move forward. They make me want to try, too. It terrifies me."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid of who I'll be if I accept this special dispensation they're handing me—of accepting that I was an innocent bystander in destiny's actions."

"Jared, you may not be ready to accept that you had a very limited role in the tragedy that killed Robbie, but you're making your way through the other phases of grief. At least you're on the road."

"That's good, I guess?"

"That is good." Jeff smiled

Jared smiled back. "Thank you for recommending Jensen's group to me. I think it's a good thing."

"You're welcome." Jeff jotted a few lines on his notepad, then sat straight. "Now, on a different note, the week after next, I'll be attending a conference in Portland and then turning it into a mini vacation with my wife, so I've rescheduled your appointments with Dr. Lehne." He handed Jared a card from his top drawer. "Here's his contact information."

"Thanks, but I'll wait until you get back. I think the support group will be enough for the time you're away."

Doctor Morgan regarded Jared carefully. "You know that the Soul Survivors is only a bi-weekly discussion group. There are no professionals involved."

"I know," Jared said. "I'll keep the phone number handy in case I need to talk to a professional."

"I certainly can't make you see Dr. Lehne, but I would if I could. I strongly suggest you keep the appointments I set up for you." Jeff tilted his head to the right. "How about we compromise, and you keep half the appointments?"

"If I need him, I'll get with him." Jared used his most sincere voice. "I think I want to start relying on myself more and less on you. This will be a good opportunity for me to assess myself."

"Use his number, Jared. Use mine if you have to, I'll always answer your calls."

"I know. I will."

Doctor Morgan shook his head. "Jared…"

"I'll be careful, doc." Jared interrupted. "I can do this."

"I'm trusting you to be smart about this," the doctor said. "If you feel yourself slipping, don't wait.
"Call."

"I will." Jared held up Dr. Lehne's card and put it in his breast pocket. "I'll keep this close to my heart." He took one of Jeff's cards sitting in the card holder. "And this one, too."

Jeff huffed. "You're anything but dull, Jared."

Jared smiled, tentatively. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Jared was walking to his truck after the appointment when he pulled out his phone.

"Hey, Chad?"

"Hey, Jare, wazzup? Everything okay?"

"I know it's a little early for dinner, but I have an overwhelming craving for a meat lover's deep dish pizza and a pitcher of beer."

"Never too early for pizza and beer man, I'm there. Meet you at The Pizza Kitchen in a half hour."

Chad clicked off before Jared had time to change his mind.

With his foot firmly on the bottom rung, Jared took a deep breath and began climbing.

"Come to order, you rowdy people." Jensen forcefully tapped his crutch tip on the floor. "I have a meeting to start." He looked from side to side. "I'll start it, but I don't think I'll end it. You will."

Jensen looked at the five faces of the people in his group.

Jared was puzzled, but Drew smirked and Mindy bounced up and down in her seat.

"A free-for-all?" Mindy asked with a grin.

"If you'd like," Jensen said.

"That sounds good, we haven't had one for a while," Liz said.

"I'll start with the topic I've given myself—as leader, I get to pick the ones I want—and we'll end with some regular conversation."

"I love it when he calls himself the leader," Liz said.

Jensen smiled and when everyone had quieted, he sat up in his chair.
"I'm the leader of this group because I needed a group like this, so I started one. I'm a survivor, like the rest of you, and I want to take a few minutes to talk about what that is: being a survivor. In the strictest terms, surviving means that we've outlived something or someone. In a more romantic definition, a survivor is a person who continues to function or even prosper in spite of opposition, hardship, or setbacks. That last definition implies that we're fighters—we're the tough guys who've outlasted the obstacles life threw at us and carried the ball into the end zone."

Drew chuckled. "We'd make a sorry Super Bowl team."

"I don't know," Jared said. "We might have a shot if we played against the Denver Broncos."

"That's right, Drew." Jensen lit up and smiled big. "And that's right, Jared. That's what I'm getting at, in a way. We'll never be who we were before, but we go forward in the skin we wear now. Our differences from how we were before manifest in big and little ways. Drew will never eat corn on the cob again, I'll never run another relay, and Liz will never truly enjoy another birthday. Yes, we won't win the Super Bowl, but we might, just might, play a great game against a team like the Denver Broncos. We might be different people, but we are strong, we persevere and one of us might even carry the ball for a touchdown."

It looked to Jensen like Jared wanted to say something.

"What are you thinking so hard on, Jared?" Brett asked.

"Of all the ways I'm different now," Jared replied.

"And?" Brett asked.

"This is going to sound petty," Jared faced Brett. "But I would like to fly again. I haven't since… and I can't imagine doing it, but I want to."

"That don't sound petty to me, son, that sounds pretty brave. You're wanting to try, I gotta give you props." Brett said, "I, uh, I think about going to Afghanistan—not Iraq—but back to contracting overseas. Don't know if I will," he looked fondly at Mindy, "but I think about it sometimes."

"That's huge," Drew said, reverently, but then poked Brett's shoulder. "But nobody says "props" anymore, old man."

Brett barked out a laugh.

"Do women have to wear burkas in Afghanistan? I mean if they don't live there, and aren't, you know, Muslim?" Mindy asked

"Why you asking, darlin'? You want to come with me?"

Mindy blushed a cute shade of pink. "I think it's time for the free-for-all. I'll start." She glanced at Jensen who indicated that the floor was hers.

"Okay, so," Mindy started, "they're building a no-kill animal shelter a couple of miles from me and they're already looking for volunteers. I don't want to volunteer but it made me think about adopting a pet. Anybody here have any advice or suggestions about that?"

"Cats are easier than dogs," Jensen said. "Misha practically takes care of himself."

"Yeah, but dogs are real pets," Brett said. "I mean, a dog is, like, a person, you know?"
"They take a lot more work than cats," Mindy said, "and I don't know if I'm ready for that kind of commitment."

"Dogs are a lot of work," Drew agreed.

"I love dogs," Liz said. "We had black and yellow Labs when we were growing up. Labs are great."

Jensen tuned out the happy conversation to motion to Jared. "Grab me a coffee cup, will you?"

Jensen ambled over to the coffee maker leaving an animated conversation of cat vs. dog vs. ferret vs. parakeet.

"What is going on here tonight?" Jared reached into the top cupboard for a mug. "I don't understand."

"It's a free-for-all." Jensen filled the cup with black coffee. "It's when we talk about anything other than why we're actually here. Underneath the weight of it all, we're still people. I do this every few months because sometimes talking about normal stuff is kind of nice."

"It is," Jared agreed.

Jensen used the wall for balance to walk over and sit back in the center of the group.

"Do you have any animals, Jared?" Liz asked.

"Not now," he said, sitting. "But I'm hoping to live my entire life around them. Hey, Mindy, you said the shelter was asking for volunteers?"

"Yes, they're taking names now so they'll have a schedule ready when they open next month. At least that's what it said on the sign out front."

"Was there a phone number, too?"

"There sure was. I'll jot it down for you the next time I drive by." Mindy pulled a pen and a pad of paper from her giant pocketbook. "Give me your number and I'll call you with it."

"My grandma and grandpa had a small farm when I was growing up," Drew said. "Mostly goats and chickens. Talk about happy memories as a kid."

Jensen leaned back and listened to the simple discussions between friends and hoped that for a little while Jared and the others found a bit of calm.

After another trip to see Mr. Coffee, Jensen sat heavily and let out a loud breath. "Okay, all right. Let's get it together, gang, and wrap it up for tonight." He turned to Jared. "See why you should keep coming? We're real fun."

Jared's lips turned up at the edges, and his eyes had a brightness Jensen hadn't yet seen. "You guys are real somethin', that's for sure." Jared brought his thumbnail to his teeth but apparently decided not to chew on it.

"We're real, all right," Drew said. "Real tired."

"Real hungry," Brett added.

"I want donuts," Mindy said. "Jelly filled and sugar coated. Who's with me?"
"Too many calories," Liz frowned.

Jensen smiled at the group. "And there's my cue to officially end the meeting. So, by the power vested in me as the guy who puts the sign on the door, I adjourn tonight's meeting. See you all in two Mondays."

One by one they pushed back and got their jackets and bags.

"Jared, can you hang around for a few minutes tonight?" Jensen balanced on his right foot to snatch his crutch leaning against the wall. "I won't keep you long."

"No problem, I'm not on a tight schedule."

"Night, Jensen." Mindy waved, heading for the door.

"Thanks for the meeting, Jen," Brett said. He followed Mindy out, saying, "How's the Doughnut House sound to you?"

Liz ruffled Jensen's hair lightly and said, "See ya."

Drew stacked the chairs and pushed the tables back in place. "I left the coffee pot for you to clean." He tipped his chin toward the sink in the corner. "You're the caffeine fiend."

"Fair enough. Thanks, man." Jensen waved good bye as Drew left.

"So," Jensen picked up the half-filled coffee pot and made his way over to the sink. "I have kind of a confession to make."

"Isn't that sort of why we're here?" Jared's eyes gleamed.

"I guess so." Jensen rinsed out the black coffee and swirled the dregs down the drain. "I've been the head of this group for four years and I'm still winging it. This Soul Survivors group was an idea I came up with in a therapy session one afternoon. It was getting real bad for me. One day, I said to my psychologist that I had to do something or what's the use of surviving? He agreed, so he helped me to start this—whatever it is we are."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"In the spirit of full disclosure. My former psychologist is Dr. Jeff Morgan."

"What?"

"Hold on, Jared. Doc Morgan and I dissolved our patient/doctor relationship years ago and he helped me start this informal group."

"I figured you knew him professionally, but I didn't know you knew him personally."

"He is a friend of mine, and I wanted you to know that."

Jared was silent.

"Jared, honestly, what goes on at these meetings is private. I never tell Jeff about anything. The closest I came was when a young boy, a teenager who ran a stop sign and killed an elderly couple, told me he wanted to kill himself. Then he told me how he planned on doing it. The boy wasn't even Jeff's patient."
"God, Jensen. What did you do?"

"There's a huge difference between someone saying they want to die, and someone planning out their suicide, so I called his mother." Jensen remembered, painfully. "He was a minor. That was my excuse."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

Jensen shrugged. "I wanted you to know that I know Jeff and that I don't tell him anything. And I'm glad you're here."

"Thank you for telling me. I'm glad I'm here, too," Jared said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Jensen leaned against a sturdy desk. "Ask away."

Jared looked Jensen in the eye. "Everyone's told their story but you."

"Oh, okay," Jensen said, "Let's sit."

Jensen took his usual rolling chair, and Jared pulled open a chair and sat in front of him.

"Six years ago, I was on a bus en route to my part-time job. We were at a red light when a moving van that couldn't stop crashed into us.

"I was talking to the bus driver, standing just shy of the white lines that divided the driver from the passengers and the passengers from the bus steps when I heard the awful screeching of metal on metal and felt a massive impact from behind. The back end of the bus was obliterated instantly.

"Even while the bus was accordioning in on itself, Jim, the bus driver, had the presence of mind to maneuver around oncoming vehicles as best he could while being plowed into the intersection. The noise of crashing vehicles and the passengers screaming was deafening. This I knew, the rest was told to me.

"After smashing into the back of the bus, inertia kept the semi going. Those trucks have a lot of mass behind them. The driver must have cut his wheels because it jackknifed and overturned. The cab and cargo container crashed on top of what was left of our bus. The bus flipped onto its side, throwing me into the stairwell. I guess there were pots and pans, dresses and living room furniture strewn about the intersection like a bad window display. Jim and I were the only survivors on that bus. Everyone and everything behind me and the driver was demolished. The moving truck driver survived the crash but died of a heart attack two days later in the hospital. It was ruled an accident due to brake failure. I think there are civil suits still pending against the Sea to Shining Sea Van Lines."

"That's awful, Jensen."

"It was." Jensen pulled in a deep breath. "But, remember how I said the back of the bus got destroyed first? Well, I'd been sitting there moments before, but gave my seat to a young mother and her daughter. The mother had a cake box. Years later, I still wonder if the cake was for the little girl's birthday."

Jensen paused until his breath evened out. Sometimes, it was still so hard to think about that.
"Those are the two people I killed. Three really, since the mother was pregnant. I guess it's easy blaming myself for those two rather than the other forty-one that died. I know you'll understand this part because the song that plays in my head is: maybe if the mom and her girl were standing where I was standing they would still be alive."

"Can they fix your leg?"

"They already did. It's attached and it works—with help. For that, I'm grateful. I'm also grateful that Jim survived. He told me that while he was driving the bus, he knew without question that the fate of the bus was out of his hands. Yet, what was remarkable was that in the midst of the chaos, he was able to maneuver away from other cars, and people in the intersection. Talk about having your head together. And that old man is back behind the wheel of a bus, driving people around like he did before.

"I keep in touch with him, and we meet from time to time. We had a casual friendship when I was his rider. Doc Morgan and Jim were the ones who kept me going until I got my head straightened out and started this group."

"The driver, Jim," Jared asked, softly, "he doesn't feel responsible at all? I mean, not that he should."

Jensen shook his head. "The way he describes it to me is," Jensen paused to get the words right, "what was going on behind him was out of his control. With what was in front of him, he did his best. He felt the force of the impact and saved lives by veering out of the oncoming traffic as well as he could. While he was devastated by the loss of all those people's lives, he knew that he couldn't have done anything more than he did. I admire him so much.

"He's the only one who gets to call me an idiot about thinking I had any responsibility for...for anyone's death." Jensen's voice cracked, and he bit down. "He tells me I'm an idiot and says he's glad I'm alive." He sniffed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry, Jensen." Jared stood and brushed his hand down Jensen's arm.

"Don't be sorry. I tell this story all the time, I don't know why it hits harder sometimes than others, but it's not your fault."

"And it's not yours," Jared said.

Jensen paused to look at Jared through misty eyes. Jared's were full of compassion.

Jensen gave Jared a watery smile. "Even though we're all a mess, like Mindy said, I'm glad you're part of our motley crew. We needed some new crazy."

Jared laughed and then looked surprised.

"What?" Jensen cracked a small smile, reaching for his crutch.

"I laughed."

"I heard. It sounds good on you."

"It's been over ten months." Jared looked bewildered.

"Ten months?"
"That's how long ago…" Jared stopped and shrugged.

"Well," Jensen said. "I hope we don't have to wait another ten for it to happen again." He handed Jared the clean Mr. Coffee pot. "Could you please put that away, turn out the lights, and, if you don't mind, since you were so kind to offer after the last meeting, would you drive me home?"

"With pleasure." Jared had the biggest grin Jensen had seen yet.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know if it was okay to park at the church, so I've been parking at the public garage a couple of blocks away. I hope that's all right?" Jared matched his speed to Jensen's slow, halting gait.

"Not a problem, but you're allowed to park at the church hall." Jensen smiled. "Besides, I'm the one who should be telling you "sorry." I'm begging the ride."

"I've got a truck that's up on a high chassis," Jared said, apologetically.

"That's okay. I'll manage," Jensen assured him.

"I should shut up, but I'm having trouble doing that all of a sudden." Jared came close to smacking his own forehead.

Jensen stopped and turned to him. "What are you talking about?"

"Me. I'm talking too much and I'm not used to it. At least not for a while." Jared knew he'd soon have to put his hand over his mouth to physically shut himself up.

Jensen laughed low and deep. The long line of his throat exposed by the street lights and the laugh lines deepening at the corners of his eyes confirmed what Jared was afraid to think about, Jensen was an extremely good looking man. And, according to the rainbow swooping up his crutch, he was gay.

Jensen resumed walking toward the parking area. "You're not talking too much. You're being nice. But what did you mean when you said, at least not for a while?"

"What I meant," Jared spied his black Ford F150 pick-up. "Oh, here I am." Fortunately, no one was parked on either side so the doors had plenty of room to open.

"You got lucky, Jared. First floor parking space. Or rather, I got lucky." Jensen's face pined up in a blush that reached his ears.

Jared laughed. "You walked into that one all by yourself, man."

Jared had to admit that laughing felt good. He used his key fob to unlock the doors and stood
waiting to see what he should do next.

Jensen didn't hesitate. He opened the passenger's side door, turned sideways so he was half sitting on the seat. Using his two hands, one with the crutch hanging by the cuff on his forearm, he fiddled with his knee and lifted the left leg in. Jensen lifted the crutch entirely, then swung his right leg inside, placed the crutch between his knees, slammed the door and buckled himself in.

Jared was almost ashamed to think this but Jensen was so graceful he made it look easy. Jared was also still standing outside the driver's side of his own truck so he hurried inside.

"So, where to?" Jared started up and backed out.

"Take I-47 North to Battlefield Road West. I have an apartment in that high rise off of Elmwood Ave."

"I know where that is. You're actually not too far from me. I'm another exit north but further east."

"We're practically neighbors." Jensen gave him a friendly grin. "So what did you mean when you said you weren't used to talking too much for a while?"

"What I said, or rather, what I meant was that I'm a talker, or I was a talker before everything happened. I haven't been very talkative since, so I forgot that I have to censor what I say before I say it so I don't make an ass of myself or hurt somebody's feelings by saying the wrong thing. Did that make any sense?" Jared headed north on the interstate.

"You're not an ass, and it's very difficult to hurt my feelings by saying the wrong thing. Pretty much the only way anyone can hurt my feelings is if they want to. So, talk away, and don't worry."

"You say that now." Jared glanced sideways.

"I do say that now. I like hearing you talk."

"Yeah," Jared snorted. "You say that now."

Jensen laughed again. "Hey, you know, we don't live too far apart, so if you ever need a ride to the meeting, or would like some traveling company let me know."

"So, you have a car?"

"I have a car. One I drive using my right foot for the accelerator and the brake. Oh, just like you do." Jensen said, playfully.

"See what I said about my idiot mouth?" Jared pointed to his lips.

Jensen chuckled. "I guess it's like a wild animal, you've got to get it used to you. The more familiar you become with it, the calmer it'll get."

"I don't know. It might take more than a chair and a whip to get mine under control."

Jensen burst out laughing.

"What?" Jared began laughing along, making the turn onto Elmwood Avenue.

"Dude," Jensen gasped, catching his breath. "We're talking about your mouth." And he burst into a new fit of laughing.
"I'll come up with something to say about yours next time," Jared promised.

"I don't know if I want to hear it. Hey, you want to come up? I'm in 303. No stairs, elevator all the way."

