If The Fates Allow

by sinnerforhire

Summary

When Jensen asks Jared to pretend to be his boyfriend over Christmas, Jared wonders how he'll keep his feelings for Jensen under control. But when Jensen gets sick, Jared can't hide how he feels any longer.

Notes

This is a spn_j2-xmas gift fic for x_posed_again, who mentioned she likes AU, college fic, pretend!boyfriends, sickfic, and schmoop. I put those in a blender and this is what came out.

"So, I did this thing."

Jared looks up from his engineering book. "Would this be a 'you-and-Christ-setting-the-microwave-on-fire' kind of thing?"

Jensen laughs. "No. It's just—this is gonna sound really stupid."

"More than usual, you mean?" teases Jared.

Jensen grabs an empty water bottle from Jared's windowsill and tosses it at him. Jared just bats it away with a smile. "Come on. Spill."
"Okay." Jensen flops down on Jared's bed. "See, my brother was making this big-ass deal about his girlfriend. He's gonna propose to her on Christmas. And he's going on and on about how perfect she is, how she's the best girlfriend on the planet, just—it was disgusting. So I told him—" Jensen takes a deep breath and picks at a loose thread on Jared's bedspread. "I told him I had a boyfriend that would blow this girl out of the water. And I was bringing him home for Christmas."

Jared suddenly realizes where this is going, but he keeps his expression neutral for the time being. "So, you're a lying liar who lies, in other words."

"Well, I was thinking..." Jensen's still talking to the bedspread. "Maybe you could come home with me and pretend to be my amazingly awesome boyfriend?.."

"See, I knew you were secretly in awe of my acting talent," replies Jared, wanting to let Jensen stew for a little before giving him an answer.

"Well, it was either you or Ryan the Gay Nazi," says Jensen, referring to an old joke about one of the plays Jared did as a freshman. "And you're a whole lot cuter."

"Aww, I didn't know you cared."

Jensen throws another empty bottle. "Just answer the question, douchenozzle."

"You've been hanging out with Mike and Tom again, haven't you?"

"Jared."

Jared closes his book. "All right. I think I can pretend to be an amazingly awesome boyfriend for a few days. But it's gonna cost you."

Jensen sighs. "Name your price."

"When we're back here, you have to go to karaoke and sing any song I pick. Including but not limited to show tunes, cheesy power ballads, or Celine Dion. And all our friends have to be there."

"You drive a hard bargain, Padalecki." Jensen puts a finger to his lips and pretends to think about it. "Fine. But I draw the line at the Titanic theme."

Jared chuckles. "I guess that's fair. Come on, let's hit the dining hall before the make-your-own-taco bar gets cleaned out."

Jensen shakes his head. "I swear, you have a one-track mind. No, it's more like a quarter-track mind."

"You wound me." Jared puts his hand over his heart and feigns staggering backwards.

Jensen punches Jared's shoulder. "My snark-fu is a thing to behold."

"Yeah, yeah, you're the master, blah blah blah." Jared waves a hand dismissively. "I'm starving. Move your ass."

Jensen stands in Jared's doorway and shakes his ass. "Only for you, baby."

Jared rolls his eyes, but he's laughing. He lightly shoves Jensen out of the doorframe. "Why do I put up with you, again?"
"Because I take legible notes in Brit Lit," answers Jensen. "And I'm your RA, so you couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

"I'm about to try." Jared knocks Jensen into the wall with his hip.

Jensen bounces off and punches Jared in the arm. "Dick."

"You love me, bitch."

"And I shudder to think what that says about me."

"That you have excellent taste, obviously." Jared stops at the stairwell and waves Jensen ahead of him. "After you, short stuff."

"I really hate you," Jensen says over his shoulder as he descends the stairs.

"No, you looooooove me," Jared singsongs. "Isn't that what you told your brother?"

"And now I'm sorry I did." Jensen shoves the door open. Jared follows him out of their dorm.

"Aw, baby, don't be like that."

Jensen glares at him. "If you call me that one more time—"

"I'm just practicing!" Jared protests.

Jensen shakes his head. "I'm really starting to regret this whole thing."

"Well, it's too late now." Jared grins at him. "You got yourself into this mess, you're lucky that I agreed to get you out of it."

"Lucky. Like catching mono is lucky."