Jared was struck dumb all of a sudden. "Um, I, ah…"

"No problem," Jensen said, cheerfully. "Next time, maybe?" He opened the door and swung out. "Thanks for the ride. See you in two Mondays?"

"Count on it." Jared said after getting his tongue to work.

Jensen cuff the crutch, slammed the car door and gave it a friendly knock. He waved goodbye and wobbled his way into the building.

I am an idiot, Jared thought. Cute guy asks me up to his apartment and I stutter like a thirteen year-old. He smacked the steering wheel with both hands until his palms stung.

He looked at his hands. This was new. This was a pain that didn't hurt.

He looked up at where he thought apartment 303 might be. This was also new.

Emotions and excitement that weren't depression and anxiety.

He just might call for a ride to the next meeting.

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Jared's good mood didn't last long. He woke late the next morning with a headache and nervous stomach. He wasn't ill, it was his brain messing up his system. Not letting him feel comfortable with the moment of calm he had with Jensen. It was the first relaxed moment he'd had in many months.

Jared found himself worrying. He wiped his palms on his sweat pants and paced. Jared worried about the way he acted in group and with Jensen. Worried about allowing himself to have a normal conversation at the free-for-all. He suddenly wasn't sure how he felt about the "full disclosure" of Jensen saying that he was friends with Dr. Morgan. He couldn't settle his thoughts or control his up and down emotions.

Stop it.

Jared stood still in the center of his bedroom, took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Calm down right now.

He breathed in and out three more times, willing his legs to stop shaking and his heart to slow down. When the nausea abated and the headache subsided he mentally high-fived himself.

Two more cleansing breaths and he was steady. Then, when he decided he would trust Jensen until he found that he couldn't, his eyesight cleared and his hands stopped sweating.

Jared had promised his family that he'd try anything that would help him get better, but he didn't want to take lots of drugs and he certainly didn't want to commit himself to a stay in the hospital.

He also didn't want to move back in with them as they had wanted, but he knew that he had to do something when he couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and couldn't breathe. School suffered, work
His phone rang a familiar ringtone. "Hey Chad, what do you want?"

"I want you to open your door."

Immediately his front door was pounded on by an open hand.

Jared sighed and pocketed his phone.

"What are you doing here?" He opened the door wide and stepped aside.

"Well, it's Tuesday morning, you know, after the Monday night thing." Chad handed Jared a bag of bagels and cup of coffee. "I wanted to see how you were. Oh, you might want to warm that up." He tipped his chin toward the coffee cup.

"Why is it you can never bring me a hot cup of coffee?"

"Pa-jammas, pa-jahmas." Chad shrugged.

"What?"

"Never mind. So, how did it go? I know you're not supposed to tell me anything specific. I get that, so I'm not asking specifics. I only want to know if it's, you know, helping?"

"Why aren't you at work?" Jared sipped the coffee, made a face, and put it in the microwave.

"Researching ancient weather patterns to compare to current weather patterns allows me a whole lot of flexibility during the day. Why aren't you at work?" Chad asked.

Jared squeezed his eyes shut and said, "I will go back, I'm just not ready. Yet."

"Sophia said you could come back for an hour or two to start. You know, when you are ready."

Jared's eyes watered and he clamped down on his lip to hold it still. "She's so good to me. Tell her thanks. I'll let her know."

Chad raised an eyebrow.

"I will, I promise. Soon."

"So the group's good, right?"

"Yeah, they are. They're all nice, but not too nice, you know?" Jared took his now hot coffee and sat at the kitchen table.

Chad sat across from him. "I know you've only been there a few times, but you seem, I don't know, able to open the door now when I bang on it."

Jared laughed and Chad lit up.

"That sounds good, Jare. You laughing."

"That's what Jensen said last night." Jared stood, cut an onion bagel in half and stuck it in the toaster. "You bring crème cheese for these?"

"Use butter. Am I going to meet this guy who sounds like he's part hero, part priest and part male
"If you ever do, don't call him any of those. Oh, and if you do meet him, he uses a leg brace and a crutch to help him walk."

"Oh." Chad looked up from taking the butter, jelly, mayonnaise and tomatoes out of Jared's refrigerator. "Was he disabled in the accident when whatever happened to him happened?"

Jared mulled over the sentence trying to make sense out of Chad's question. "I don't think I'm supposed to tell you."

"Okay, so that's a yes. Too bad the crutch thing gets in the way of the male model thing."

"How do you even come up with this stuff?" Jared threw a toasted bagel half to Chad. "I never told you what he looked like."

"Your eyes tell me everything, Jare. They always have. If you think someone's stupid, you squint. If you think someone's smart, you raise your eyebrows. If you think someone's hot, your eyes get all smoky. You have smoky eyes when you talk about him."

"You're never meeting him." Jared slathered strawberry jelly on the buttered, toasted onion bagel.

"You also think he's nice. Your eyes tell me that, too." Chad put mayo and tomato on his.

"I do think he's nice."

"I'm glad." Chad licked a dollop of mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth. "So, when should I tell Sophia you're coming back to work?"

Jared stopped mid bite, looked far away for a moment then said, "Next Saturday morning. Tell her I'll be there a week from Saturday, nine o'clock sharp."

Chad gasped but said nothing, reaching for his coffee instead. "Done and done."

"Thanks."

Chad was strangely silent for a few minutes as they ate their impromptu meal.

"What's up with you?" Jared asked. "You got quiet all of a sudden."

"Yeah, well, I got stuff on my mind. Stuff like how I got offered a gig at the Mt. Washington Observatory in New Hampshire."

"Dude, that's awesome. When did this happen?"

"Just came down yesterday. Two month assignment. Supposed to be crazy weather patterns and other wacky weather shit they want me to record."

"You love to travel, and you love wacky weather. What's the big deal?"

"You, Jare. You're the big deal, man."

"What do you mean?" Jared added sugar to his cooling coffee.

"You know what I mean, and I don't want you here by yourself."
"Why, Chad, that's strangely sweet of you."

"Shut the hell up. You know what I'm talking about."

"I do. I'll be fine because I'm not going to be here by myself. Sophia's here and Jensen is literally down the street and around the corner. If I need company, I'll go see him, or he can drive over here."

"I thought you said he had a bum leg. How can he drive?"

"He can drive with his good leg, you jerk," Jared said, smiling.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Not only do I have Sophia and Jensen, I've got the whole support group, too, so give me another bagel."

"You know you can call me, right?" Chad diligently sliced another bagel.

"I know."

"Any time, right?"

"I know."

"Good." Chad tossed him another bagel half and said, "You know what? I like your hero slash model with a limp and I haven't even met him."

"And you will only meet him when pork sprouts wings."

His phone was never far away, but right now it sounded like it was coming from another dimension. The wine bottle was half empty, the brace was off and the TV was on low. Jensen was floating on his sofa in that warm, happy place between barely awake and barely asleep. Until the damn phone rang again.

"Christ Almighty." He yawned, and then fumbled sightlessly around the top of the side table for his phone. Blinking at the screen, he was instantly awake.

"Hey, Jared, everything all right?" He said, trying to sound alert. It was, after all, four o'clock, Sunday afternoon.

"I saw her today, Jensen." Jared sounded wrecked. "It was Robbie."

"Oh, no," Jensen crooned. "Oh, Jared, no."
I looked down the street and she was crossing at the crosswalk. I ran four blocks to catch up but by the time I got there," Jared made a sorrowful little noise, "she was gone."

"It's okay." Jensen was stabilizing his left foot to get the shoe on. "It's okay."

Jared was panting and sobbing. "Part of me knew that it couldn't have been her, that I must have been seeing things, but it looked like her, Jensen, it really looked like her."

"I know it did." Jensen reached for both crutches, wincing when a little weight got put on his useless, unbraced leg. "I know. Where are you, Jay?"

Jensen heard Jared's breath catching in his throat. "Jensen?"

"I'm right here, Jared. I'll pick you up. Tell me where you are." Why did he have to drink so much wine in the afternoon, and where were his car keys?

"It could have been her, right?" Jared sounded so young. "I have her number. The one she gave me right before she boarded. I never called it. Maybe it was her crossing the street today. Maybe she got out of the boarding line and I didn't see her—and—and maybe she didn't want me to know she got out of line 'cause I just gave her my seat, you know?" Jared was crying openly.

"It's okay, Jay, it's all right. Tell me where you are, and I'll take you home."

"Don't, don't want you to see me."

"Wait for me, I'll be right there. We'll just...we'll just sit." Please Jared, let me take you home, Jensen prayed. Please wait for me.

"I am home. I'm safe." Jared sniffed loudly. "I'm alive."

"Good. Good." Jensen breathed a sigh of relief. "I'd like to come over. Can I come over?"

"I'm so stupid. So stupid."

"You're not stupid, Jay. Not stupid at all."

"Do you know what I do every moment of every day? I try not to cry. Try not to think. I try not to imagine how peaceful it would be to take this breath and not take the next one. I wake up in the middle of the night trying to hold the screams in and I'm tired. Jensen, I'm so goddamned tired."

"I know it's hard, Jared. I know it." Jensen said, desperately.

"I'm sorry I bothered you on a Sunday."

"Don't hang up. Talk to me."

"I gotta go."

"It happens to me, too." Jensen blurted out.

Jensen heard Jared take one shaky breath and then another, until one breath hiccupped over the next. Stay with me, Jared.

"It happens to me," Jensen repeated, softly.

"It does?"
"Yes, it does." Jensen swallowed. "Every little Latino girl could be her. Every mother and daughter with dark hair and sparkling eyes. Sometimes it's a mom holding her baby. All of them. They are all them. So, yes, it still happens to me."

"What can I do?" Jared asked, tearfully. "I wanted so bad for it to be her, Jensen. Then it would be okay. Nobody would have died because of me. Robbie would be eating ice cream with her mom. It would all be okay." Jared's voice quivered. "I would be okay."

Jensen brushed the wetness from his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I don't know if I can do this anymore. I don't know if I can live like this night after night, week after week." 

"Then do it day by day, Jared. You can do one more day, right? And then one more after that. Please, Jay. One more day. Just one more."

"One more." Jared's voice was ragged. "Just one more."

"We don't have a meeting tomorrow night, so I'll be home. Come over to my place. You know where I live. We'll eat junk and watch something mindless on TV. Come over, I'll be here. We could talk, or not. Whatever you want."

There was no answer from Jared, but Jensen could hear that he was still there.

"I'll leave the door unlocked so you can c'mon in without knocking. Third floor, apartment 303, remember? Come around seven. I make some mean nachos. You bring the drinks." Jensen held his breath. "Please, Jared. Just one more day."

"Okay, tomorrow. I'll come over tomorrow. I can do one more." And the line went dead.

Jensen knew nothing would come of it, but for the first time in six years Jensen wished he could go down on his knees and pray.

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On Monday night, Jensen had the nacho cheese and the chilies and tomatoes ready for the microwave. The chips were out waiting for Jared to show up. Jensen had his brace off and was wheeling around in his blue, lightweight wheelchair. He wasn't going out tonight and it was easier to carry the chips and cheese in his lap than using his crutch and lumbering one-handed. Jensen actually used the wheelchair a lot when he was home.

This wasn't the first time he'd invited a distraught survivor over to his place for some quiet talk and comfort food, but Jared was special. Jensen liked him, and he was worried about him. Jensen knew the toll that grief took on a person's mind and body.

He hoped Jared would come over tonight so Jensen could help him over this hump. Recovery is a forever process, but it gets easier with time. Jeff had told him, "There's no way around the grief, kid, you gotta slog through it."

Jensen wanted to help Jared slog through it. Again and again, if necessary, until the sharp edges of grief wore down to a manageable dull ache.

Jared was usually a few minutes early for the group, but it was hard to determine an actual pattern as Jared had only attended three sessions. He'd known Jared for five weeks now, but it seemed longer.
The minute hand had passed seven o'clock, fifteen minutes ago, and Jensen came to the conclusion that nachos were out for the night. He was figuring out how long to wait before calling to make sure Jared was okay as he put the chips back into the pantry and the cubed cheese into the refrigerator. Then, Jensen's front door snicked open.

"Hello, Jensen?" Jared called softly. "Are you here? I'm sorry I'm late."

Jensen sighed in thanks. "In the kitchen," he called out. Jensen's wheels skidded back over to the pantry for the chips. "Come on in."

"I needed gas, and then I didn't know what you liked to drink so I got Pepsi and beer and apple juice." Jared peered around the door of the kitchen. "Oh. You, you're, uh, sitting."

"Yeah, but I'll be getting up in a minute," Jensen smiled. "I'm glad you're here. Let's start with beer." He opened the top drawer and held up a bottle opener.

"No need for that," Jared said screwing off the top of a Miller Lite and handing it over.

"Living room's over there." Jensen pointed to the left. "The TV remote's on top of the coffee table, find something to watch while I heat up the cheese. I have Netflix if you can't find anything you like on cable. Oh, and here."

He gave Jared the bowl of chips and a stack of napkins.

"Take these. I keep the cheese and the chips separate. I like to determine my own cheese to chip ratio and not leave it to chance," he explained. "The cheese will be there shortly." He spun in an expert 180 and opened the refrigerator.

Jensen wheeled into the living room, deposited the hot cheese, various veggies, and an unopened bag of blue tortilla chips onto the large coffee table. He scooted his wheelchair up to the sofa at a forty-five degree angle, swung away the left footrest and gracefully pivoted out of the chair, and onto the cushions, landing softly next to Jared.

"You make that look easy," Jared said, impressed.

"I had a physical therapist who insisted there was no plopping allowed." Jensen smiled, grabbing a fist full of chips. "I got an A in no plopping."

"You know, the more I know you, the more nuanced you become," Jared said in mock seriousness.

"I can be very nuanced," Jensen agreed before crunching down, spraying chip crumbs down his shirt. Aiming his finger at the TV, Jensen said, "Let's watch something."

Jared sat on the couch with his finger on the remote, but hesitated.

"Jared, everything okay?"

"Yeah."

"You're welcome," Jensen said, sincerely. "I know it sounds, I don't know, condescending, but I've been where you are. Remember when I said that we go up a couple of steps then fall back? Well, you just slipped a little. It's okay to slip every now and then as long as you land on your feet."

"Thank God you were there to catch me." Jared looked down. "You were very understanding."
"Anytime, Jared. I mean it. Call me anytime things seem too much. I may not always know what to say, but I will always listen."

"Thank you. I will."

"Good." Jensen sipped his beer. "But that's not why I asked you to come over tonight."

"Oh, no?"

"Nope. I wanted some company and free beer," Jensen said. "Plus, I was in the mood for nachos and it's pretty pathetic to make them and eat them by myself."

"Well, I'm here for you, man, because I gotta tell you, that looks good." Jared loaded a tortilla chip with spicy melted cheese.

"Thanks, it's a secret family recipe that only I, the Velveeta, and RoTel families know."

Jared grinned before dipping another chip. "I won't tell."

"Outside of the nachos and beer, I wanted you to come over because I wanted to meet you. You seem like a nice person."

Jared's eyebrows rose to his hair line. "What do you mean, you wanted to meet me?"

"We know each other, but we haven't been formally introduced. In fact, I don't even know your last name, so let me start." Jensen offered his right hand. "I'm Jensen Ackles. I'm thirty years old and I work as a copy editor for a great metropolitan newspaper. I like nachos, beer, and It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia."

Jared smiled. He wiped his hand on a napkin before shaking Jensen's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Jensen Ackles. I'm Jared Padalecki. I'm twenty-six, and working towards a degree in Biological and Agricultural Engineering, or I was until my college track was disrupted. I worked part time at an organic dairy farm owned by the State Department of Agriculture. I want to help run a farm like that someday. Oh, and I like Key and Peele."

"Good for you, Farmer Padalecki!" Jensen laughed.

"Well, not so much a farmer as a pesticides expert," Jared said shyly.

"Still, it sounds like a great plan, Jay." He placed a throw pillow onto the coffee table and used his hands to help hike his unbraced leg up on it.

"That's funny how you call me Jay," Jared aimed the remote and scrolled through the Netflix selections. "No one has ever called me that."

"I'm sorry," Jensen stopped mid cheese scoop. "I went to college with a guy named Jared and he went by Jay."

"I like it. But that means I get to call you Jen. Or Sonny. I kind of like Sonny. Sounds like a powerful playah."

"No, it sounds like someone about to get wacked at a toll booth. Jen is fine," Jensen pointed a finger. "Jenny is not. Besides, it's Jen-sen not Jen-son. So Sonny isn't even in the ball park."

Jared laughed hard, needing another napkin to keep the chips from falling out of his mouth.
Jensen sipped his beer and snorted.

After Jared got settled, he slouched back in his seat. "Do you always take in strays after an hysterical phone call?"

"No, but I do take in strays." Jensen clicked his tongue and patted the couch seat next to him. A big, gray, long-haired cat with a bushy tail hopped onto the couch and curled up next to him.

"Jared, meet Misha. Misha, Jared."

"Wow, he's gorgeous. Will he let me pet him?"

"Sure, he's a big ol' whore of a Tom cat, aren't you Mishie." Jensen stroked the cat's back. "He's so easy. Ear scritches, butt scratches, a few sardines and a litter pan, and he'll love you for life."

Jared leaned across Jensen's lap and scratched under the cat's chin, eliciting purring like a revved up lawn mower. "Why did you name him Misha?"

"I didn't name him, a friend of mine did."

"Oh, who?" Jared spoke to the cat rather than Jensen. "Who named you Misha, huh, pretty boy? Who would do that to you?"

"Misha did."

"Excuse me?"

"My friend, Misha. He named the cat after himself and gave him to me." Jensen shrugged. "My friend Misha is an ol' whore of a Tom cat, too."

Jared laughed, "Your friend named a cat after himself and then gave him to you? And they're both Misha?" Jared laughed again, petting the top of Misha's head. "No offense, buddy."

Misha rumbled a, "No offense taken," purr.

"I'm glad it didn't take another ten months for you to laugh. I like it." Jensen smiled and gently scratched the cat's shoulders. "Thank you, Misha."

Jared shifted to his side of the couch with a grin and aimed the remote at the TV. "You know that Cricket guy on It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia? In real life he's married to Bones."

Jared raised his feet up on the coffee table at the same time Jensen went to reposition the pillow under his leg. The coffee table bounced and Jensen's leg slipped off the pillow.

That little jolt shouldn't hurt, but, dear god, it did. Jensen hissed and doubled up as he wasn't given any say in the matter.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Jared's horrified voice filtered in. "What did I do? What happened? I'm so sorry."

Jensen raised his two hands and made the "time out" signal at Jared, who was perched at the edge of the cushion.


Jensen caught his breath and blew it out. "God, I hate when that happens." He looked into Jared's
stricken eyes. "That wasn't your fault."

"It sure looked like it was my fault," Jared tried for casual, but he was obviously rattled. "I mean, our first night together and we're already at 'it's not you, it's me.'" Jared tried for another smile.

Jensen breathed a laugh as he leaned back carefully. When that happened, the pain never lasted long, but it always took a couple of breaths to believe it was over.

"So, you've probably noticed that I have a leg issue."

"I noticed that you walked with a colorful crutch, and I assumed you wore some kind of brace under your pant leg because you do something at your knee before you sit." Jared said. "Oh, and now, that." Jared indicated Jensen's blue wheelchair with the spoke wheels.

"Ahh, wheelchair envy." Jensen leaned forward to reposition his leg back on the pillow.

"Well, it's more like crutch envy, but I have pins and bracelets with the exact same rainbow color scheme." Jared's cheeks blushed. "In case you didn't know."

"I didn't know, but I figured." Jensen used the remote to mute the TV. "Would you like to know why I use a wheelchair, wear a brace and need crutches? It's okay if you don't, because I know it makes some people uncomfortable to talk about this stuff."

"I want to know," Jared said. "If you want to tell me."

"It's okay with me. Nothing I can do about it anyway." He shrugged. "It's the way I am, now."

"Then if you don't mind, I'd like to know."

Jensen sat back against the cushions. "Remember I said that I was thrown into the stairwell and that saved my life?"

"Yes."

"It also cracked a couple of vertebrae in my back and left me with some nerve damage and partial paralysis in my left leg. My left femur—thigh bone—was broken, and my foot must have caught on the step or something because my leg twisted all the way around at the knee. Even after several surgeries, my knee is blown for the duration. Before you wince too hard in sympathy, I don't remember any of the initial injury except for seeing my leg pointing the wrong way before I got hit in the head with…something."

"Jesus, Jensen. That's awful."

"I wear a brace that straps high around my thigh. It automatically locks and unlocks the knee when I'm walking and goes across my knee and ankle to the bottom of my foot. The lock is what you see me fiddling with sometimes when I sit, because I can lock and unlock it manually if I want to. The brace is called a stance control knee, ankle, foot orthosis, or KAFO. It's actually a pretty high tech device."

"What does it do?"

"Do you really want to know?" Jensen laughed. "Because it's not as exciting as it sounds."

"Yeah, I really do." Jared smiled back.

"All right, I'll keep it simple. When you walk, your leg is either swinging or standing. It swings
through, then your heel strikes and you're standing—in stance phase—before pushing off into swing again. The brace allows me to flex the knee when swinging and it locks during standing. Sometimes, if I haven't been walking—only standing—I have to manually unlock it to sit, but it allows me to walk pretty well. It doesn't get in the way of my driving because, as I said, I use my right leg for that. I need the crutch to keep from toppling over if the sidewalk is uneven—and it helps take some of the weight off if I get sore."

"What happened just now?" Jared asked, looking at the coffee table.

"That pain was nerve pain from overactive pain receptors. It's unpredictable. A soft knock in the right place, like tonight, and it zings all the way up and down. The pain doesn't last long, and it doesn't cause any damage, so don't worry." Jensen paused. "See, it really wasn't your fault."

Jared dropped his eyes and was silent.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm really okay."

"No, you got badly injured in your accident, and it looks like you'll be hurt for a long time."

"Probably forever," Jensen agreed, gently.

Jared nodded, sadly.

"It's okay, Jay. It could have been much worse."

Jared swallowed before continuing. "But nothing physically happened to me. I wasn't even near the plane crash. I feel like—if I were hurt, like you, at least I would deserve the depression, the guilt, and the overwhelming sadness I feel." He looked up at Jensen. "How fucked up is that?"

"Not fucked up, Jay. I get it, I do, but you don't need to be hurt in your bones and blood to be hurt. To paraphrase what Liz said, it's not a pissing contest to see who deserves to be the unhappiest."

Jared looked up and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, that's not even close to what Liz said."

"You're right," Jensen grinned. "Women don't have pissing contests. Now pass me some of those blue corn chips. I don't know how they taste; I bought them because they're pretty."

They both munched on big blue chips. Jared dipped his in cheese and Jensen went back to the regular Tostitos.

Jared drank a mouthful of beer and then regarded Jensen. "You're, I don't know. You're so…"

"What? Unique? Technologically interesting?" Jensen smiled as he swirled a chip into the cheese. "Bionic?"

"Brave."

"No." Jensen said. "I'm not. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because I got hurt, that I'm in any way brave."

"I think you are."

"Wrong. Bravery is when you fearlessly march into battle. There ain't nothing fearless about me," Jensen said. "Given the choice, I would've run away."

"You haven't, though. Run away, I mean. You're here, fighting for all of us, and doing it with a leg
brace and wheelchair. Jared sat back and thought. "But you're right. That's not bravery. That's courage. Courage is knowing that the battle is dangerous but going in anyway."

"Shut up." Jensen waved it away good naturedly. "I was in a crash, I broke some bones and now I limp. I had no choice."

"And you created a group for people who need you." Jared countered. "I need you. I may very well have done something stupid last night if you hadn't answered the phone."

"Jay, if it's that bad, if it gets that bad, you've got to tell someone." Jensen shifted close. "If it is that bad, you need more help than a phone call to me. You need to call Jeff."

"I'm okay now."

"Jared, please, I couldn't stand it if you hurt yourself. There's no shame in needing help. None at all."

"I know that, Jen."

Jensen kept speaking. "You need to be honest with me. When it gets hard, call me and let me know. I can come and sit with you, or talk to you, or just hold your hand 'til you can breathe again." He placed his hand on top of Jared's.

Jared took Jensen's hand, turned it, and placed a soft kiss on his palm. "It won't happen."

"It might, Jay, and if it does, I'm here." Jensen closed his eyes for a moment as Jared kissed each knuckle. "Let me help you."

"You already have," Jared whispered. "But if it gets bad, I will call you. If it gets worse, I'll call Jeff."

"You can't kill yourself." Jensen's voice caught. "You can't do that."

"I won't. I promise you, I won't." Jared looked intently into Jensen's eyes. "I'm guilty of a lot of things, but I have never, ever broken a promise, and I give this one to you. I will not kill myself."

Jared's eyes glistened and Jensen felt that his own eyes were damp. "Thank you," Jensen said before burying his face in Jared's chest.

Jared's arms came around him in a firm embrace and Jensen felt Jared kissing the top of his head.

"Is this okay?" Jared asked. "Is it okay to do this?"

Jensen sighed deeply and pulled back. "You know what?"

Jared touched Jensen's cheek. "What?"

"We should go on a date. A real date away from Mindy's peanut butter cookies and stale Mr. Coffee and cats named Misha."

Jared leaned in close. "I think that's a great idea." He nuzzled Jensen's neck briefly and then sat up. "Where would you like to go? When can I pick you up?"

"That's a lot of questions. Let's finish the nachos first and then figure it out."

"Give me a hint, though." Jared cocked his head to the right and gave a half smile. "When?"
"Soon," Jensen laughed. "I'll look through my extensive social calendar and then pencil you in."

"Gosh, I'm really looking forward to being penciled in," Jared pouted.

"Oh, look." Jensen scribbled a couple of lines across his left palm with his right index finger. "It seems that next Saturday night just opened up."

Jared leaned over and "wrote" his name in Jensen's hand with his finger. "There. I'm in."

Jensen held his palm up. "Looks like."

"How does seven o'clock sound?" Jared asked.

Jensen smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

"Good." Jared snuggled close to Jensen on the couch. "I have one more question."

"Shoot." Jensen leaned back comfortably, petting Misha's back.

"Is there any candy, or ice cream, or anything with high fructose corn syrup content in this place?"

Jensen looked Jared up and down. It appeared that Jared's clothes may have fit him better twenty pounds ago. Appetite and grief don't mix well, so, for Jared, Jensen made a painful decision.

"Next time you come over for TV night, I promise that the main fare will consist of Twinkies, Fruit Loops and root beer."

Jared laughed. "Add chocolate chip cookies and Twizzlers and you have a deal." Jared leaned across to scratch behind Misha's ear.

Jensen waved the remote at the TV, clicking it on and said, "Now tell me again, which one is married to Bones?"

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"Jared, you made it!" Sophia stood and spread her arms wide. She beckoned with her fingers and said, "Gimme some, gimme some, gimme some."

Jared swooped her up into his arms and hugged her. "I told Chad to tell you I'd be here today." Jared's voice was muffled by her hair.

She stood back and beamed at him. "He did tell me but we both know what a big, fat liar he is."

"Not this time, though." Jared drew her in again, softer this time.

"Thank God. Let me look at you."

Jared backed up and made a small pirouette ending in a curtsey in front of her.

"You look good. I'm so glad you're here. Not only because I missed you, but I really need you."

"Thanks, Soph. Did you make up a schedule for me for today?"

"Not exactly. I have you here from nine to twelve, but I'm hoping you can stay longer. There's a weed infestation at the Brighton Springs pilot program. It's a resistant strain and if we don't get it under control soon we'll have to go with non-organic pesticides. That means it can't be a Certified Organic farm."

"Boy, first day back at work, and you have me signed up to save the Brighton Springs Project." Jared took off his hoodie, sat at the desk and perused the data on the computer screen.

"If anybody can do it, you can. You have a brilliant mind for this, Jared."

Jared was already making notations as she spoke. "I can stay, but I need to be out by five. Six at the latest. Can I log in on this under my user name and password?"

"It's all yours."
He logged in and pulled up information thinking how nice it was that they didn’t delete his password or purge his folders.

"You said you had to be out by six. How come? Do you have a big date or something?"

Sophia was clearly joking so he looked up to watch her face as he said, "A big one."

Her face fell. "Damn."

"What?" Jared chuckled.

"Chad decides to tell two truths in a row and now I'm out twenty dollars."

"And you two were betting on the what, now?"

"Truth number one, Chad said you would be here at nine o'clock this morning. Truth number two, he said you were interested in dating someone." She looked up despairingly. "You tell me—when was the last time he did that?"

"You're right. I don't think he's ever told two truths in a row." He went into his wallet at handed her a twenty. "It's on me, but stop betting on my personal life."

"Done." She snagged the twenty, but her demeanor shifted. "You doing all right, Jare? I mean, with everything?"

"Little by little. One day at a time." Jared smiled, sadly. "Where my head is right now, those words aren't clichés they're the way I live."

"I'm sorry, Jared."

"But," he interrupted her. "It's getting better. Not all better, but better." After he said that, he knew it was true. "I'd like us to put together a temporary work schedule, and then, when the next semester begins, modify it around my new school schedule. Would that be okay?"

"You're going back to school?" Sophia ran her fingers under her eyes. "Yeah, that would be more than okay. But we gotta work fast today to get you out by five."

Jared looked at his friend and smiled warmly. "Thanks, Soph."

She sniffed. "What are friends for?"

Jared turned to the papers he was jotting notes on and pointed to the computer screen. "You're right about this. It's going to take more than vinegar and water to get this under control."

She sniffed again and gave him a smile. "Thank God you're here."

Jared left work at five and had to admit that if felt good to get back to doing what he spent years working on. Today was good. Tonight was going to be even better.

He'd put a lot of care into planning this date, choosing to wear his expensive black jeans, a white shirt and a black sport coat. Jensen was special, and not because he had difficulty walking.

However, Jared did take that into consideration.
Reservations at Bellisio's were for seven thirty and, while it was a nice place, it wasn't overly fancy. He did, however, mention that his companion would need easy access due to his disability. They accommodated him immediately.

He stood outside Jensen's apartment and shifted foot to foot. He looked at his watch, breathed into his hand to make sure he was minty fresh and then knocked on the door.

Jensen was gorgeous. His dark gray slacks were loose to allow for the brace, but his black shirt fit like a glove. His blue silk tie was loose around his neck and a soft, dove gray sweater made the whole package work. Jensen looked like a GQ cover.

"Wow, you look great." Jared's eyes traveled up and down. "Like, amazingly great."

"You're not so bad yourself." Jensen surprised him by leaning up and kissing him softly.

"Too bad I made dinner reservations," Jared said. "Otherwise we could just stay here looking great."

"No," Jensen said. "We can't."

"Why not?"

Jensen reached for his plain, unrainbowed forearm crutch. "No Twinkies in the apartment."

"Well in that case, shall we?" Jared backed up to let Jensen lock the door and, in a sweet gesture, Jensen took Jared's hand and held it until they got to Jared's truck.

Jared pulled out of the parking space and said, "So, have you ever been to Bellisio's, 'cause that's where I'm taking us."

"I like Bellisio's, they have this great seafood dish with artichokes and prosciutto."

They made happy small talk during the drive and when they got there, Jared was pleased to see that they were seated at a table by the window with little foot traffic and an easy in/easy out with plenty of room to maneuver with one crutch.

"You know a lot about me, so tell me about you. Do you like being a copy editor?" Jared sipped the dry white wine and then broke off a piece of Italian bread to dip into the seasoned olive oil.

"I don't know if I want to tell you any more about myself. I kind of like being an international man of mystery. Can I have a sip? You can try mine." Jensen held up his wine glass. "I know you're supposed to have white with seafood, but I like red. I know, I'm a rebel."

Like a scene in a romance movie, they crossed arms across the table, each holding their wine glass up to each other's lips.

"That's pretty good," Jensen said licking his lips. "For a white wine."

"You, sir, are a red wine snob."

Jensen smiled proudly, sipping his Cabernet Sauvignon. "That I am."

"You're also a genuinely nice person. How did I ever talk you into going out with me?" This time Jared did slap his hand over his mouth.

Jensen nodded with understanding. "Ahh, the mouth thing."
"Mmm hmm," Jared muffled through his hand.

"Well, for the record, I think you're pretty nice, too, and I feel just as lucky sitting here." Jensen raised his glass. "Thank you for asking me out tonight."

Jensen was right, Jared mused, the seafood dish was marvelous. The salad was crisp, the pasta was al dente, and the company was comfortable and warm.

They chatted about Jared's job, his passion for green solutions to practically everything, and his love of the outdoors. Jensen talked about his trip to Europe when he was an undergrad, his happy childhood and his parents living in Texas.

"I'd see them more often," Jensen was saying, "but they're always so damn busy. Dad's always doing something with the Rotary Club; mom is either helping out in some soup kitchen or visiting my sister and her family in Maine."

They were sipping decaf after sharing a dessert of Tiramisu.

"Okay, so, I'm going to say it, even though it's corny, but I feel like I've known you my whole life." Jared reached for the check before Jensen could make a grab for it.

"I can handle the check, Jay. You just started working again."

"Please, let me." Jared handed the waiter his Visa. "I'm okay. When I started college, my parents gave me access to the trust fund my grandmother had set up for me. You and I can eat out every night like this for the next five years and it wouldn't make a dent."

"I'm glad," Jensen said, seriously. "That must have come in handy. I'm glad you didn't have to worry about finances along with everything else."

Jared stopped short, his voice was a little raspy when he said, "Thanks."

"Don't worry," Jensen assured him, "we're not going there tonight. In fact—where are we going tonight?"

The waiter brought the card back with the bill. Jared tipped heavily, signed the bottom and stood.

"We're going to my place for soft music and a nightcap. I want to get to know you better. I want to know your hopes and dreams and aspirations for the future."

Jensen stood, arranged himself carefully and said. "Lead on. But I warn you. If that's the criteria, it's going to be a short night."

Jared chuckled to himself. Oh, no it won't.
Jared had been a perfect gentleman and a delight all evening. Now Jensen was in the passenger's side of Jared's truck parked in the driveway of a one story Craftsman Style home.

"This is great," Jensen said. "Is this yours, or are you renting?"

"It belongs to me and the Grand National Bank. But in twenty-nine and a half years, it's mine, all mine."

"So, you're pretty sure you want to stay in this neck of the woods?" Jensen got out of the truck, hiking his hip and locking the knee before reaching in for his crutch.

"Pretty sure for now. I don't have my life all mapped out yet." Jared said. "I bought it using some of the trust fund money for a down payment. My parents wanted me to move back home after the jet crashed, but, at the time, that seemed too much like giving up. I didn't want to quit my job—even though I kinda did—or give up on getting my degree. I thought that buying a house would help get me back on track. It didn't work as well as I'd hoped, but I do love the place."

Jensen could tell that Jared was proud of his house. "So, Mr. Home Owner, are you going to show me around?"

"That's Mr. Mortgage Owner, and hell, yes. Come on in."

Jensen slammed the truck door and followed behind Jared who was almost skipping up to the front door.

"Voila!" Jared fumbled with his key, opened the door and spread his arm wide. "Welcome to Casa Padalecki."

Jared's house had an open floor plan with warm wood paneling and built in shelves. The high timber ceilings went well with the stone fireplace and tiled floors. A large flat screen TV was in the Great Room in front of an overstuffed couch and two recliners. Jared clicked a few switches and soft music floated in the air.

"This is great, Jared."

"Thanks. Come into the kitchen with me." Jared took Jensen's hand and led him into a cozy kitchen with an attached screened-in patio. "I love drinking coffee out on the patio when the weather's warm enough. Even when it's not warm enough I bundle up so I can go out there." Jared scratched the ground with his shoe. "Maybe you could join me some morning. Not tomorrow, or anything, I mean, unless you want to. Except that it's still too cool in the mornings to drink coffee out there unless you're wrapped in a blanket."

Jensen tensed, pressing his lips together. "Jared, I need to talk to you about something."

Jared's eyes opened wide. "What's the matter? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, not at all. It's—let's sit down for a minute, okay?"

Jensen made his way back into the Great Room and sat on the left hand side of the sofa. He patted the seat next to him and Jared slowly sat.

"Jensen, I didn't mean anything."

"I know. I want to say a couple of things up front. Just so there's no misunderstanding."
"Dear God, please don't say It's not you, it's me again."