Jared grabs Jensen's shoulders and pretends to give Jensen a big smack on the cheek. Jensen shoves him off, but he can't hide his smile. "You're ridiculous."

"It's my best quality." Jared pushes open the door to the dining hall.

"Sure. You keep telling yourself that."

Jared heads for the taco bar, while Jensen goes toward the stir-fry station. They meet up at their usual table. "So, when's your last final?" asks Jensen.

"Wednesday afternoon. How about you?"

"Thursday morning," replies Jensen. "I was thinking, if I pack the night before, we can leave right after, and get back to my place in time for dinner."

"Sounds good to me," says Jared. "Do you still have to come back right after New Year's for that lab thing you're doing?"

"Unfortunately, yeah." Jensen stabs a piece of chicken. "I'm guessing you'll go home then?"

"That's what I was thinking," says Jared. "I figure I'll come back with you and get my car, and then I'll head home from here."
Jensen nods. "Works for me. Of course, we might be ready to kill each other by then."

"I'm already tired of your face," Jared jokes. It's not true, not in the least. In fact, Jared's pretty sure he could never get tired of Jensen's face. Sometimes, when Jensen's not paying attention, Jared just sits there and gazes at it. He's managed to hide his massive crush on Jensen for two years now. He figures this whole pretending-to-be-Jensen's-amazing-boyfriend thing is either going to kill his crush dead or multiply it by a thousand.

"Seriously, though, I really appreciate you agreeing to this," says Jensen, and Jared can hear the sincerity in his voice. Jensen shakes his head. "I'm an idiot."

"Maybe, but you're my idiot." Jared grins softly at Jensen, and Jensen smiles back, the corners of his eyes crinkling in that way that drives Jared absolutely crazy.

"Only you could turn self-criticism into a term of endearment," says Jensen, and Jared's grin widens.

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"I didn't bring anything for your parents," says Jared as they're walking up the driveway to Jensen's house.

"Not a problem. There's still a few shopping days left before Christmas." Jensen grins at him and opens the front door. "Hey, anybody home?"

"Jensen!" A teenage girl with pink streaks in her blonde hair practically tackles Jensen as he steps over the threshold.

Jensen laughs. "Nice to see you too, Mack." He extricates himself from her grip and moves so Jared can step inside and shut the door. "Jared, this is my baby sister Mackenzie. Mack, this is my boyfriend Jared."

"Hi," Jared says, feeling a little awkward.

"You are so out of my brother's league," says Mackenzie, and Jared swallows back several sarcastic remarks. He's supposed to be the perfect boyfriend, and the perfect boyfriend wouldn't jump at the opportunity to insult Jensen's manhood.

"Well, thanks, I think," Jared replies. Jensen turns and grins at him before taking Jared's hand in his.

Jensen tugs Jared past Mackenzie and into the house's spacious kitchen. Jensen's mom is standing there in a red plaid apron, rolling out cookie dough. It looks so much like a postcard that Jared has to smile. He should have known that Jensen would have a picture-perfect family.

A timer buzzes and Jensen's mom retrieves a pan of cookies from the oven. The kitchen fills with the smell of peanut butter and warm sugar. Jared takes a deep breath. "That smells heavenly," he says.

"So this is the young man we've heard so much about," says Jensen's mom, and Jensen's cheeks color.

"Momma, this is Jared. Jared, this is my momma, Donna Ackles."

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am," says Jared.

"And so polite, too!" Donna chirps. "I think this one's a keeper, Jensen." She picks up a spatula and starts moving cookies onto a cooling rack. "Why don't you show him to the den where he'll be
sleeping? I pulled out the sofa bed and put sheets on it."


Jared follows Jensen down to a spacious, well-lit basement rec room. There's a huge entertainment center there with a flat-screen TV and a PS3, and shelves of DVDs, games, and books take up the rest of the wall. The sofa bed is only a small part of a massive sectional sofa that has two corners, three sides, and recliners on each end. Jared sets his bag next to the bed. "This looks awesome, actually."

"My nana's gonna be staying in my room, so I'll be staying down here with you," says Jensen. "I hope you don't mind."

"Your mom trusts us that much?"

Jensen points to a rolled-up sleeping bag. "Not exactly. My sister's gonna be down here too." Is it Jared's imagination, or does Jensen look a little relieved about that?

"So who's in her room?"

"Josh's soon-to-be-fiancée," says Jensen. "She doesn't trust them either, so don't feel bad."