Jensen smiled. "Well, in that case, it's not me, it's you."

Jared's face fell.

"Kidding, I'm kidding. No, it's—I know this is going to sound presumptuous of me, but I think it's only fair to tell you…"

"Oh, God, the accident. Was it your accident? Did it mess something up that you haven't told me about? Can I wire my jaw shut now because I can't believe I just asked you that?"

Jensen laughed from the gut. Jared looked positively mortified. His face was red and his hair was sticking out everywhere because he was pulling at it.

When he caught his breath, Jensen said, "Relax, relax nothing else is messed up. Gosh, you're adorable when you're embarrassed."

"Adorable, huh? I'm glad you think so." Jared looked anywhere but at Jensen.

"Hey, all I was going to say was that I," Jensen felt his own face heat up, "I, uh, don't have casual sex. I mean, I take sex seriously."

"Jensen, I hope you didn't think I just wanted to hook up with you?" Jared said. "I do like sex casually now and then, but that's not why I asked you out. Please tell me you know that?"

"I do know that, Jay. And I'm not saying I don't want to have sex."

"Oh, good," Jared interrupted. "Celibacy is off the table." He sounded genuinely relieved.

Jensen had a moment of panic. "No, no, I'm not celibate. That's not what I'm saying."

Jared sighed with a grin. "I know what you're saying and I agree. Let's get to know each other. Let's get to like each other. Then let's really get to like each other and then discuss the possibility. Does that sound all right?"

"It does," Jensen agreed. "And, for the record, the accident left all those parts intact and working properly. Although we may have to maneuver things to get everything in the right place."

"Good to know." Jared moved closer until his lips ghosted Jensen's. "Can we do things up to, without including, sex? Things like this?" Jared kissed him gently, and Jensen's breath stuttered in his chest. It had been a long time.

Jensen kissed him back with a bit more intent and Jared took it in stride. "I'm going to follow your lead, Jen. Go as fast or as slow as you want. I've got nothing but time."

Jensen brushed his lips along Jared's long, stubbled neck and kissed up behind his ear and whispered, "I'm so glad you came to that first meeting. I'm glad I'm here with you, now."

"I'm glad you're here, too." Jared took Jensen's face in his hands and softly, thoroughly, devoured Jensen's mouth. Jensen responded by systematically sucking all the air out of Jared's body.

Jared's large hands and long fingers traced down Jensen's back and Jensen noticed how carefully he kept his hands above Jensen's waist.

"I know we haven't known each other for very long, but, Jensen," Jared kissed Jensen's hair, his
eyes, and his neck, "I don't think I want to let you go."

Jensen thought he should find it overwhelming, crowding, claustrophobic even, but all he felt was warm and happy. "I don't know that I want you to."

Jared pulled back. "So you'll go out with me again? Now that you know where I live, and that I can keep myself from jumping you?" Jared gently licked back into Jensen's mouth. "Sort of?"

"Yes, I'll come back. I may even make you dinner someday, you have a great kitchen. I can cook more than nachos, you know."

"I didn't know, but I'd like to." Jared kissed him again. "I'd like to know a whole lot about you."

Jensen became fully involved with the kissing program, pushing his tongue into Jared's mouth and working his fingers through his hair when suddenly Jared stopped. He pulled back and just stared at Jensen with an unreadable expression. Jensen cocked his head to the side and was about to ask if something was wrong when Jared drew him close and simply held Jensen in his arms. Jared squeezed tight and hugged him, his long arms wrapping fully around him. He rocked gently side to side. It was a gesture so sweet that it took a moment for Jensen to hug him back.

"Hey," Jared whispered into Jensen's ear. "Now I'm going to be presumptuous." Jared kissed Jensen's temple, got off the couch and went into the master bedroom.

Jensen's body was warm and his lips were swollen. His hands ached to touch himself, his heart was pounding happily and his breath came in short spurts. Something strange was happening, and it felt wonderful.

Jared hurried back with a big, bound book and stood shyly in front of Jensen. "I want you to meet my family."

He sat next to Jensen and opened up an old fashioned photograph album. Page after page were family pictures starting with old photos of Jared's grandparents, leading to the newer ones of his parents, and, finally, himself with his siblings.

Jensen brushed his hand over Jared's high school graduation picture. "You were a pretty hunky seventeen-year-old."

"I was Bexar County's star wrestler that year and I don't even know why I'm showing you these." Jared shut the book and placed it on the side table. "You probably think I'm crazy. I think I'm crazy. Don't feel pressured to stay."

"I don't feel pressured, I feel special."

"Sometimes I think something is very wrong with me. I mean who does this?" Jared looked at the album. "Crazy people do this."

"You're not crazy. Besides, I enjoyed seeing you with chocolate frosting all over your three-year-old face."

"Smart aleck."

"And I particularly liked the one of you wearing your Ghostbuster's proton pack."

"My brother and I had the ghost traps, too."
"I'm not surprised," Jensen said. "Seriously, though, thank you for sharing your family with me."

Jared laughed out loud and then scooted up close to him. "Have I told you how much I like you?"

Jensen chuckled. "Well, not in so many words."

"Well, I do. I like you. I might even be in like with you."

Jensen realized that Jared was talking, Jared was laughing, and Jared was happy. This might be something like the Jared from before.

Jensen felt so lucky to have finally met him.

~~~~

There was an undeniable spring in Jensen's step as he placed the Soul Survivors Support Group sign on the meeting room door.

Well, maybe not a spring, more like a lurch, but it was happy. Jensen was excited to start the meeting, because among the numerous texts back and forth, Jared had assured him that he'd be there tonight.

Liz was already making coffee and Brett was setting up chairs.

"No Drew tonight?" Brett asked.

"No, he said he couldn't make it." Jensen rolled his computer chair over.

"What about Jared? He coming?"

Jensen couldn't help what color his cheeks might be turning, but he kept his voice neutral. "Last I heard, he was."

"And Mindy?"

Brett feigned disinterest, but Jensen knew what a big draw she was for him. Jensen smiled, indulgently.

"What?" Brett asked. "I have to know how many chairs we need."

"She's on her way, but said she might be late."

"What else is new?" Brett grinned and opened a chair, setting it beside his.

Jensen pulled out a pad of paper and sat. One ear listened for the coffee maker to finish, the other for Jared to arrive.

His phone vibrated with a text. Scooting forward and pulling it out of his pocket, Jensen read:

*Remember how I said I was going to be at the meeting tonight?*

He frowned and keyed in: *Yeah*

*I'm here.*

Jensen looked up and saw Jared standing in the doorway texting into his phone.

Jensen's phone buzzed. *Told ya!*
Jensen smiled broadly at Jared and then looked longingly at the coffee machine. Jared snorted, poured two cups and handed one to Jensen. One by one, the members took their seats.

"Okay, we're one Mindy short of a meeting but she's on her way. Drew's not coming tonight."

"Is he okay?" Jared asked.

"Members come and go, pop in and out. We've been a pretty stable group for a couple of months, but don't be surprised or worried by who does and doesn't show up."

"I'm here! I made it!" Mindy hurried in, panting. "Did I miss the mission statement?"

"Nope, you haven't missed anything, we're just about to start." Jensen leaned forward in his chair. "Hey, Liz?"

"Hmm?" She swallowed her coffee. "Yes?"

"How about you open our first Monday of the month meeting." Jensen leaned back and sipped his coffee.

"Me?"

"Sure."

"Well, ah," Liz frowned in thought. "Okay. We are the Soul Survivors Support Group. We were regular people living regular lives until tragedy became part of our lives. None of us may ever feel normal again, but we meet here because that way, we're not alone in our grief. We are the survivors."

She looked at Jensen. "How was that?"

"That was great," he said, softly. "Does anyone have anything they'd like to say to start the meeting?"

Jared raised his hand. "I came to my first meeting because I didn't know what else to do. My sadness was so deep it was like I was in a hole constantly being filled with mud. Every time I thought I saw a way up, another shovel of muck was dropped on me. I thought I'd never see daylight again. Being here, with all of you, has lifted me out of that unbearable darkness."

Brett said, "You know, like Jensen said, you climb and you slip, then you climb again. Jared, just so you know, we all slip back down into that hole you're talkin' about every now and then. That slip and slide may happen for the rest of our lives, I don't know. It's important to remember to climb back out if you do fall in."

"I thought I was over it, once," Mindy said. "I thought I found my balance. Like the song said, I had the sun in the morning and the moon at night. I had a job, I had a hobby, I felt good. Then one night I went to the movies with a bunch of friends and the leading character smoked Camel non-filters. That wasn't even my brand, but I slipped back down so hard and so fast I thought I'd never get up. I kept saying, you stupid, stupid actor. Taking a part in a movie that makes you smoke. What if you can't stop? What if you die and I'm still alive?" Mindy's hands were clenched into fists. "You never know what might set you off."

"That's right," Jensen agreed. "The emotions we think we have under control can come out of the blue and blindside us. We talk about climbing up a ladder, but recovery is also like a wave. We move forward, fall back, and then head forward again. I know that sometimes the shore looks so
far away that we're tempted to lie back and let the tide take us out to sea, but remember, it's worth it to keep going. On the shore the sand is soft and the sun is warm and it's there, waiting for us."

"I'd like that," Liz whispered. "Lying on the sand. Maybe with a steel drum band playing in the background?"

"And fruity drinks with little umbrellas served by tanned, half-dressed men," Mindy said, patting Liz's hand.

"I've always wanted to learn to surf," Jared said.

The women hummed in approval and Brett snickered.

After a couple of beats, Jensen gently tapped his note pad. "Let me know when you're all back from the tropics."

Liz laughed, Mindy stuck her tongue out and Jared shrugged.

Jensen smiled back and said, "Tell Me Something I Don't Know. I think originally that was a segment from a news program. The host would go around the table and ask his panel to tell him something he didn't know. They usually gave short one or two paragraph answers. I'll go first, and then I'll ask you, one at a time, to share some little—or big—thing with us. Okay?"

"What if I don't have anything?" Brett asked.

"Everybody has something," Mindy answered. "It doesn't have to be big."

"I like it. Go ahead, Leader." Liz smiled.

"Okay, I'll tell you something about myself that I didn't know. This weekend, I had the opportunity to have dinner out, and my dinner companion ordered white wine with the meal, which was correct for a seafood dish."

"You hate white wine," Liz chuckled.

"It's true, I am, as my companion put it, a red wine snob. I have no problem ordering a full bodied red with nice legs with any meal, but I actually liked this crisp chardonnay with a light prickle at the end. So, I liked a white wine." Jensen held up both hands. "Who knew? Let's see, who's next?"

He made a play of looking around and then inclined his chin to Jared.

"How about you, Jared? Tell us something we didn't know."

"Well, I went back to work part time last week."

Jared was stopped by Brett firmly slapping him on the back. "Good for you, son. Good for you."

Jared laughed, looking embarrassed. "Thanks. Being back at work was great. I also went out for fun afterwards. And it was fun. I honestly didn't think I'd be able to enjoy a night out again, but I did." He elaborately scratched his head. "Who knew?"

Jensen laughed out loud. "What about you, Liz?"

"A while ago you mentioned that I may never be able to fully enjoy another birthday. I'm going to prove you wrong. I've decided to celebrate my and Lindy's birthday in a big way this year. She was someone to celebrate and I'm going to see that it's done right."
Mindy jumped up and hugged her. "That's awesome, Liz. If you need cakes or cookies or pies, let my number one hobby help you out."

"Okay you can bake for the party, but only if you come."

Mindy wiped her eyes. "I'll be there with bells on, hon. You watch. Great big bells, baby." She hugged Liz again and sat.

"So?" Jensen asked. "What about you, Min?"

"I found out that I wouldn't have to wear a burka if I visited Afghanistan." She nudged Brett. "Just saying."

"Brett?"

Brett looked at the floor, shyly. "I," he swallowed. "Well, I..." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling then turned to his left. "Mindy, would you go out on a date with me?"

Liz squeaked, Mindy turned a shade of red that bordered on orange, and Jared slapped his thighs, laughing in delight.

"It was the burka remark, wasn't it?" Mindy said. "Couldn't resist me after that."

"No, darlin', I think it was the image I got of you wearing great big bells to Liz and Lindy's birthday party."

Jensen felt misty, like something important happened. He knew it was only a date, and didn't he just have one with Jared? But something let loose in the room.

It was hope.

It was hope for a future and they all felt it. Jensen remembered standing in front of a crowd saying, "If we love one another, there can be peace. If we are peaceful, we can give great solace. When our hearts open wide, there is hope."

Words he had said before, another lifetime ago, ringing loud and clear.

"So what's the word, Mindy? Brett's waiting for an answer and I have a meeting to run." He cut his glance over to Jared whose eyes were shining and dimples out in full force.

"I'll think about it." She smiled, demurely. "Oh, okay. But no more donuts—after tonight."

Brett laughed and touched her arm. "Nothing but the best for you, Min."

"Well, now that my meeting has been hijacked, I'm going to open the floor to discussion." Jensen said good-naturedly. "But before I do," he turned to Liz, "We know that Mindy's wearing bells, what should the rest of us wear to your birthday party?"

~~~

Jensen watched the group members clean up the meeting area. After the chairs were stacked and the coffee cups put away, Jensen turned to Mindy.

"Can you hang around for a couple of minutes? I have a quick question."

She glanced at Brett. "Sure thing, Jensen."
Jared's eyes met his, and Jensen asked, "Can you wait for me? I won't be long."

Jared grinned. "I'll be in the parking lot."

"Thanks." Jensen turned to Mindy. "So, how do you feel right now, Min?"

"Honestly? A little scared, but mostly great." She looked out the door after Jared. "How are you, feeling?"

"Better," he replied. "Lots better."

"Good," she said. "You look good, too."

Jensen smiled, looking toward the door. "I was wondering if you knew when Lorraine was coming back. Do you think I could convince her to come and talk to the group?"

"I'm sure you could," Mindy said. "I think Jared should meet her."

"That's what I was thinking."

"I know," Mindy said. "Jared's special to you, isn't he?"

"You're all special to me. You know that."

"I know that, but I also know that he's got a special place in your heart."

"You're such a romantic."

Mindy touched Jensen's sleeve. "But Jensen, Jared is special. He's special to all of us. He's torn up because he did a good deed for a stranger. Talk about no good deed going unpunished."

Jensen kept his game face on. "None of us asked for it. Not me, not you. It's unfair to all of us, but I think Jared would be helped by Lorraine's story. Could you ask her to call me when she gets back in the States?"

"Will do. Sounds like she'll be home in a couple of weeks. I'll let her know."

"That's awesome. Thanks." Jensen stood and teetered a bit reaching for his crutch.

"We like him, Jensen. I like him." Mindy said. "Go ahead and let you like him all you want. We all can't be wrong."

She hefted her pocketbook strap onto her shoulder, winked and hurried out.