"I don't mind," says Jared. "Your sister's cute."

"You won't think so after a day or two."

"I have a little sister of my own, don't forget," replies Jared. "I can handle it."

Jensen smirks. "She thinks you're cute, you know."

Jared pretends to be hurt. "I am cute. I'm adorable."

"And humble, too." Jensen takes a step towards the stairs. "Come on, the cookies should be cool by now."

"Well, if there's cookies…" Jared follows Jensen up the stairs to the kitchen, where the now-finished peanut blossoms are still sitting on the cooling racks. Jensen grabs two, and not wanting to look greedy, Jared only grabs two as well. Jensen finds paper plates in a cupboard and hands one to Jared. Jared sits down at the dining room table across from Jensen.

"Wow, these are amazing," says Jared, as he devours the cookie in two bites.

"Well, thank you," says Jensen's mom as she returns to the kitchen. "Jensen, I'm gonna make the sugar cookies now, and you and Jared can decorate them tomorrow."

"Okay," says Jensen, hastily swallowing a mouthful of cookie. "You don't mind, right?"

Jared smiles. "No, that sounds like fun."

Jensen looks down at his plate, and Jared's really starting to wonder why Jensen's being so awkward about this whole thing. Jensen's family seems to like Jared, at least, the members he's met so far do, so he can't imagine what Jensen's problem is. Jared's not hanging all over him, and maybe that's what he wants? That would be rude, though, not to mention weird. Jared eats his second cookie and swallows a sigh. It might be a long week if Jensen's going to make him guess what he's doing wrong.
"Well, we'll get out of your way," says Jensen. "You want to go downstairs and play some Guitar Hero?"

"Only if you want to get your butt kicked," teases Jared.

Jensen glares at him. "Oh, it's on now." He takes Jared's plate from him and puts them in the trash can. "Come on, Slash. Daylight's burning."

They go back down to the rec room and Jensen sets the game up. They end up playing until Jensen's mom calls them for dinner an hour later.

When they get up to the dining room, Jensen's dad is sitting at the head of the table, and there are two empty chairs, which Jared assumes are for Jensen's brother and his girlfriend. "Oh, Jared, this is my dad, Alan. Dad, this is Jared."

Alan grins. "Oh, so this is the infamous Jared." He turns to Jared. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh, it's all true," jokes Jared. "Especially the bad stuff."

Alan chuckles and passes Jensen a plate of pork chops. For a few minutes the only conversation is about the dishes going around and requests for salt or butter. Jensen still looks nervous for no good reason that Jared can figure.

"So, Jared, Jensen tells us you're studying engineering," says Alan once everybody's started eating. "What are you hoping to do with that?"

"I want to be a civil engineer," answers Jared. "I'm thinking about specializing in traffic. No one realizes how much work goes into placing traffic lights at busy intersections, and timing them just right."

"Well, you certainly shouldn't have trouble getting a job. I'm sure good traffic engineers are in high demand in cities," says Alan.

"So I've heard," says Jared. "I don't know that I'd want to move to a really huge city, like New York or Chicago. Tell you the truth, I think I'd rather stick around here." He smiles at Jensen. "And since Jensen's going to be in med school for so many years, he won't be able to just move anywhere."

"Jared!" Jensen's face turns almost purple. "You know we haven't—we're not—"

"I know we haven't talked much about the future," Jared says. "But Jensen's not only my boyfriend, he's my best friend. I don't want to move half a country away from him."

Donna just about melts. "Oh, Jensen, you've really got yourself someone special here."

Jensen swallows hard and nods. "Yeah, he's pretty great, isn't he?" Jensen reaches under the table for Jared's hand, and Jared lets him take it with a small smile.

"Jensen's in looo-oooove," Mackenzie teases from across the table.

Jensen blushes and looks down at his plate. "I am not," he mutters.

"We haven't really gotten there yet," Jared tells Jensen's parents, looking at each of them in turn. "But maybe someday soon." Jared leans over and nudges Jensen's shoulder with his own. "Right, Jen?"

"Jensen, honey, there's no need to be embarrassed," says Donna. "We all know how you two feel
about each other. Maybe you're not ready to call it love yet, but it sure looks like it from here."

Jensen's quiet the whole rest of the meal. Jared chats easily with Jensen's parents about his own family's Christmas traditions, and Donna fills him in on theirs, including one he's never heard of—making personal pizzas on Christmas Eve.