"Where there is hope, love is possible. And the cycle begins again."

~~~~

Jensen clicked off the light put the sign away, and locked the door. He looked out the front entrance to the church hall parking lot and saw Jared leaning against the driver's side door facing away. His phone vibrated, and Jensen slowed his gait to get it.

_I saw Mindy climb into Brett's truck. My truck wants to know where are you?_

Jensen chuckled and hobbled quicker to get outside. "Here, I'm here."

Jared aimed his brilliant smile at Jensen. "That didn't take long. Everything okay?"
"Everything's great. Thanks for waiting." Jensen opened door and got himself inside.

Jared was in the driver's seat, a small grin playing at his lips. "You know what I've always wanted to do in a church parking lot?"

Jensen narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Jared closed the distance and whispered in Jensen's ear. "Make out with my boyfriend."

Jensen's heart kicked up a notch and a wave of fondness so strong overcame him. He cleared the raspiness from his voice and said, "So, I'm your boyfriend, huh?"

"Yup. And I'm yours, if you want me to be." Jared kissed him gently. "Actually, because you're my boyfriend, logically speaking, I have to be yours."

"Is that so?"

"Says here in small print." Jared kissed him again, less gently this time.

Jensen kissed him back and opened his mouth to suck on Jared's tongue until they had to come up for air. "I wish I didn't have to get home so soon, but I've got this conference call scheduled for tonight."

"Why so late?" Jared kissed along Jensen's jawline.

"Because of the time differences around the world. Damn time differences," Jensen arched his neck to the side, inviting Jared's attention. Jared accepted the invitation and attacked, leaving little red welts on the skin as Jared's mouth trailed up Jensen's neck and behind his ear.

"Damn world," Jared mumbled.

Jensen turned and repaid the favor by nipping at Jared's lips before pushing his tongue into the warm wet of Jared's mouth.

Jared made a cute gasping sound and sucked at Jensen's mouth like it was air, keeping him alive.

After coming up for a breath, Jared sat up and sighed heavily. "Guess I should get you home before I mess up the upholstery."

"Yeah, guess you should." Jensen cupped the back of Jared's head and drew him in for another kiss. "At least you can chalk up one of your life goals of making out with your boyfriend in a church parking lot."

"There is that." Jared kissed him long and lingering and then a short, quick peck on the nose. "There is one more goal I've been trying to achieve."

"And that is?" Jensen asked, buckling his seatbelt.

"Making out with my boyfriend in the parking lot outside his apartment."

As Jared put the truck into gear and headed out, Jensen decided that it would only be fair to help his new boyfriend achieve that goal, as well.
Jared felt itchy. His clothes were too big and his belt was too tight. He rubbed his face against his pillow and sighed. His long hair was greasy and snagged when he tried to comb his fingers through it. His beard was scraggily and his running shoes smashed the tips of his toes.

Food didn't taste right, the colors of spring turning to summer were dull rather than vibrant and everything smelled bad.

Maybe I'm coming down with something.

Please God, let me be sick.

Jared knew what was happening, but he chose the road most taken and denied his symptoms. He called Sophia, telling her that he wasn't at work because he had the flu.

Tired.

I'm so damn tired.
He looked at his phone, sitting across the room on his dresser, and thought about Jensen. They'd developed a serious texting addiction, but right now the phone was too far away, his fingers and thumbs too clumsy.

He had nothing to say anyway.

_I don’t want to talk._

It was getting harder and harder to breathe, so Jared pulled in several deep breaths, took two pills—only two, because a promise is a promise—and curled up in his unmade bed. The lights were off, the shades were drawn and the world was a dark, dark gray.

The medication helped him relax. Jared closed his scratchy eyes, and prayed for sleep. But there was no rest, because behind his lids, a flock of geese were getting swallowed up by the giant turbines of two powerful Oceanic Airlines jet engines. Blood and entrails streamed out from the intake and the fan blades splattered gore all over the passenger's windows. The compressors of both engines, now clogged with beaks and feet and gray and black feathers, seized up dead becoming quiet and still. Jared watched the passenger jet hang in mid-air, silent and doomed, and then gently nose down to plummet in a free fall to Earth.

He grabbed his pillow, jammed it into his mouth and screamed and screamed and screamed.

Jensen rocked his wheelchair back and forth, pushing with his right foot on the floor. This was how he paced.

He stared at the empty text screen on his phone and tried to tamp down the worry. Jared seemed fine after last Monday's make-out session in his parking lot and they'd texted normally up until Wednesday.

Jared's texting slowed down after that. He was still funny but much slower on the comeback than his usual quick draw responses, and on Thursday night, he said he'd be taking a texting break saying simply:

_thumbs need a rest_

Jensen didn't think that taking a break meant complete radio silence. Friday afternoon came and went without a peep, so Friday evening, Jensen started leaving Jared voice messages and emails asking Jared to please call him.

It was now early Saturday evening and Jensen hadn't heard a single word from him. He was seriously worried.

Jensen contemplated calling Jeff Morgan for advice. He considered googling Jared's workplace
and dropping by in case they were working late. He debated calling the police. And in the midst of all these deliberations, a text came through.

Thank you, thank you, Jensen repeated, until he saw an unfamiliar number. Ice formed in his gut and his hands trembled as he hit the read button.

_Dude, I'm a friend of Jared's and I'm not always real respectful of his privacy. I stole your phone number out of his contacts. I'd say I was sorry, but I'm too scared coz I can't get in touch with him. If he's with you and he's fine, plz don't tell him I texted and just hit send and that way I'll know he's ok. If he isn't with you, call me back. Chad_

Jensen stabbed the button. Chad picked up immediately.

"This Jensen?"

"Yes. When was the last time you talked to Jared?"

"I, well…when did you?"

"I saw him last Monday night and we were texting on Wednesday, but that's the last I've heard from him."

"How was he?"

"Honestly, he seemed okay." Jensen perched at the edge of his wheelchair seat. "He really seemed okay."

"Sophia called to tell me he called in sick at work today. I shoulda kept closer tabs on him, but I'm up a mountain on the other side of the country and he was all wrapped up in Jensen this and Jensen that. I knew I should've been watching him closer."

"Stop." Jensen interrupted. "What do you mean you should have been watching him closer? What's going on?"

"Haven't you looked at the calendar, man? Tomorrow, it will be one year since the plane went down."

"Oh, God." Jensen collapsed back into his wheelchair; the rear wheels smacking up against the wall. "Oh, dear God."

"He didn't tell you, did he?"

"No, no, he didn't. I never knew exactly when it happened." Jensen's hands were shaking as he wheeled into his bedroom. "I'm going to see him. I gotta go."

"Listen, dude, he might not let you in."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Sometimes when I'd go over, he wouldn't let me in no matter how hard I banged on his door."

"What did you do?" Jensen collected his brace and shoes.

"I used his key."

"His key? I don't have his key. I'll have to break the door down. I can't break the door down. I'll
call the fire department."

"Hold on, Jensen, man. You've met Jared, he's a mess and he sometimes locks himself out of his own house. He knows it and always has a spare key hidden outside. Under the door mat, in a flower pot, someplace like that. Check above the door, it was there last time."

"Okay, I will. I'll get in, I swear."

"Dude, call me..."

Jensen clicked him off.

After carefully donning his brace, he called Jared's home phone again.

You've reached Jared's answering machine. Talk to it nicely. beep

"Jared, I'm coming over now. Please, Jay, wait for me. I'm on my way."

Jensen couldn't help himself. Old habits die hard. He raised his head up, spread his arms wide and closed his eyes.

"Please let Jared be safe and whole. Please have him wait for me. Please, please, let him be all right." He wiped his eyes, grabbed his crutch, his keys, and what was left of his hope.

~~~~

Jared's house was dark inside and out.

"Come on, Jared. Open the door."

Jensen called and knocked until his throat was raw and his knuckles hurt. He turned the knob back and forth again, but the door was clearly locked.

"I'm coming in. Jay, can you hear me? I'm coming in."

He switched the crutch to his left arm, kept the brace locked with his knee straight and stood tip toes on his right foot. He reached up as far as he could and walked his fingers along the ledge above the front door searching for Jared's spare key, but came up empty.

"Dammit, Jay." Jensen looked around frantically. The concrete planter along the walkway was too heavy for even Jared to pick up, so Jensen knew the key couldn't be hidden underneath, but he sifted the soil with his fingers in case it was buried there.

Nothing.

Think, think, think.

Jared had a welcome mat monogramed with the letter P at the threshold of the front door. Jensen used his crutch to shuffle the mat aside and balanced carefully to pick it up. No key underneath. There was no key at the door-side mailbox either.

The front door was made from thick oak planks and Jensen knew it was sturdy enough to hold up against him hammering his crutch against the hinges. So beating the door down was out.

The moon was full, which was good, because that was the only light Jensen had to work with. He peered under the rose bushes as best he could and checked the ledge above the door again. There
was nowhere else to look for a key. He pulled out his phone, preparing to dial 911 when he remembered the back door.

The back door.

Shit.

Walking on grass with one crutch was tough enough when it was light out. At least the sunlight showed where the ground sloped, or large roots had broken the surface. But, at night, grassy lawns became a minefield of hidden potholes, dead branches, wet leaves and sharp rocks.

Heaving a deep breath, Jensen checked that his brace was still locked and his phone was easy to reach. He made his way to the grass line at the corner of the house. Placing his crutch on the soft soil, he leaned into it. The crutch tip sank a half an inch, but otherwise the ground seemed firm.

Because his brace was locked, Jensen had to hike up and swing his left leg around before placing his foot down. This hurt his back, but it was safer to walk with his knee securely locked then to risk a sudden collapse.

Jensen's crutch was cuffed to his right arm, as usual and he used his left hand against Jared's house to balance himself. Slowly, Jensen crept along the side of the house towards the back. Each step was thought out in advance. First, he hugged the wall, and then he advanced his crutch to test the ground. After he was sure it was stable, he swung his left leg around. He checked his footing by slowly putting full weight on it, and then stepped forward with his right. He slid his hand forward along the exterior of house and started the process over.

Jensen made it all the way to the back corner, then stopped and strained his ears for any sound coming from inside. He made the turn panting and sweating and, thankfully, the patio door was in sight. The brass door handle reflected in the moonlight about ten feet away. He planted his crutch in the dirt, leaned into it, still listening hard for any sign of Jared, when the crutch tip slipped.

"Shit, shit. Fuck." Jensen doubled over, both hands scrabbling at the wall to keep from falling. A thousand needles pulsed from Jensen's hip, down his leg and into his foot. A thousand more followed, each with an electric tip that shocked his muscles and scoured his bones. His low back tensed and he moaned, "Stop, stop, stop."

Jensen knew the over reactive pain lasted only a handful of seconds but tonight it went on and on before it finally let up and faded away completely.

Jensen's heart was beating out of his chest. At first he was scared. Scared of falling, scared of the pain returning, scared of being too late to help Jared. And then he was angry.

Why? He looked up at the full moon.

Why all this, just to walk around a house? He breathed in and out until his hands stopped shaking, and looked around to locate his crutch. It wasn't far. He leaned against the exterior wall and bent his right leg, counterbalancing with his left. Jensen carefully picked it up, slid his hand through the cuff and held on tight. He tested his next step and it held firm. Taking the last three steps, he was finally at the patio door.

The screen door wasn't locked but the door leading to Jared's kitchen was. Jensen looked around.
No welcome mat. No door ledge. But, in the far corner of the small patio was a TV tray, and on top was an artificial fern sitting in a coffee cup.

He limped over, lifted the plant out, and found the key sitting at the bottom of the mug. He nearly wept, thanking Jared for being absent-minded enough to lock himself out, and for being a coffee drinker.

You've reached Jared's answering machine. Talk to it nicely. beep

"Jared, I'm coming over now. Please, Jay, wait for me. I'm on my way."

~~

He heard the message. Jensen was on his way here. It was amazing how profoundly he didn't care.

Maybe I'm already dead.

Several minutes or hours later, Jared thought he heard pounding, but he waited, and it finally stopped. That, or he just couldn't hear it any more. Then he heard Jensen calling softly from his bedroom door, "Jared? I'm coming in, okay?"

Whatever.

"Hey, Jay. I'm happy to see you. I was worried. Can I sit on the bed, here?"

Jared blinked slowly and shrugged.

"Chad was worried when he couldn't get in touch with you. He called to see if you were with me."

"Well, here I am."

"Good, I'm glad." Jensen sat on the bed. His shoes were muddy and his braced leg was straight out, probably locked.

I guess if he got up quick with the knee locked, he won't fall over. I...I don't want him to fall down...

"Jared, hey, Jay, have you taken too much of anything?" Jensen's voice was unsteady.

Jared swiveled his head to look at him. "I promised you I wouldn't kill myself."

"I know." Jensen let out a deep breath. "You said you kept your promises."

"Yeah, I don't want to be known as a murderer and a liar."
"You're not a murderer."

"You know what, Jensen?" Jared snarled, his sudden anger giving him the energy to stand. "I wish I'd never made that promise."

"Don't say that. Don't ever say that," Jensen pleaded.

"That was my out." Jared's eyes blazed as he loomed over Jensen. "I swore to you I wouldn't end my life and now I have no out."

"Good."

"I don't want to be here. I don't want to be anywhere. But I fucking promised..." Jared trailed off. He swallowed around the large lump that came from nowhere. "I promised you and now I can't even fantasize about giving myself a peaceful way to go."

Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes.

"You took that from me and now I'm forced to live like this." Jared's legs gave out and he collapsed in a heap onto the floor. "I can't stand it. Day after day, holding it in, trying to feel like I used to, and knowing, knowing that I'll never be happy again. I don't want to do this anymore. I want it over."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry this happened."

"Fuck off. Go away." Jared's voice bubbled wetly. He was crying now, and couldn't stop. "I hate my life. I hate all of this. I hate you."

"Hate me all you want," Jensen's voice was soft and steady, "but I'll never be sorry you're alive."

"Fuck you. Fuck it all." Jared's voice got lost amid his sobs. His body shook and he felt like he was coming out of his own skin. He tore at his hair until a gentle hand grasped his fingers and drew them away. His other hand was tucked up against his chest as Jensen hugged him close. Jared burrowed down into Jensen's arms crying, "Fuck you. Fuck you for making me have to live. Fuck you."

Jensen's arms trembled around him. He shushed and whispered, "It'll be okay. I'm here. You're alright. I'm with you," over and over until Jared finally caught his breath.

"Why did this happen to us, Jensen?" Jared asked. His voice was hoarse and his throat was sore. "Why did this happen to all of them?" He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Jensen all around. "I didn't mean it. I don't hate you. I don't. I don't."

"I know you don't. It's alright." Jensen's fingers carefully carded through Jared's snarly hair. "I don't know why bad things happen to good people. Them and us. I can't reconcile it. I've tried, but I can't." Jensen whispered. "But I know that I can't ever be sorry that you're here, Jared. And after knowing you, I'm not sorry I'm here either."

Jared ran the back of his hand under his nose. "You've thought about dying?"

"For a while, that was all I thought about. But then I had the group, and now I have you." Jensen's eyes were wet. "I don't want to die anymore. I never want you to die."

"I don't want you to die, either." Jared sounded like a little kid, even to himself. "But I want us to feel good. I want all the things you talked about—the warm breeze, the fall leaves and the peace.
Sometimes it's so black and so bad that I can't believe I'll ever get there."

"Get where?" Jensen's lips skimmed Jared's cheek.

"To the top of the ladder. Where there's a sun shining, and a promise of fair winds and following seas." Jared wiped his eyes. "I want to believe in hope again."

Jensen recited, softly:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops—at all-

Jared gave Jensen a sad smile. "Emily Dickinson."

Jensen smiled back. "Yeah. I like the image of hope, perching at the edge of the soul, ready to burst into flight."

Jared sniffed. "I do, too."

"We will get there, Jay. We'll make it to the top, even if we have a few false starts. All we have to do is hold on tight to each other. When one of us slips, the other one will be there to catch—and, together, we won't fall."

They held each other in a solid, silent embrace.

"I really am in like with you," Jared's throat was rubbed raw.

"I'm in big time like with you, myself." Jensen grimaced on the last word.

It was then that Jared noticed they were both on the floor, leaning up against his bed. At some point, Jensen must have unlocked his knee, because he was sitting with his left leg bent out to the side, cradling Jared to his chest.

"You're on the floor."

"So I am."

"You shouldn't be on the floor. How can you get up?"

"I took the calculated risk that you would help me." Jensen made another painful expression and Jared disengaged his hands from Jensen's shirt so he could stand.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Give me a second to get my foot...here. Okay, take my hands and pull."

Jared took both his hands and backed up while Jensen used the strength in his right leg and both arms to get himself upright. Jared looked with concern as he helped Jensen maneuver onto the edge of the bed.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Jensen sounded a little winded. "Thanks."
"You don't look okay."

"Nothing a hot bath won't cure."

Jared sat next to Jensen, wrapping his long arms around him, pressing his cheek to Jensen's chest. "I'm sorry about what I said."

"Why didn't you tell me? Chad said that tomorrow it will be a year since the crash."

"I don't know why I didn't say anything." Jared sighed. "It's not that I was consciously hiding it from you. I guess maybe I didn't want to put you through all this."

"We never know how we're going to react to things. You might not have realized how hard this would hit you. You might not have realized how much you needed someone who cares—how much you needed me—around to help you through this."

"It did take me by surprise. The intensity of it." Jared pulled away. "I'm going to be no good for a while. You might not want to be around for the next couple of days."

"Not gonna happen." Jensen said. "I'm staying right here."

Jared wiped his wet cheeks again, like he had been doing for the past year.

"Good. I want you here."

Jensen leaned into Jared. Their hearts pounded through the fabric of their clothing. Their breaths matching one by one.

Jensen kissed Jared's temple and said, "I've been thinking about this and I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"If you're ready, and only if you're ready," Jensen's soft voice rumbled. "I have a suggestion on how you might achieve a small amount of closure."

"Anything, Jensen. I've got to do something."

"It might not go well, but I believe that it's something you need to do to move forward. You probably won't like it."

"Probably not. Tell me."

And Jensen did.

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Jensen's hand was warm on his back, rubbing soft circles of reassurance. Jared's hands shook as he tried for the third time to make his fingers touch the right numbers. They sat at the kitchen table with the phone on speaker so that Jensen could listen in. That is, if he could ever complete the call.

This last time, Jared made it through the area code and the first three digits before hitting cancel and closing his hand around the phone. Jensen pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder and kept his hands moving in a slow, comforting rhythm.

Finally, all the numbers were entered and the call went through. A gruff, male voice answered, "Hello?"
Jared cleared his throat. "Is this the Summer residence?"

"Yes, but it's not a good time. You'll have to call back."

"Wait. Please wait. My name is Jared Padalecki and I need to speak with Mrs. Summer. Robbie Summer's mother."

In the background Jared heard, "Who is it, Greg?"

"Never mind, mom." Greg hissed into the phone, "I don't know who you are or what you're trying to pull, but calling my mother today to talk about Robbie? That's plain cruel. Don't call here again."

"Greg, who are you talking to about Robbie?"

"Nobody, just some guy."

Jared was certain Greg would hang up until he heard Robbie's mother's voice get louder. "Wait a minute. Did he tell you his name?"

Greg's puzzled voice came through the receiver. "What's your name again?"

"Tell her it's Jared. Jared Padalecki."

"He says it's Jared."

The phone rustled and changed hands. An older woman's voice came through the handset.

"This is Mimi Summer, Robbie's mother."

"Mrs. Summer, you don't know me, but…"

"Are you the Jared Robbie met at the airport that morning?"

"Yes ma'am and I'm so sorry."

"You're the boy who gave her your seat on the plane, isn't that right? You're that Jared?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was a year ago and that's why I'm calling. I had to let you know how—I mean sorry isn't anywhere big enough, but I am. I am so, so sorry."

"I've thought a lot about you."

"Please, please forgive me, Mrs. Summer." Jared barreled over her.

"Stop." Mimi Summer's voice was firm.

"I would change places with her if I could. You've got to believe me."

"Jared, stop. You don't understand. I loved my daughter dearly and I was devastated by her death, but I know it wasn't your fault."

Tears clung to Jared's eyelashes as he replayed Robbie's mom's last few words. "What? What did you say?"

"I have been thinking a lot about you for the past year. Wondering what you're doing and how you might be feeling, and I think you need to hear me say that it wasn't your fault. That you're not
responsible for Robbie's death."

"We both know that it should have been me." Jared's voice wobbled. "You should want it to've been me."

"Jared, you can't believe that I wished you died on that plane?"

"I do. And I would if I were you." Jared swallowed, thickly. "Mrs. Summer, if I didn't give up my ticket, you would still have Robbie."

She sighed, sadly. "Do you remember she called me that morning?"

"I remember everything about that morning,"

"Then you know how excited she was to be coming home. On that phone call to me, she was fun and happy. She bragged about how she was able to charm you into giving her your seat. Remember, Jared, I know my daughter and she was irresistible." Mimi sniffed. "She also hated hanging around in airports."

Jared buried one hand in his hair and his other, grasping the phone, trembled uncontrollably. Jensen gently pried the phone from his hand and set it on the table top.

"Jared, giving Robbie your seat was a sweet gesture. You probably forgot that."

"You should hate me. It was my ticket, I had the flyer miles, but," Jared's voice was failing, "but I gave it to her and she died."

"Did you know that would happen?"

"Of…of course not."

"That's right, of course not. And you know what else? Even if you weren't there to give her your seat, she would still have been on that plane."

"Mrs. Summer?"

"I told you I've thought a lot about this." Mimi took a shuddering breath. "You weren't responsible and I don't want you to think you were."

Jared choked back a sob.