"We did it one year when the boys were little, and after that they wanted to do it every year," says Donna. "It's something that's unique to our family, but we like it that way."

Jared grins. "Well, I look forward to it."

After dinner, Mackenzie goes off to her room and Jensen makes a beeline for the rec room. Jared apologizes for him, but Donna tells him not to worry about it. Jared heads down to the rec room to confront Jensen.

"What was that?" Jared demands when he finds Jensen stewing on the couch, arms crossed over his chest.

"You told them we were in love!" Jensen replies, voice rising until he's almost shouting. "We're not—that wasn't—I'm not fucking ready for that!"

"Shit, I was just playing along," says Jared, sitting down on the couch next to Jensen. "I'm sorry it made you so upset. I just thought that's what you wanted me to do, play along with that stuff."

Jensen shakes his head. "Well yeah, that's what I thought to. But—" He sighs. "I don't know what I want anymore."

"Yeah, I picked up on that." Jared places a hand on Jensen's arm. "If I crossed the line, I'm sorry. I'll be more careful from now on."

"No, it wasn't your fault," says Jensen, sagging against the back of the couch. He looks strangely defeated, and once again Jared wonders just what the hell is going on with him. "It's—forget it."

"Okay," Jared says, but he's not happy about it. "I'm here if you want to talk. Anytime. Even if it's four in the morning."

Jensen smiles, but his eyes are sad. "Thanks. It's just—don't worry about it. It's nothing. Really."

Jared nods. Just then, clomping footsteps on the stairs warn them that someone's coming, so Jared pulls back from Jensen even though it's the last thing he wants to do. Mackenzie finally appears, storming down the stairs with a backpack in hand.

"Mom kicked me out of my room," she tells them, frowning. "Said she had to vacuum and dust." She drops down on the other end of the couch. "Can we watch a movie?"

Jensen gets up. "Sure," he says, his voice slightly hoarse. "What do you want to watch?"

"Muppet Christmas Carol," she answers.

Jensen locates it on the shelf and takes the disc out of its case. He pops it into the DVD player and Mackenzie grabs a remote from somewhere to navigate the DVD menu. The movie starts a few seconds later, and Jensen moves back to the couch. "I'mma go upstairs and change. I'll be back in a minute."

"Okay." Jared thinks that's a pretty good idea, and he digs in his suitcase until he finds his pajamas.
He goes into the bathroom and changes, and when he's done, Jensen's come back and crawled onto the sofa bed. Jared slides in beside him.

Mackenzie's doing something with a sketchbook and markers and not paying a bit of attention to them or the movie. Still, Jared reaches over and twines his fingers with Jensen's. Jensen looks at him and Jared grins. "Just staying in character," he whispers in Jensen's ear. Jensen rolls his eyes, but he's grinning too.

Jared longs to put an arm around Jensen's shoulders, but he's pretty sure that would be too forward. He'll have his chance when they're upstairs in front of Jensen's family, and he plans to take advantage of that as much as possible. But for now, he'll take what little he can get, and if that's just holding hands, Jared's okay with that. For now, at least.

Jensen doesn't let go of Jared's hand until the movie ends and Jensen has to get up to take out the DVD. "Mom's probably done with your room," Jensen tells Mackenzie. "You can go back up now."

Mackenzie packs up her stuff and goes back upstairs. "Unfortunately, that's the last time we'll be able to get rid of her," says Jensen. "My brother and his girlfriend are coming tomorrow."

"That's okay." Jared pats Jensen's knee.

Jensen seizes the remote and turns on the TV. They flip channels until they find "Die Hard" on a cable channel. Jared grins. "Best Christmas movie ever."

Jensen laughs. "That's exactly what I always say."

Jared looks over at Jensen and has the urge to kiss him breathless. He tamps it down and tries to focus on the movie. Jensen's close to him, but not that close, not pressed up against him or anything, and Jared decides to let Jensen make the first move, if he's going to. Jensen leans back against the couch cushion and Jared settles in with him. Jensen's keeping his hands to himself, much to Jared's dismay.

They watch random things on TV until Jensen starts yawning. Jared looks up at the clock and realizes that it's eleven, and Jensen's been up since seven this morning. "Bedtime?" he asks, and Jensen nods.

Jared lies down next to Jensen and pulls the covers up over them both. Jensen's keeping to his own side of the bed, but Jared can still feel the heat from his body. Jensen turns onto his side, his back to Jared, and Jared longs to spoon up against him. It's so unfair, being this close to Jensen and not being allowed to touch. It's cruel. He's got to confess his feelings for Jensen and try to turn this fake-boyfriend deal into the real thing.

You've got time, Jared tells himself. It's only the first day.

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The next day, Jared wakes up with Jensen pressed against his back, one arm slung over Jared's waist, and Jared becomes horribly, inappropriately hard. He wonders where Jensen would have learned to be a sleep-cuddler, since as far as he knows Jensen's never had a serious boyfriend. Maybe he was dreaming.

Jared curses his hard-on and tries to remove himself from Jensen's grip without waking him up. He's not thrilled about the idea of jerking off in Jensen's parents' house, but he doesn't know what else to do. Luckily, Jensen stays asleep and Jared rushes into the shower to take care of his problem, imagining that it's Jensen with him under the shower spray, and envisioning all the things he'd like to
do to that perfect pink bow of a mouth. Jared comes so hard he probably kills a few brain cells, but at least he can face Jensen now without blushing.

He goes out to the rec room to grab some clothes and finds Jensen just waking up. "Mmmm, when'd you get up?" he mumbles, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"Not long ago," says Jared. "Shower's free, if you want it."

"Nah, not yet." Jensen yawns and climbs out of bed. "I bet Mom'll make us pancakes if we ask nicely."

"Sounds good to me," says Jared. "Just let me change first."

Jared detours to the bathroom to change into his street clothes before joining Jensen in the kitchen. Sure enough, there are already pancakes sizzling on the griddle and bacon frying in a pan.

"I could get used to this," Jared says fondly. Jensen cuffs him on the shoulder. "Smells amazing."

Jensen heads for the giant coffeepot on the far side of the counter and grabs a mug out of the cabinet that must hold three normal-size cups of coffee. Knowing Jensen's coffee addiction, he's not surprised that Jensen has such a thing. Jensen fills the whole mug and sips it with a blissed-out look on his face. "Your first love will always be coffee, won't it?" asks Jared.

"Damn straight," murmurs Jensen, although he joins Jared at the dining room table. "I could love you as much as coffee, but I could never love you more."

"Never?" Jared feigns hurt.

"Never." Jensen's reply is firm.

"Your love of coffee borders on the obscene, man," says Jared.

"Coffee is the eighth wonder of the world." Jensen takes a long, contented sip from his giant mug.

"Should I leave you two alone?"

Jensen's reply is cut off by the arrival of his mom. "Morning, boys!" she says brightly. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble," says Jared.

"Oh, it's no trouble," Donna replies. "I figure I better feed you so you'll decorate the cookies and not eat them."

"Good plan," says Jared with a smile.

"I was hoping you'd start on that after breakfast so I can get the kitchen cleaned up before your brother and Sara get here," she tells them.

"Works for me," says Jared. He glances over at Jensen, who nods, still enraptured by his caffeine delivery system.

Donna plates two pancakes and bacon and hands it over to Jared. "Thank you," Jared says, grinning. "This looks great."

Jared sits down at the table while Jensen waits for his pancakes to get done. Jensen sits down in the
seat next to Jared and Jared places a hand on Jensen's knee. "I knew you weren't a morning person, but this is kind of ridiculous," he says lightly.

"Mmmm." Jensen takes another long sip of coffee. "I'll start talking once I finish this."

"I look forward to it." Jared takes a bite of his pancakes. They're light and fluffy and pretty much perfect. He's starting to feel a little spoiled.

"Jensen," Donna calls from the kitchen. "Food's ready."

Jensen puts the mug down, which surprises Jared a little, and goes over to get his plate. "Thanks," he mumbles, making a beeline for the table. He immediately goes for his mug again once he sits down. Donna doesn't seem offended, so Jared figures that Jensen must always be like this.

They finish their breakfast in silence, and finally Jared sees Jensen drain his mug and go for more. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," replies Jensen, but he's grinning now, and seems to be well on his way to being a functioning human.

Donna lays out the cookie decorating supplies and sets a large tin out on the counter. "The cookies are in here," she tells them. "You each get one. That's it."