"Losing a child is wrong and the worst, most devastating pain for a parent to bear. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I could never want your mother to go through what I'm going through. Jared, listen, I wish to God that Robbie wasn't on that flight, but I don't wish you were."

"In fact, it must have been a very difficult year for you. You did something nice for a stranger with nothing but the promise of a free lunch, and had your life ruined by it. I won't add to your grief because even if you do, I don't blame you. And for the record, I never did—even at the moment I heard that the plane went down." Mimi's voice wavered, but her conviction rang through loud and clear.

Jared cried silently, his head moving side to side. Jensen cupped his hand around the back of Jared's neck and held tight.

"Thank you," Jared gasped. "I don't know if I can forgive myself, but if you can, thank you. God bless you."
Mimi's reply was soft and sorrowful. "I'm sorry for all of us, Jared. Please forgive yourself. I can't, because I have nothing to forgive you for."

Jared couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. He saw Jensen pick up the phone. In the background of rushing water and darkened vision he heard Jensen say, "You may very well have saved an amazing man's life today, Mrs. Summer. I'm Jared's friend, and I thank you for that. Believe me when I say how sorry we are for the loss of your daughter. Jared and I will hold her in our hearts until we all meet again."

Mimi's teary voice said, "Thank you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Summer." Jensen whispered, and ended the call.

Jensen helped Jared stand, and led him over to the couch. His crutch thumped hard on the tiled flooring as he struggled with Jared's weight.

"Jay, can you help me out a little, please?" Jensen pulled up on Jared. Jared's watery stare was unnerving.

"Jared, come on." Jensen tried shaking him without them both ending up on the floor.

Jared slowly came back to himself. Finally taking his weight on his own feet, he said, "You heard her, didn't you? I didn't make it up?"

"I heard her." Jensen prodded him over to the sofa. "Here, sit, I'll get you some water."

"She doesn't hate me. She should, but she doesn't."

"And she never did." Jensen filled a glass from the tap and carefully walked it back.

Jared's eyes were shiny wet. He took a small sip. "She was worried about me."

"She's one of those rare individuals who can see the stars shining through the clouds at night."

"She doesn't hate me. I thought she would hate me." Tears dripped down Jared's face but he didn't seem to notice.

"She doesn't hate you. Jensen sat down next to Jared close enough to share his body heat. "She doesn't hate you because you did nothing wrong."

"I told her I was sorry and that I didn't know the plane was going to...to go down."

"She knows how sorry you are and that you would have changed places with Robbie if you could." Saying that made Jensen's heart break. The thought of never having met Jared caused a physical
pain in his chest.

"I would have kept my seat if I'd known, except now," Jared raised his eyes to him, "if I had died in that crash, I never would have met you."

Jensen clamped his jaw shut and kept a whimper from escaping his lips. Drawing in another breath, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have to be okay and you don't have to know anything. Let the conversation work around in your head for a few days and then see how you're feeling." Jensen made to stand.

"Where are you going?" Jared's hand was quick on Jensen's arm.

"You'll need some time alone to quiet your mind and process what happened today. Don't worry, I'll only be a phone call and a couple of miles away."

Jared's grasp tightened. "Stay with me?"

"I might not be what you need right now."

"I need to hold onto you or I'll fly apart. I'm barely holding it together. You keep me grounded. Believe me, you're what I need right now." Jared gulped in a breath. "Please stay."

Jensen inched closer. "I'll stay as long as you want."

"Good." Jared's long arms twined around him. "You have no idea how important you've become to me." Jared kissed him, gently. "I don't know if I would be here without you."

"You're strong, Jay. You're spirited, and you're brave." Jensen sat back and let Jared cuddle him.

"You're only saying that because you like me." Jared's wet eyelashes skimmed Jensen's cheek.

"Possibly," he said, smiling.

"She said I wasn't responsible. Even though I gave Robbie my seat. She said," Jared muffled a sob into Jensen's neck, "she said she never wished I was on the plane."

"Of course she didn't. There's a big difference between wanting your daughter to be alive and wishing that someone else was dead. Nobody wants you dead, Jay."

"She said…she said I was nice." Jared clutched onto Jensen as though he would fall and keep on falling without him to hang onto. He was openly crying, his tears soaking through the thin material of Jensen's shirt.

Jensen stroked Jared's hair.

After Jared calmed and his breathing evened out, Jensen tried figuring out how to get comfortable without disturbing him.

"Jensen," Jared said, sleepily. "You know what?"

"What?"

"It's bright up there. I can see the sky, and it's blue." Jared yawned. "I've still got a lot of climbing
to do, but now I know the sun is shining."

Jensen repositioned his legs and placed a sofa pillow and Jared's shaggy head into his lap.

"Jensen?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now take a nap. I'll be here when you wake up." Jensen smoothed Jared's hair away from his face, and soon, Jared was snuffling in a deep sleep.

Jensen ran his fingers lightly down Jared's cheek.

_Someday, I hope to see the sun with you._

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Jared both did and didn't want to attend the next Soul Survivor's meeting. He did because he needed the support and camaraderie of the group, and he didn't because he didn't want to talk about his crisis moment or the telephone call with Robbie's mother. Jared knew he wasn't obligated to, but he didn't want to feel as though he were lying to his group of friends by *not* telling them.

Jensen had been wonderful. He was there when Jared needed him, and when Jared wanted some space, Jensen gave him a kiss and said to give him a call.

Jared had also come to the conclusion that he was more than just *in like* with Jensen, but wasn't ready—emotionally or physically—to go further with him right now.

Jensen was drinking coffee sitting in his rolling computer chair and chatting with Liz. They all seemed to be waiting for something. Jensen glanced at his watch and clapped his hands twice.

"Okay my friends, gather 'round and be seated. It's a second Monday meeting so let me jump right in." There was the full crowd of regulars tonight.

"I've asked Mindy whether Lorraine was in the States and she said…" Jensen raised his hand to Mindy.

"Lorraine is back in town and she's coming to tonight's meeting." She raised her eyes to Drew. Drew shook his head with all good nature, stood and opened another chair to Mindy's right. Brett was on her left.

"That's great!" Liz exclaimed and then turned to Jared. "You'll like her. She's interesting and, yeah, pretty amazing."

"Well, she *is* pretty," Brett said and Mindy laughed.

"When she gets here, I'll be asking her to tell her story," Jensen said. "In the meantime, does anyone have anything they'd like to share?"

Just then, all eyes turned. A petite African-American woman stood in the doorway. She was in her early sixties and dressed in a colorful print dress with large bronze and green swirls. She wore bright red lipstick, short tight curls, and a huge smile.

"Lorraine." Jensen lit up as she entered. He reached for his crutch and fingered his brace. "Stay sitting, Jense. I'll come over to you. You are as handsome as ever, my darling." She leaned down, kissed him on the cheek and then rubbed the lipstick off his cheek with her thumb. She stood with a grin. "Hello, my dears. How have we all been?" There was a lilting accent to her low, sultry voice.

Liz stood and held her arms out. Lorraine wrapped her arms around her and closed her eyes as they hugged tight. "How's my Lizzy?" Lorraine tucked a blonde strand of hair behind Liz's ear.

"Much better. It's so good to see you." Liz smiled deep and bright.

"It's good to be here." She gave Liz another quick hug and then turned to greet them all, one at a time.

"Drew, you're looking well and strong."

"Brett, you need a shave, but otherwise, a sight for sore eyes."
"Mindy, baby, so glad we keep in touch. I have a bottle of brandy with our names on it."

Then to Jared. "My goodness, what a fine, handsome, man you are. I am sorry you have to be here, but so glad you found us."

Jared was rendered speechless. He looked helplessly at Jensen.

"Meet Jared," Brett said, patting Jared on the shoulder.

"I'm Lorraine Dembo, pleased to meet you." She made a polite half bow.

Jared was nervous and didn't know why. He tried his best to give her a warm smile.

No, he did know why. He knew he was going to hear another story where something horrible happened to somebody nice.

"Have a seat Lorraine. You're the star of the show tonight." Jensen motioned to the empty chair.

"Maybe yes, maybe no." She turned in a flurry of printed swirls and sat primly next to Mindy.

"Nothing cryptic about that," Drew said.

Lorraine shrugged. Jensen asked, "You've been out of the country for a long time, haven't you?"

"My, yes. I was in Bahrain for three months and Qatar for two."

"Will you be around for a while?" Liz asked.

"Well, if you consider San Jose "around" then, yes," she smiled. "But that's not for a couple of months. You'll be seeing me here until I leave."

"Before we start," Jensen said, "is there anything anyone would like to share?" He looked at each member.

"I shouldn't date and tell," Brett said, "but I think Mindy might go out with me again."

"Yes, he sent me an email with: Do You Like Me? Check yes or no. I checked yes. Now it's official." Mindy made an exaggerated eye roll, then smack/patted Brett's arm. "I like you."

"I met someone, too." Drew's cheeks turned pink. "I guess you inspired me." He glanced at Brett.

Brett fist pumped the air, and Liz giggled. "You hound." She looked at Jensen. "It's always the quiet ones."

Jared's tongue was seriously tied. He didn't join in on the conversation because he couldn't shake the dread of what he was about to hear.

"That's all great news, guys." Jensen was beaming at them. "It looks like you're moving forward. I'm proud of you."

Jensen caught Jared's eye and gave him a concerned look. Jared eyed his thumbnail.

"So, Lorraine, how would you feel about telling us your story? You know you don't have to."

"I know that, my dear, but there are so many strong and conflicting emotions—anger, fear, grief, blessed, cheated, in all combinations—that they roil and weave inside my head and heart until I
She looked around at the group and then back to Jensen. "No one outside of this room can know how that feels. Sharing with you is a relief and a release of some of the emotional pressure. I think that's one of the reasons why we come here, so we can tell our stories and let the devil out at least for a few moments. So, I'll begin if you'll allow me."

"Yes, please." Jensen said.

All Jared could do was hold his breath and hang on.

"I'll start by telling Jared a little of my background." Lorraine smiled kindly at Jared before taking a moment to center herself.

"I'm an international IT consultant. I was born in Zimbabwe but have been an American citizen for many years. I work for a very successful American internet technology firm and I dare say that I have been around the world many times, as my job requires much traveling. During one business trip, my team and I were given special treatment by the Kuwaiti Emir, and one of the many private jets in his fleet was at our disposal."

Lorraine, who had been calmly reciting her story, began kneading the knuckles of one hand with the fingers of the other. Mindy reached over and held Lorraine's hand.

"Our particular aircraft was a luxury JetStorm XL. It carried six passengers and three crewmembers." She looked up. "It was a beautifully appointed, state-of-the-art business jet. It was white with red, green, and black striping along the body and up the tail. It's funny how you remember things like that."

When Lorraine stopped to regroup her thoughts, Mindy softly stroked up and down her arm. Jared's own breath was caught in his lungs. He didn't want to hear the rest. He knew it ended badly, but he raised his thumbnail to his teeth and forced himself to listen.

"This jet was technologically the most advanced aircraft in its class. And yet, when the weather suddenly deteriorated and the young co-pilot panicked, even the best technology in the world couldn't protect us from an impact on the desert floor.

"Upon recreation of the events, the pilot must have reduced air speed at the last minute because I survived. The other five passengers and the three crewmembers did not." She sniffed deeply and stared at the floor. "I'm the only one left," she whispered.

Jared chewed at his nail until it bled and brushed away his tears as quickly as he could. This wasn't about him.

Lorraine's soft, deep voice said, "Jared, I don't know your story. But I am the sole survivor of that ill-fated jet. Whatever tragedy befell you in your young life, believe me, I understand what survivor's guilt feels like and I'll do whatever I can to help ease yours."

Jared tried to catch his breath but all he could do was gasp.

"Thank you, Lorraine," Jared heard Jensen say. "Let's all take a break."

Jared stood so quickly, he shoved the folding chair back. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I've got to…" He looked to Jensen who was holding out his hand to him.

"Help me up, Jay? We'll take a short walk."
"Okay, yes." Jared took Jensen's hand and helped him to his feet.

"We'll be right back," Jensen said to the group. "Min, did you bake cookies for tonight?"

Jared didn't hear the answer as he dragged Jensen out of the room. In his haste, he'd forgotten to take the crutch, so Jensen had to hold onto Jared's arm.

"Jesus, Jensen. Oh my God." Jared's thoughts were out of control. "I can't imagine. That would be worse. That would be so much worse. What if I was in Robbie's seat and I lived? What if everyone around me died? I can't imagine what it must be like for her. I can't."

"Jay, breathe." Jensen was latched onto Jared. "And slow down."

"Sorry, sorry, but how can she deal with it?" Jared realized he needed to calm his breathing down as the world started spinning.

"That's why she needs us. That's why we're here. We're here because we need each other. But in Lorraine's case, imagine surviving that accident. Then imagine there's nobody around who knows what that feels like. That would be worse." Jensen shifted all his weight to his good leg. "That's why I'm...that's why we are here."

"Unimaginable," Jared mumbled. "Unthinkable."

"There's something else, though, that I wanted you to notice. One reason I wanted you to hear Lorraine's story is because she still flies all around the world, doing the job she did before. To me, that's the mark of a strong spirit and remarkable resolve."

"And faith," Jared said.

"That, too."

"Um, guys?" Liz called from the doorway. "Everything okay?"

"We're fine," Jensen called back. Jared looked towards Liz and gave her a weak smile.

"Lorraine says that she has something else to tell us."

"Okay, we'll be in in a minute." Jensen looked at Jared. "Do you think you can go back now?"

"Yeah," Jared breathed in and out, feeling a little better. "I'm fine."

"The rule still stands. If we don't want to talk, we don't talk."

"I know." Jared turned to face Jensen. "Thank you for helping me to breathe just now."

"No problem." Jensen cocked his head to the side. "That's what boyfriends are for."

They walked back into the room arm in arm. People were milling around so after Jensen got seated, Jared sat beside Lorraine.

"I'm sorry. It must have looked like I ran away from you." Jared's thumb came halfway to his mouth until Lorraine touched his wrist.

"No, sweet boy. It just looked like you needed a break." She smiled, fondly.

"May I ask you a couple of things?" Jared tried not to choke on the words.
"Of course. Anything you want. Remember, I said it was my pleasure to talk to people who understood."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"Twelve years."

Jared was speechless.

Lorraine nodded, "There weren't any groups like this back then. I was on heavy medication for depression the first few years. Four years ago my psychiatrist recommended Soul Survivors. I guess I'm one of the founding members." She smiled at Jensen who was drinking the coffee Drew had handed him. "He'll be awake all night. He's such a caffeine addict."

"Were you hurt?"

"I was in a coma for three weeks. I don't have any recollection of that. All I remember was waking up in a strange hospital room filled with terror. At first, I didn't know what I was afraid of. Apparently I suffered some memory loss, but believe me, it wasn't enough to make me forget all of it."

"How did you get the courage to go back to work, especially since you have to fly so much?"

Jared's chest hitched on the last word.

Lorraine tilted her chin down and smiled softly. "That's easy. Faith. Faith in God. He knows what He's doing and when it's my time to go, I will take my last flight right into God's arms."

"Wow," Jared whispered.

"I was," she said, lightly.

The air was suddenly changed with a subdued excitement.

Jensen looked up. "What's up? Is something going on?"

"Jensen, dear," Lorraine said. "I asked another old member to come by, if he had the time. He was instrumental in helping me to cope with the world again." Lorraine looked at Jensen through her lashes. "You know who I mean, don't you?"

Jared thought he saw Jensen go pale. His hand holding the coffee cup trembled slightly. Jensen swallowed and asked, "Is, is he coming here, tonight?"

Lorraine grinned. "Well, this is his church. I don't think it would be polite to keep him away."
Jensen should have realized that Lorraine would want to see the Reverend. It was long past due for him to show up at one of their meetings. Damn, but he wished he could pace properly. Instead, Jensen crutched over to the coffee maker and pretended to pour another cup. He was already three cups in and knew more than that was a bad idea.

He'd seen Jared and Lorraine, with their heads bowed low in private conversation. Lorraine had her hand on Jared's arm, her expression was warm and inviting while they spoke in hushed tones. Lorraine had many bad years suffering from the aftermath of the crash.

Jensen made out some of her words like, "depression," "coma," "terror," and "memory loss, but not enough to make me forget." Jensen looked away when she said, "faith."

Looking at his watch, Jensen saw there were only fifteen minutes left in the meeting, so maybe Reverend Williams wouldn't be coming after all.

Jared came up behind him. He was pale and his eyes were red, but there was a spark behind them. "Liz was right," Jared whispered. "Lorraine is amazing."

Lorraine was in an animated discussion with Drew when a baritone voice greeted Jensen from behind.

"Good evenin', Jensen. Lorraine told you I'd be coming tonight?"

"She did, Reverend. How are you? We haven't seen you in a while." Jensen was polite, but reserved. Reverend Williams turned to Jared.

"I don't believe we've met. I'm the pastor of this little church, Reverend Steven Williams, but I've been called Brother Rufus since I don't know how long." He shook Jared's hand.

"How did that name come about?" Jared asked with a grin.

"Well, son, around the turn of the twentieth century, where I come from, Rufus Turner was a famous evangelist and healer. I began preaching the Word when I was a child, and on one hot, Sunday afternoon someone shouted, 'Pray it loud, Brother Rufus, pray it loud' and the name stuck." He shook Jared's hand again, offering a bright smile. "Call me what you want."

"Just don't call him late for lunch." Brett stuck his hand out to Brother Rufus and shook it vigorously.

Jared pulled Jensen to the side. "He's the pastor here?"

"Yeah," Jensen said, softly. "I mean, yes, he lets us use this room in his church hall for free. He's a, well, he was a member. Doesn't attend regular meetings any more but occasionally comes by to
speak to the group."

"Is everything okay?" Jared looked him in the eye. "Are you okay with that?"

Jensen pasted a smile on. "Of course I'm okay. Brother Rufus is a powerful speaker. I think you'll be impressed and inspired by him. And, as Lorraine said, he helped her a lot early on."

"Plus," Jared said, "it is his church."

"Yes, so there's no way around it." Jensen maintained his faux grin and patted Jared on the back before sitting in his computer chair.

"Brother Rufus, welcome," Jensen said. "I believe you've met everyone. The floor is all yours."

The Reverend stood before the group and took them all in.