They both nod. Jared gets up and surveys the counter. In addition to a large bowl full of white icing, there are sprinkles and sugars in every color, a large bottle of holly leaf and berry sprinkles, some small tubes of colored icing, and a tub of cinnamon candies. "Wow, you guys really go all out."

Jensen smiles. "Yeah, it's tradition." He drinks for a long time and then sets the mug aside. Then he walks over to the counter and opens up the cookie tin. "Each cookie gets a layer of white icing before we do anything else. The little icing tubes are for outlines and stuff. Usually we use those on the gingerbread men. The blue goes on the snowflakes, and the green goes around the edge of the trees. We use the red on the gingerbread men too sometimes, for scarves, and the yellow on the stars. The plain round ones can have just about anything on them."

"Wow, you really have this down to a science."

Jensen chuckles. "Yeah, it probably seems kind of OCD, but Mack'll flip if they're not done the 'right' way. Anyway, it's not hard. I'll show you."

Jensen takes a star cookie out of the tin and sets it on the rack. He picks up the spatula and spreads the white icing on it. Then he takes the tube of yellow icing and makes a line down to each one of the star's points. Then he sprinkles red and green sugar on it. "I'm not saying you can't get creative. It's just, you have to make at least one of them the 'right' way." He looks up. "I'll do those ones, I guess." He hands the spatula over to Jared. "You try."

Jared takes a gingerbread man out of the tin and ices him. Then he sticks cinnamon candies on for buttons, makes eyes with the green icing, a mouth with the red icing, and a scarf with the blue icing. Jensen grins. "That looks great."

They take turns icing the cutouts and adding the flourishes. Jared makes a colorful Christmas tree and Jensen makes a few gingerbread men. Jensen goes over to a radio and turns on Christmas music, which makes the mood a little more festive. Jared has trouble figuring out what to do with the holly sprinkles, but eventually he just puts them on the plain round cookies. Jared finds a snowflake cookie and outlines it with blue icing. Jensen grins. "That looks great."
"I've got skills," says Jared, although he really doesn't. He looks up from the tree he's outlining in green icing and smiles at Jensen.

Jensen points to Jared's face. "You've got a little—" He reaches up and thumbs some icing off of Jared's cheek.

Jared laughs and picks up the spatula. He dabs a bit of white icing on the tip of Jensen's nose. "You've got a little—" he teases, and leans over to lick it off.

He's a little surprised when Jensen holds still and lets him. Jensen laughs, low and melodic, and Jared can feel Jensen's breath ghosting over his lips, and suddenly he's overwhelmed with the urge to kiss those plump, perfect lips he's been dreaming about for months. He's just leaning in, lips only a fraction of an inch apart, when—

"Hey, are you done ye—oh, um, sorry," Jensen's sister says, skidding to a stop in the doorway. Jared jumps back from Jensen and nearly trips over the edge of the cabinet. He grabs onto the counter to steady himself and almost knocks the rack of cookies off the edge. He takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair.

Jared dares to look over at Jensen, and he might be imagining things, but he thinks Jensen looks a little bit disappointed. It's gone then, too quickly for him to be sure it was real.

He can hear Jensen's breathing, slightly fast and ragged, next to him. Jensen finally speaks up. "We're almost done." His voice is raspy and slightly choked.

"Good, 'cause Mom said Nana's gonna be here in an hour and she needs to clean up."

"Okay," Jensen says. He reaches for the last bare cookie and spreads some icing over it. It's a star, so he just dumps some yellow and blue sugar on it and sets it aside. "We're done now. Tell Mom she can start cleaning."

"Okay!" Mackenzie skips out of the room.

Jared rubs the back of his neck. "We better make tracks."

Jared and Jensen are on the way to the rec room when Jensen's mother leans over the banister to call him. "You have to go vacuum and dust your room."


"I'mma just go watch TV downstairs," says Jared, heading down the rest of the stairs.

Jared flips the TV on and searches through channels till he finds "SportsCenter." He can't stop thinking about his almost-kiss with Jensen. It really looked like Jensen wanted it too. He didn't move or push Jared away when he realized what was coming. He had the feeling Jensen's weird behavior the night before had something to do with Jensen having feelings for Jared that he didn't want to admit to, and now it seems that Jared has proof of that. He has to decide what he's going to do with that information, though. He doesn't want to make a move too soon and scare Jensen off, and as scared as Jensen seemed last night, that's a definite possibility. He'll just have to wait for another opportunity.

Jensen comes down about twenty minutes later, flushed and sweaty. He swipes an arm across his forehead. "Mom made me do Mack's room too," he says. "I hate vacuuming."

"Yeah, that's no fun," replies Jared.
Jensen drops down onto the couch beside Jared. He leans his head on Jared's shoulder and pretends to snore. Jared laughs and Jensen smacks his knee. "Sleepin' here," he mumbles.

Jared stays still, wondering what his next move should be. Should he put his arm around Jensen? Would that be too much? Or is that what Jensen's looking for?

Mackenzie bounces down the stairs then. "Ugh, turn on 'Charmed'," she says.

"We were here first," retorts Jensen, sitting up. Jared curses his missed opportunity. "Deal with it."

Mackenzie throws herself down on the end of the couch and rolls her eyes. She tries to grab the remote away from where Jared left it, but Jensen's faster and he snatches it up as soon as he sees what she's trying to do.

"Jensen!" she whines.

"Tough cookies," replies Jensen, handing the remote to Jared. Jared puts it down beside him.

Mackenzie crosses her arms and glares at Jensen. Jensen shrugs and sits back against the couch. He glances over at Jared and raises an eyebrow, then takes Jared's hand in his and twines their fingers together. Mackenzie notices and makes a face, to which Jensen grins. "You both suck," she says.

Jensen presses their hands against Jared's leg as a signal for Jared to swallow the smart remark he was about to make. "I know you too well," mutters Jensen. "She's still my baby sister."

"Yeah, I know," Jared whispers back.

Mackenzie gets up and goes over to one of the bookshelves. She pulls a book off the shelf and flops back down on the couch. She makes a big show of not looking at them.

"Sorry about this," murmurs Jensen. "Alone time's gonna be hard to come by till Christmas is over."

"I don't mind," replies Jared. "Just means we'll enjoy it more when we do get it."

Jensen runs a hand through his hair. "I need a shower."

"Don't let me stop you."

Jensen stands up. "I'll use the one upstairs. I'll be back."

Jared grins. "I'll be waiting."

Jensen pats Jared's knee and steps past him. Once he's gone, Mackenzie turns puppy eyes on Jared. "Please can I watch 'Charmed'?"

Jared shrugs. "Yeah, whatever," he says, handing the remote over. "Thanks!" She changes the channel.

It's about half an hour before Jensen comes back down. "You gave in," is the first thing he says.

Jared nods. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Jensen sits back down next to Jared, close enough that his leg brushes Jared's when he sits down. There's a tang of citrus under the biting scent of his aftershave.

"You smell good," Jared tells him, resting his chin on Jensen's shoulder.
Jensen grins. "You're biased." He leans into Jared, pressing their shoulders together.

The developing moment is interrupted when Jensen jerks away and sneezes twice. "Sorry," he says, clearing his throat.

"You feeling okay?" Jared asks him.

Jensen shrugs. "My throat's a little scratchy."

Jared frowns. "You might be coming down with something."

"Great." Jensen sighs and shifts away from Jared. "We probably shouldn't get too close, then."

"Yeah, I guess not," says Jared, trying not to sound as disappointed as he feels.

"That's just what I need, two days before Christmas," grouses Jensen. He slumps against the back of the couch and tips his head back.

"It might just be all the dust," suggests Jared. "It's probably nothing big."

"Yeah, maybe." Jensen doesn't sound convinced. He sniffles. "Seriously, you should keep your distance."

"I'm not afraid of a few germs." Jared leans over and nudges Jensen's shoulder to prove it. Jensen doesn't push him away, but he shrugs him off. Jared frowns. "Fine, if that's the way you want it."

"I'm trying to look out for your well-being. Quit being a baby."

"Come on, let's not do this now." Jared clasps Jensen's hand. "I can hold your hand, can't I? That doesn't involve you breathing on me."

Jensen looks down at their joined hands and nods. "Yeah, I guess that's okay."

They sit quietly on the couch for a while. Jared starts to wonder if Jensen really is coming down with something, since he's being so quiet and subdued. That definitely sucks, and not just because it ruins Jared's plans to try again to kiss Jensen.

Jensen sneezes another couple of times and goes into the bathroom for a tissue. He brings the box out and drops it on the couch, then flops down with a dejected groan. "This sucks."