"Thank you, Lorraine, for inviting me and thank you, Jensen, for letting me talk to everybody tonight. Good to see some old faces," he smiled at Drew, "and some new ones, too." He tipped his head to Jared.

"It's good that y'all are here 'cause that means you're looking forward."

Brother Rufus had a strong, quiet energy and it was easy to see that sitting still was difficult for him. His whole body spoke as he walked, lifted his voice, and raised his hands.

"But forward ain't always an easy place to go, but here we are. If it's okay, I'll start by telling you all my story."

Jensen glanced at Jared who looked calm and interested.

"I met my wife, Keisha, at a church service where her daddy was a preacher. I was seventeen and she was sixteen. I'd already made up my mind to work for God's church, been preachin' since I was a boy, but didn't know the kind of Reverend I wanted to be. My religion was mushy, but my faith was strong, so I shopped around for a good church, a good match. When Keisha's father, the Reverend Louis Jones, spoke the Lord's words, as soon as they were out of his mouth, I knew I'd found my church. After my first date with Keisha, I knew I'd found my woman. She was the love of my life, and I was a happy man.

"Because I drove a big ol' Buick, one of my domestic chores was chauffeuring family to and from church services, picnics, school functions, you name it. I was on the road a lot." Brother Rufus chuckled softly, "My girl had a big family."

His eyes went glassy for a moment. "That day, Keisha and me were driving the last family member home from her daddy, the Reverend's, birthday celebration. He turned eighty-one that day, praise God. Lavonne was Keisha's youngest sister, and out of that whole family, I knew that Vonnie was her favorite.

"It's a story that'll sound all too familiar, there wasn't nothing extraordinary about that day. No wet roads, no foggy windshields, just a kid going too fast in his dad's pick-up. T-boned me on the passenger's side where my wife and sister-in-law were scrunched up against the doors gossiping. All three died at the scene. Keisha, Vonnie, and Kyle. Kyle Miller was seventeen, not a drop of anything in his blood. No drugs, no alcohol, no Benadryl, only youthful exuberance. And me?"
Here, Brother Rufus took a breath.

"A headache and a broken wrist." He shook his head. "How can such a thing take three lives and leave me without a mark?" He held up his arm and rolled down his sleeve. "Not even a scar showin' where my wrist got broke." His eyes quick glanced at Jensen's crutch.

"But what did get broke was my faith. Why would God use his mighty hand to sweep away two pious women and a child? How could I continue to give my life to Him and honor Him when He took so much for no reason? But as the poet said: God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform." The Reverend smiled to himself before saying, "The road back to faith was rocky, but it held firm."

Brother Rufus held up his finger. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna be preaching, Jensen. I'm not gonna go any farther than to say that there can be powerful faith after the horrors we all have faced. We can find peace in ourselves and with God, again, because he is always with us, and He loves us beyond all measure.

"There's one more thing I have to say—this real thing I have to say—I gotta remind each and every one of you that we are still here. Let me say it again. We. Are. Still. Here. We gotta respect that. I don't know why we escaped death, because it ain't my place to second-guess the Almighty, but I believe we have work to do and we must not take this life, this fragile, fleeting life, for granted. We owe it to the memories of the ones who are no longer here, to live our lives for us and for them. To be kind to others and kind to ourselves. This, this, I believe." He looked at Jensen. "And I know Jensen believes that, too, 'cause that's what he said when I sat down at my first meeting of the Soul Survivors."

"It seemed like Brother Rufus was focusing a lot of his speech on you, tonight." Jared said. They were sitting on Jared's couch with soft music playing in the background.

"He was," Jensen admitted.

"Why?"

Jensen took a deep breath and then another. Jared saw him clamp his lip with his teeth. Finally, he appeared to have amassed the resolve he needed for this conversation. "So, you know that I'm a copy editor?"

"As a deflection, that's not a very good one." He nudged Jensen's shoulder with his.

"Wasn't trying to deflect." Jensen smiled, sadly. "Before I became a copy editor, I had a whole different future mapped out. One that I'd worked on my entire life."

Jared waited patiently.
"I was a Divinity major at the university, working on my Masters in Divinity before going for my Masters in Theology. I was going to make my faith my profession. You know, blessed is the man who can make a living..." Jensen said, sadly.

Jared took Jensen's hand. "Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby. George Bernard Shaw wrote that."

Jensen sniffs and nodded. "My faith was challenged by the accident—and my faith lost."

It would be disingenuous to pretend that Jared didn't understand what caused Jensen to lose faith. Instead, he asked, "What religion were you?"

"I was brought up Catholic, but became an Episcopalian. They had ordained an openly gay bishop back in 2003 plus a couple of lesbian friends of mine were married in an Episcopalian church two years before the accident." Jensen shrugged. "I wanted to be a part of a church that didn't care about that aspect of my life. They seemed to only care about my devotion to the church and commitment to the community rather than my sexuality."

Jared licked his lips before he spoke. "Some Catholic parishes have a strong LGBT inclusion. I was part of a gay outreach group at my church. I still go to Mass every now and then."

"Why?" Jensen sounded like he wanted to know.

"Because being around prayerful people centers me and calms me. I find comfort in the holy rituals of the Mass."

Jensen wiped his face with his hand. "I'm glad for you. I'm glad you didn't lose that."

Jared twined his fingers with Jensen's. "Maybe yours isn't lost, either. Maybe your faith is just hiding?"

"No, it's gone." Jensen took his hand back. "Everything I ever knew about a just and loving God was blown away by a runaway truck."

"It doesn't always..."

"God had me, Jay. He had all of me. He was my life, my vocation and my future. Everything I did, everything I had, I gave happily in His name and to His service. Everything I was, belonged to God. Everything—and still, it wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough. And I have nothing left to give. That accident took my mobility, my vocation, my golf game," he chuckled, sadly, "and my future."

Jared tried to take his hand again, but Jensen waved him away.

"It didn't happen right away. After I got out of the hospital with my first clunky brace and shiny new wheelchair, I was still hopeful about my relationship with God. At first, I gave him a pass. This had nothing to do with God. He must have blinked and missed that red light. I denied his whole involvement and figured that once he realized what happened, he'd fix my leg and ease my heart."

"After that, I got angry. I was furious at everything and everyone. The moving company, the bus company, the woman and child I gave my seat to, Jim, myself for not getting my Kia's oil changed in time. And, of course, topping the list, God Almighty." He turned his head to Jared. "You see
where this is going, don't you?"

Jared sighed sadly, and reached for Jensen's hand again—successfully this time. Stage one, denial. Stage two, anger, followed by bargaining, depression and, ultimately, acceptance.

"Then I thought of all sorts of good deals for God, and I made him several offers including the prime real estate of my soul for all eternity. I even threw in some everlasting devotion to sweeten the pot. I kept trying to come up with more and more incentives—offers that were just too good to refuse until I realized that I didn't even know what I was bargaining for. For the accident not to have happened? That wouldn't work. To feel nothing about those people sitting in a bus crushed to death by a semi? I didn't want that. To buy back God's love? Bingo. So I promised God that I wouldn't bargain with him again if he would just love me the way he used to. Which, of course, was me bargaining with God again."

All Jared could do was listen, because there were no words to fix this. Jensen's lips were bitten raw, but his eyes were dry and his words were steady when he said, "Then, one day, I couldn't get out of bed, and it had nothing to do with my hurt leg. Looking back, I entered the stages of depression and acceptance at the same time, because, Jared…"

Jensen's throat worked and his eyes were blurred by unshed tears. Jared held his breath and didn't move.

"Jared, a God who loved me would never have done this to me."

One tear slipped from Jensen's eye, and then another. He took a deep breath and leaned into Jared. Jared hugged both arms around him and held on tight. Jared felt the soft shaking of Jensen's shoulders, and the heavy hitching of his chest, but, other than that, Jensen's grief was silent. They sat like that until Jensen got hold of his breathing.

"What happened next?" Jared softly stroked across Jensen's back.

Jensen sat up and wiped his face with his sleeve. He sniffed and said, "I realized I had to make a decision. To live, or not."

Jared tightened his hold around Jensen.

"You know you had to make the same decision, Jay."

Jared silently agreed.

"Though, all of a sudden it was a whole new paradigm. You see, I did what Matthew said in the bible, I came to God like a child—dependent and trusting. I believed that when I died I would be met by God and the angels, all patting me on the back, congratulating me for a life well lived and a job well done. I had no doubts about that.

"Suddenly I was scared shitless and too terrified to die. I'm not here because I was courageous, like you said before. I wanted to die. I wanted it over and done with. But because God was no longer in heaven looking down on me and approving of me, I didn't know what lay ahead. I hated living, but was too fucking afraid to die.

"I guess I believed in sin but not salvation." Jensen blew out a breath. "In the end, it was cowardice that kept me alive."

"That's bullshit." Jared gritted his teeth to keep from shouting. "You are the bravest, kindest, most
spiritual person I have ever met. You've got some facts about your value in God's eyes wrong, and you are many things, but cowardly isn't one of them."

"You like me. You can't see me."

"I love you, and I see you just fine." Jared hadn't planned on saying that, but it was out and he wasn't taking it back.

Jensen tugged out from under Jared's arm to place soft kisses on Jared's knuckles. "When you really know me, you'll change your mind about that."

"Not likely." Jared said. "Can I say some things that might make you mad, even though I'm not trying to make you mad?"

Jensen sighed. "Go for it."

"What you don't realize, is that you are carrying on God's work. Maybe not in name, but most definitely in spirit."

"No, Jared. I'm doing it for me. To ease my guilt. As Drew and I talked about, I'm atoning for the sin of surviving. They all died, except me and Jim."

"And Jim is glad you're alive. He's glad you made it. He's back to driving buses and probably razzing on the passengers to stay behind the white lines."

"Jim's different."

"Jim was the driver. He was the director, Jensen. He's alive, he's carrying on with his life, and he was unhurt—without a way to atone."

"You'd better stop, now." Jensen withdrew from all comfort and folded his hands in his lap.

"Listen, please listen," Jared begged. "Jensen, you never gave up on your life's work because your ministry is us. You help us. Counsel us. Grieve with us. You give us hope. You make us believe that there is a light shining at the end of a long, dark tunnel."

Jensen focused on Jared's face. "What are you saying?"

"Jen, that light you shine for us comes from somewhere."

Jensen dropped his head down. "No."

"Yes. The only way you could help us was by living through what we went through. By walking a mile in our shoes. We are your ministry, and your accident was, I don't know, your crown of thorns. You couldn't help us, save us—save me—unless you walked that road with us. It's not fair, it's not right, but it happened and you continued your mission—maybe God's mission—despite your lapse of faith. After all, we are Soul Survivors." Jared paused. "Maybe you have more faith than you realize."

"That's it, Jared, I don't," Jensen said. "How could I, when God is playing chess with human pieces? A car crash here, a mall shooting there, a disease that zeroes in and kills children? I want nothing to do with it. God had nothing to gain. He already had my devotion. He didn't have to take my leg." His voice faltered. "All those people, Jared. He killed Lindy. He killed those soldiers. He killed Robbie, and Keisha, and I can't. I can't forgive it."
"He didn't kill me," Jared said.

"Thank God." Jensen looked up, horrified. "Thank God you didn't die."

"Look who you thanked," Jared said. "I thank God for you every day, too."

"It's an expression." Jensen's voice shook. "It's a habit."

"Maybe."

Jensen clenched his jaw. "Calling on God, or even praying to God is just an ingrained pattern with me. It doesn't mean anything."

"It might, Jen."

Jared watched Jensen's expressions go through a myriad of emotions.

"You don't have to overthink it, make any decisions or even say a word," Jared said. "But you might want to think of today as stepping onto the bottom rung of another ladder."

"I don't think I can do it." Jensen's voice was sandpaper rough.

"You'll never know unless you try. And I want you to know, I'm hanging on and I won't let you fall if you decide to climb. So, take your time, because you and me?" Jared smiled. "We've got all the time in the world."

Jensen sobbed a laugh. "I don't know what I want to do, but I do know that I want you with me. And not because I like you."

"No?"

"No." Jensen's wet lips kissed Jared's dry ones. "Because I love you, too."

This time, Jensen beat Jeff to Benny's Tavern. He took a swallow of the dark ale and placed his locked leg up on the chair in front of him.

"That for me?" Jeff pointed to the draft beer sitting next to plates of French fries and Mozzarella sticks.

"That's for you. Thanks for meeting with me tonight. I know you just got back." Jensen raised his glass.

Jeff tapped it with his. "Salute."
They both gulped down a healthy mouthful, and Jeff started in on the appetizers.

"I've got burgers coming, too." Jensen swirled his fry in a puddle of ketchup. "How was your vacation?"

"It was great, but I'm glad to be back." Jeff dipped a cheese stick into the marinara. "So, what's up? I know this isn't just a guy's night out thing. What's on your mind?"

Jensen looked at Jeff, thought a minute and came to a decision. "I was in over my head and almost lost control of a...situation."

Jeff stilled. "What do you mean you almost lost control?"

"You know what I mean." Jensen put his glass down. "I got to the person in time and talked them down, but it was by the grace," Jensen swallowed and nodded to himself, "it was by the grace of God that he didn't do something awful."

"Who was it?" Jeff narrowed his eyes

"He's okay, now."

They stared at one another until Jensen nodded and then looked away.

"Jesus, Jensen. He didn't call me, he didn't call Lehne. I didn't know."

"I didn't know it was that bad until I got to his house. He either hit bottom fast, or I didn't see the signs. That was too close." Jensen balled his hands into fists. "I don't think I should be doing this anymore."

"Doing what? Running a discussion group?"

"Stop it, Jeff."

"Jensen, that's all the Soul Survivors group is. It's a discussion group, not a formal group therapy session and it's not supposed to be. But you need to recognize when things are out of your purview."

"I think the group has become more than just a discussion group," Jensen said. "It's a lifeline. For me and for the others."

"Maybe we should come up with a plan emphasizing suicide prevention and resources for outside services." Jeff scratched at his beard, thinking. "You and I might need to revamp the format of the group."

"That's a good idea." Jensen took another swallow.

Jeff paused and then said, softly, "Maybe Soul Survivors should be headed by someone with more qualifications than a copy editor. A psychologist or even a psychiatrist. Someone with training, who would have a better chance of catching the symptoms of a major depressive decline before the situation got dire."

Jensen's heart clenched. Give up his group? But it was obvious that he badly misread Jared's situation. Jensen admitted that possibly the only reason Jared was still here was because he accidently made Jared promise not to kill himself. That was too close. Maybe having a trained professional take the helm was the way to go, but he hoped he could still work with the group in
"So," Jensen pushed out the next sentence. "Do you have someone in mind to take charge of Soul Survivors?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Jeff leaned back and tipped his half-full glass in Jensen's direction. "You."

Jensen's eyes went wide and his mouth opened. "Me?"

"You've got a fair amount of college under your belt. Why not steer a course toward being a clinician? See how much you like the insurance companies when you're sitting on my side of the desk."

Jensen stared over Jeff's shoulder at nothing. "Me?"

"Jen, you're a natural, and you would make an amazing counselor, therapist, group leader, doctor or all of the above. You already are."

"I don't know if I can," Jensen said, but as he uttered those words he felt a wash of peace flow over him and he knew. He knew.

"You can do this, but you're the one who has to take that first step." Jeff put his glass down when the waitress came with their burgers.

After the food was distributed and more beer ordered, Jensen looked at his friend and asked, "So, what do I have to do to become a shrink?"

"I know I should be nicer to you and let you win once in a while, but, man, you suck at Madden NFL."

Jensen threw the controller down on the sofa cushion. "Maybe, but I'd kick your ass at Scrabble."

"Oooh." Jared hissed through his teeth. "So not a turn-on. But, now that I think about it, I'd probably take you to the cleaners in a winner-take-all game of Candyland."

"You're right," Jensen agreed. "Not a turn-on."

Jared placed his controller on the side table, and faced Jensen. "So, are you going to do it?"

Jensen took a big breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah. I'm gonna do it."

"You'll be awesome. You're already awesome, and I'm not just saying that because I like you."
"I'm excited about it, Jay. I didn't know how much I wanted to go back to school and learn how to run a group for real."

"News flash. You already run a group for real," Jared said.

"Full disclosure, okay?" Jensen bit his lip.

Jared knew that look, but there wasn't anything Jensen could say that would upset him up. "Go ahead."

"I told Jeff that I'd almost lost you."

"You did?"

"Yes. I didn't use your name, but he had no problem figuring it out." Jensen didn't look at him when he said, "I meant for him to."

"I see." Jared said. "So after you told him about me, that's when he talked to you about becoming a psychologist?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I broke the rule."

"Well, technically we weren't in group, so the whatever happens in group, stays in group rule doesn't exactly apply. But, if by telling Jeff about me you were able to change the course of your life for the better, then, I forgive you."

"You do?" Jensen looked so hopeful it broke Jared's heart.

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I betrayed a confidence." Jensen frowned. "I betrayed your trust."

"You did what you did with love, not malice. I recognize that, so it's okay. In fact, I don't feel I need to forgive you at all, since you didn't actually use my name, but I thought you might need me to."

"Thank you."

"Jen, can I tell you something and you won't make fun?"

"Anything, Jay."

"I believe that the people we meet in life, we're meant to meet them, you know? I met you so you could help me, you met me so I could help you. We both met Jeff so that he could help us, and so on."

"I believe that, too." Jensen said, softly. "I think we're drawn to special people so that we can teach them and learn lessons from them as well. I've learned so much from you."

"We're lucky, you and I. We've got an entire lifetime ahead of us to keep growing, moving forward," Jared smiled, "slipping backward, but going forward again. Recovery is like that. You taught me that. We're riding that wave together."

Jensen buried his head in the crook of Jared's neck. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for everything."
Jared held him close and mumbled into Jensen's hair. "Love you. Love you so much."

"So much bad has happened, but you are one of the good things in my life." Jensen placed his palm on Jared's chest.

Jared looked into his eyes and said, "You've helped me, and others, see that there's still good left in life. You're responsible for reawakening hope in so many people. I like that I'm special to someone as remarkable as you."

"Jared, you're more than special. I've never been in love before. None of the relationships I've ever had come close to this."

"I thought I was in love once, but now I know that I was wrong," Jared said, kissing him gently and pulling him in. "I want to show you how much I love you."

'I'd like that." Jensen got as close as he could, then huffed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not very graceful," he grunted, as he tried to shift on the sofa cushions. "Or very limber."

"I'm not graceful either." Jared grinned. "But I'm limber enough for two."

Jensen made a sound between a gasp and a snort, started chuckling and then threw his head back and let go a laugh. It was a full, deep, belly laugh that Jared had never heard come out of Jensen. It was the best sound ever, and he couldn't help but join in.

"You're going to have to prove that," Jensen said, snickering. "It certainly conjured an image."

The air was lighter after that, and the mood was easy. Jared took advantage of Jensen's position, immovable and scrunched up in the corner of his couch, and started laying kisses up and down Jensen's chest and neck.

"You're not playing fair," Jensen moaned. "You know I can't get away."

"I'm a bad, bad man."

Jensen hummed either in agreement or in pleasure.

Jared was placing open mouth kisses along Jensen's jawline when a thought occurred to him. He stopped mid-kiss and asked, "Are you still a virgin?"

Jensen laughed. "No, why would you think so?"

"You once told me that you didn't do casual sex. I wondered if that meant you'd never had any, like, real sex."

Jensen laughed again and then turned squarely toward Jared. "I don't do casual sex because, to me, sex has to mean something. It's too important when one human being is as close to another as they can possibly get."

"Then we've been having sex for a while, because I've never been as open or as close to anyone as I have been with you."

A small smile formed on Jensen's lips. "You have a unique way with words. I guess that's one of the many things I love about you."
Jared stopped and looked at Jensen.

"Everything all right, there, Jay?"

"You've seen me at my ultimate worst and you can still say that you love me. I would use a word like 'miracle' if you'd let me."

"I feel the same way, so I'm using the word 'miracle', too." A blush rose in Jensen's cheeks. "I've also been thanking God for you on a regular basis."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Jensen said. "I'm trying. I've really, really missed Him."

Jared whispered, "I'm going to start kissing you now, and I can't promise that I'll ever stop."

Jensen's breath was warm when he said, "I'm okay with that."

"And then, after you've been kissed to within an inch of your life, I'm kissing you some more."

Jared proceeded to make good on his claim and took Jensen's face between his hands, tilted his head just so and kissed him with an open mouth and a hot, wet tongue. Jensen's hands held onto him, suckling his tongue until breathing became a necessity. They broke apart, panting.

"Wow," Jared said. "Let's do that again." And he went to dive back in.

"Wait, wait." Jensen put up a stop hand. "I've having some trouble with the angle here."

Jared's lips curled into a grin. "Think maybe a more reclined position with a whole lot less clothes would be more comfortable?"

Jensen smiled shyly then tapped on his brace hidden beneath his loose slacks. "Do you think you're ready to see what's under this hardware?"

"I am, if you are."

"I, uh, won't be able to stand on that leg with the brace off, and I only have one crutch with me, so I'll have to be sitting where I'm going to be staying for a while. Also, I have scars on my leg and low back from the accident and subsequent surgeries. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm kind of awed that you'll let me in that far."

Jensen smiled fondly as he shook his head no. "I'm only warning you beforehand. Some parts of me aren't as nice to look at as other parts of me."

"As long as nothing hurts you, I don't care. It doesn't matter to me how you walk or what scars you carry. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you."

"However, it doesn't hurt that you're smoking hot."

Jensen chuckled. "That another thing I love about you."

Jared leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss. "Seriously, though. Don't let me hurt you."
"I won't."

"We don't have to go all the way. There are other things we can do."

"Jared?"

"Yes?"

"It's okay. I want this."

Jared calmed himself because he didn't want to rush and he didn't want to let any words get in the way. He stood and held out his hands. Jensen hoisted himself up and walked with his cumbersome, endearing gait beside Jared into the bedroom.

If Jensen came to the church as a child, Jared went to sleep like one. There were paintings, posters, and photographs of wildlife, sea life, pasturelands, dogs, cats, farm animals and fields of grain with siloes in silhouette on the horizon. There was a particularly nice portrait of a black and white Holstein painted in acrylics, matted and framed beside Jared's dresser.

The shades were wide open, and the window was open a crack, letting fresh air in. The acres of freshly sprouting fields in the distance, bathed in the light of the Waning Gibbous moon, became part of the décor. The only other time Jensen had been in here, Jared's life was falling apart and the beauty of his life's passion was masked in darkness.

Jared felt a little embarrassed about the pictures plastered all over his bedroom, but before he could say anything, Jensen said, "I love it. This is your room."

Jared could tell that he wasn't teasing him, because Jensen spoke with such affection.

Jensen sat on the edge of Jared's king-size bed and pulled off his slacks, socks and shoes. Then he undid all the straps and d-ring Velcro closures that held the brace around his thigh, knee, calf, ankle, and foot. Jensen pulled the brace clear and handed it off. It was a lot bigger than Jared imagined. He carefully placed it on his desk, while Jensen removed the stockinette, the soft, stretch cotton, he wore underneath it.

Jensen was in his shirt and boxers. Without looking up he said, "Are you going to join me? I'm feeling a little underdressed here."

Jared knelt between Jensen's legs and looked up at him. Jensen looked halfway between embarrassed and aroused. Jared pulled his own shirt and undershirt up over his head, and then leaned down to kiss the inside of the Jensen's left thigh. The skin was scarred and rough and the muscles had atrophied—making his left leg look as thin as a child's compared to his right. He pressed soft kisses along the scars that outlined his misshapen knee and kissed the bones through the skin where the muscle should be.

Jensen's arms came around Jared's neck and forced his face up. "Come up here with me," Jensen said.

Jared stood, unbuckled and unzipped, and joined Jensen in nothing but the skin he was born in.

Jensen stared a moment, then removed the rest of his clothes.

They laid down facing each other, skin to skin and breath to breath, Jared said, "It's like after all that's happened, I've been given a reward. I don't feel like I deserve you."
"You're just saying that because you like me." Jensen's eyes shone bright.

"I don't just like you. I can't imagine me without you."

Jensen sighed, dramatically. "Guess that means I can't get rid of you then?"

"Okay, with that attitude right there? I've changed my mind about having sex with you tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" Jensen turned and propped up on his right elbow. Jared saw that Jensen was already half hard.

"Yeah," Jared said, softly. He opened his hand and ran his palm over Jensen's left shoulder, down his arm, ribs, hip and thigh. Jensen shivered under his touch. "I'm going to make love to you."

"Oh, yes." Jensen lay down on his back, adjusted so that his left leg was straight and smiled up at him. "Do that."

Jared smiled as he loomed over Jensen. The heaviness in Jensen's heart that had been there for so long turned to smoke and drifted into the ether. He breathed in, and when he breathed out just as easily, thought the word miracle applied here, too.

Jared straddled Jensen's thighs and his kisses started at the edge of Jensen's jaw to the dip of his collarbone. Moist, open mouthed kisses progressed down and across Jensen's chest. The tip of Jared's tongue circled Jensen's left nipple and then his right. Jensen sighed deeply and relaxed under the affection that was being showered upon him.

Jared shuffled down the bed nipping tiny bite kisses along the length of Jensen's body until Jared's hot breath hovered above Jensen's erect cock.

"Can I?" Jared asked.

Jensen closed his eyes. "Yeah."

Jared stroked Jensen's dick, getting the feel if it, almost caressing it with his long, capable fingers. He held Jensen firm at the base as he planted soft, soft kisses on the head and down the shaft. Jared hummed around the length of Jensen's cock as it swelled to full hardness in his mouth.

"Jay, Jay, Jay," Jensen whisper-chanted. He was so hard it was almost painful. Almost.

Jared leaned into Jensen, taking him all the way down his throat. Jensen clutched the sheets and breathed out, holding on as best he could.

Jared softly bobbed up and down and Jensen opened his eyes to watch. Jared's eyes were closed and there were tiny teardrops clinging to the ends of his lashes. A sheen of sweat covered Jared's
body and the light from the moon made him glow. He was beautiful and alive and he loved Jensen.

A particularly pleasurable tug on his cock along with the suction Jared placed upon it, had Jensen groaning, "I'm close, Jay. Close."

Jared pulled off immediately, gently grabbing and holding the base of Jensen's cock as he wiped his mouth on the inside of Jensen's leg.

"Not yet, Jen, please. I have plans for this," Jared said as he tenderly stroked up and down.

"Plans?" Jensen whimpered.

Jared's chest and face were flushed. Jensen's eyes traveled down to where Jared's erection bobbed thick and heavy between his legs. Jensen groaned again and Jared had to squeeze a little bit tighter.

"Here," Jared took Jensen's hand and circled it around the base of Jensen's cock. "Hold on and don't let go—in any sense of those words."

Jensen held on to his own erection, stroking lightly, without any real friction but enough to take the edge off.

Jared held onto his own hard-on, panting loudly for several seconds. After he was back in control he said, "Watch."

Jared went to the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out a bottle of lube and a string of condoms.

"See, I have plans for you." Jared's eyes were alight with mischief. He took the lube and squirted a good amount in his hand and thoroughly wet his fingers. He bent forward and began working himself open in front of Jensen. Then he reached back to make a thorough job of it.

Jensen swallowed and held onto his cock so it wouldn't burst. "Jar...Jared," Jensen stuttered. "That is the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"Keep watching, then." Jared thrust in two then three fingers as far as he could and rocked back and forth, calmly and relaxing into it. Jared closed his eyes and continued to work on himself.

Jensen's breathing became erratic. His grip was sweaty on his cock, and he was fairly sure his heart would explode if he didn't come very soon.

"Everything all right, there, Jen?" Jared asked, mimicking Jensen from earlier.

"Are you kidding?" Jensen rasped. He was holding on for dear life, now, afraid of flying off the bed if he let go of his dick.

After a few more turns, Jared removed his fingers, wiped them off on his discarded undershirt and got up on the bed on all fours. He held up the condom and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Uh huh." Jensen had to strain his voice to get that out.

Jared smoothed the condom down over Jensen's cock, added a generous amount of slick and said, "Watch. This is what being limber means for us."

Jensen held firm to the base of his erection as Jared, again, straddled Jensen's body. He rose up on his knees, pulled his ass cheeks apart and began slowly lowering himself down.

Jensen bent his right knee and helped by pushing up as Jared slid down, inch by inch, stopping every few seconds to adjust. Slowly, as Jensen filled Jared's body Jensen found himself holding tighter and tighter to keep himself under control. Jared was unstoppable. Moving downward until he sat squarely on top of Jensen and fully seated. Jared put up a finger to signal wait, and took two or three deep breaths. After another moment, Jensen felt Jared squeeze his muscles playfully around Jensen's dick.

Jared grinned, and using his powerful thighs, pumped up and down, pushing Jensen deep into the mattress.

"This okay?" Jared panted.

"Holy shit," Jensen agreed as he feebly pushed up one legged. His low back clenched and his left leg bounced, but it didn't get any worse.

Jared, on the other hand appeared to appreciate the effort. His eyes rolled back in his head as he rose up and down, squeezing and releasing his inner muscles, holding for a few seconds before thrusting downward to pummel into Jensen deeper and deeper.

Jensen gave up even trying. "Close."

"Go for it," Jared said breathlessly.

Jensen pushed up once, twice and on the third he let loose, shooting hot and hard, filling the condom deep inside Jared.

Jared rose up with Jensen still inside and took his own swollen dick in hand. He pulled twice before every muscle tensed and he threw back his head. He groaned deep from his chest and then spilled messily over Jensen's chest and neck, with a few dabs of come sprinkling onto Jensen's face.

The room smelled of sex and sweat and apple blossoms from the open window. Jared was panting, gasping in deep breaths, and chuckling.

Jensen lazily opened his eyes to see Jared looking down on him with a wide grin. "And I can do it backwards, too."

Jensen laughed breathlessly as Jared carefully lifted off. He peeled the condom off and took it into the bathroom. Jared returned several minutes later with a wet, warm cloth and handed it to Jensen.

"Stay with me tonight," Jared said, lying down and rolling next to Jensen. "It's already almost tomorrow."

Jensen finished wiping himself down and sighed. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't have my wheelchair and only have one crutch, so I can't get up in the middle of the night if I have to," Jensen was embarrassed to admit. "Putting the brace on to go to the bathroom, or to get up and stretch out my back, isn't practical."

"Does your back hurt now?"

"Just a twinge. It's not bad."
"Let me see. I have other talents, too."

Jared helped Jensen carefully roll onto his right side. Jensen knew there were surgical scars crisscrossing his back and hip. He couldn't see Jared's face, but he felt two warm hands stroke up and down his low back and buttocks.

"You should get used to me helping you when you need it," Jared whispered as he kneaded Jensen's tight muscles. "I won't mind helping you in and out of the bathroom if you stay tonight. Afterwards, we'll make sure you have a set of crutches here. After all," his breath was warm at Jensen's ear, "that's what boyfriends are for."

"I guess since you put it like that." Jensen was sleepy enough that he was willing to risk the embarrassment of needing assistance for an early morning bathroom break.

"Or, you could move in here and always have whatever you need, whenever you need it. Misha would love my couch."

Jensen could barely stay awake. Jared's firm hands and soft voice were soothing and sweet. As he drifted off to sleep he heard a congregation of people singing and saw that he and Jared were among them. There were bright lights and a prism of colors. An overwhelming sense of peace enveloped him right before he heard the sound of his own snoring. His last image was of one braced leg stepping up onto the rung of a ladder reaching high into sunny, white clouds.
"It's the first Monday of the month, so I'll start the session."

Jared looked at his small group: May, who in the wee hours of one terrible morning, lost her husband and two teen-aged sons in an electrical fire. There was Juan, who was standing in line at the wrong club on the wrong night when a drive-by shooting took the lives of his best friend, his cousin, and his fiancée. Tim was there because, one drunken afternoon, he and his big brother Evan were thrown from an ATV. Tim walked away without a scratch. Evan never got up.

"Welcome to the first Monday meeting of the Soul Survivors Support Group." Jared began. "We were ordinary people until we became part of a tragedy. We feel guilty because we lived when others died. We come together here, because unless you've walked in our shoes, you can't begin to understand what it's like to be us. We are survivors."

Jared smiled and said, sincerely, "I'm glad you're all here. Before we go any further, I'd like to re-introduce my partner, Jensen. He is our founding father, as it were."

Jensen stood behind Jared shaking his head, fondly. "I don't know why I put up with him."

"Yes, you do," Jared replied, matter-of-factly.

Jensen rolled his eyes as though he were extremely put-upon.

"Jensen is here, taking a break from his studies, to give us words of wisdom and show his pretty face," Jared said. "He's working on his doctorate in psychology and is learning how to actually run a support group instead of just winging it."

May giggled into her hand. Jensen crutched up behind Jared and sighed, long-sufferingly. "Pay no attention to the man behind the hair," Jensen said. "He has a habit of munching on the organic pesticides he works with."

"Hey, you didn't even notice that I put them in the salad last night." Jared's eyes glittered. "You said the crunchiness gave it character."

"That," Jensen pretended not to hear, "along with the various animals running around the house, it's a wonder we survive at all."

Jared got up and rolled Jensen's computer chair next to him. "You love it."

"So says you." Jensen smiled as he sat.

"So says me."

Jensen shook his head, fondly and then spoke. "Without meaning to commandeer this meeting, I do want to say how glad I am that you are all here. That means you're moving forward, and as a friend..."
of mine says, "Forward ain't always a easy place to go." But, thank God—here we all are, because, believe it or not, it does get better."

"Not all better." Jared gently patted Jensen's left knee. "But better."

"But better." Jensen smiled at Jared, warmly. "I will begin by asking—is there anything anyone would like to say before Jared takes over and no one will be able to get a word in edge-wise?"

Tim raised his hand.

"Yes, Tim?"

"There's a poem that has always been a comfort to me, may I read it to the group?"

Jared and Jensen exchanged a look.

"Go ahead," Jensen said.

Tim pulled a scrap of paper from his back pocket and smoothed it out. He looked it up and down and then began, "Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there; I am not there; I do not sleep."

After he completed the last verse, Jared stood and said, "Actually, before we start the discussion, I'm going to copy Tim, and go with a poem as well. It was my night for a topic, and after, I'll open up the floor to everyone." He looked at Jensen. "Is that okay with you, Leader?"

"Okay with me."

Jared reached into his breast pocket for the poem and read:

"Abou Ben Adhem
By James Henry Leigh Hunt

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,  
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,  
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,  
An angel writing in a book of gold:—

Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
And to the Presence in the room he said  
"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,  
And with a look made of all sweet accord,  
Answered "The names of those who love the Lord."

"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"  
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,  
But cheerly still, and said "I pray thee, then,  
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
It came again with a great wakening light,  
And showed the names whom love of God had blessed,  
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest."

Jared eyes shone and he folded the paper and said, "So there."
"Thank you," Jensen whispered. "I'm still climbing that ladder, you know. I wouldn't have started without you."

Jared placed the folded poem into Jensen's breast pocket. "You know I'm here to give you a boost when you need it."

"Yeah, I know."

They looked at one another, soft and still with words unsaid and said a thousand times. Both of them moving forward, slipping back and moving forward again in a sad but perfect rhythm. A lifetime ago, and a lifetime beyond and eternity as well—all belonged to them, now.

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Very Special Thanks to my artist, bflyw. Collaborating with her and being the recipient of her gorgeous artwork have truly been an amazing and wonderful experience. My deepest and heartfelt thanks, N. She went above and beyond the call of duty and I thank her very kindly. Please go HERE to her LJ and view her beautiful work..

The Ladder of Links

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Need help? In the U.S., call toll free, 1-800-273-8255

The doomed bus, looking down the aisle to where Jensen had been sitting

What Jensen saw out the back window of the bus

Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep—wikipedia

Sweet, sweet, Tesla Model S

Mt. Washington Observatory, New Hampshire

RoTel and Velveeta recipe for Queso

From 2010, the marriage of Cricket and Bones

Jensen's KAFO
scroll down for a better view of his Stance Control KAFO—what can I say, I'm a geek for this stuff

Jared's House

The origin of "Tell Me Something I Don't Know"

"Hope" is the thing with feathers, by Emily Dickinson

William Cowper poem, God Moves in a Mysterious Way

V. Gene Robinson, first openly gay bishop

Catholic Association for Lesbian and Gay Ministry

Abou Ben Adhem by James Henry Leigh Hunt

Beginning Quote by Unknown-scroll down

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