"You want some tea or something?" asks Jared. He doesn't know where anything is in the kitchen, but he figures it can't be that hard to find.

Jensen shakes his head. "No, that's okay."

Jared lets go of Jensen's hand to squeeze his knee. "It's gonna be okay." Jensen sniffs and doesn't respond.

Mackenzie finishes watching her show and bounces out of the room. Jensen takes the remote back and changes the channel to Comedy Central.

"You wanna watch a movie, take your mind off things?" asks Jared.

"Yeah, sure," answers Jensen, and his voice sounds scratchier than before. It does seem like he's coming down with something, which really sucks for him. Jared gets up and looks through the DVD shelves. He picks out *Iron Man 3*, which he hasn't seen yet, and puts it in the player. Jensen looks up
and smiles weakly. "I didn't get a chance to see this yet."

"Me either," says Jared. He sits down and makes sure to keep as much distance as Jensen wants him to. He doesn't need to hold Jensen's hand, they're not showing off for anybody, but Jared wants to, and Jensen doesn't object when Jared reaches for his hand.

They get about three-quarters of the way through the movie before Donna calls them for lunch. When they get upstairs, the dining room table is set with soup bowls full of minestrone and two plates full of homemade, still-warm pepperoni bread. "Your mom is the best," Jared tells Jensen as the rest of the family takes their seats.

Jared digs into his food right away, but out of the corner of his eye he's watching Jensen pick at his bread and stir his soup without eating any. Jared's about to say something when Donna speaks up. "Jensen, honey, what's wrong?"

Jensen lifts one shoulder and drops it, as though he's too tired to actually shrug, and mutters, "Nothing."

"He's coming down with a cold," Jared informs her, since Jensen apparently isn't going to.

She frowns and stands up, crossing behind their chairs to press a hand to Jensen's forehead. Jensen rolls his eyes but submits to the handling. "You're a little warm," she says. "You should try to eat, though." She pats his shoulder and goes back to her seat.

Jensen stares gloomily at his soup bowl and takes a tiny spoonful. Jared's already half finished with his. He didn't realize how much he missed good home cooking. Jensen's mom is an even better cook than his own mom, which he didn't think was possible.

"It's not going to eat you," Jared says under his breath, nudging Jensen's leg with his own.

Jared's nearly finished with his soup by the time Jensen takes another small spoonful. Finally, Jared can't take it anymore. He points to the piece of pepperoni break that Jensen's been picking tiny pieces off of. "Are you going to eat that?"

Jensen looks relieved and hands it over. "It's all yours." It's Jared's fourth piece, but it's so good he could eat the rest of the loaf all by himself.

Mackenzie gets up and rinses her empty dishes, then puts them in the dishwasher. "Jensen, you're excused. Go lie down," says Donna, and Jensen shoots her a ridiculously grateful look. Jared collects Jensen's dishes with his own, but Donna takes them out of his hands. "I'll take care of those. You go take care of him."

"Yes, ma'am," Jared says with a small smile. He turns to see Jensen gloomily making his way down the steps. By the time Jared gets down to the rec room, Jensen's already burrowed his way under the covers on the sofa bed. Jared opens his mouth to say something but stops when Jensen sneezes loudly. He grabs the abandoned tissue box and hands it over. Jensen sneezes twice more and groans.

"You want some company?" asks Jared as Jensen blows his nose.

"I'm pretty crappy company right now," replies Jensen, and he's starting to sound congested.

"I'll forgive you." Jared sits down on the sofa bed beside Jensen. Jensen kicks off the covers and shoves them to the bottom of the bed.

"It's hot," Jensen complains, unbuttoning his flannel shirt. He's not wearing an undershirt, and Jared
swallows hard when he gets an eyeful of Jensen's bare chest. He forces himself to look away.

Jared turns the movie back on. About ten minutes later, Jensen sneezes twice and gathers the covers back up, cocooning himself in the fleece blanket and rolling over to bury his face into Jared's stomach. "How'd it get so cold in here?"

Jared presses the back of his hand to Jensen's cheek. It's definitely warmer than it should be. "That's all you, buddy."

Jensen pushes himself to sitting and wraps his arms around Jared's shoulders. "You're warm," he explains.

"Are you always this clingy when you're sick?" asks Jared. Not that he minds, not at all. In fact, it's downright awesome. But it feels uncomfortably close to taking advantage.

"How should I know? Not like I ever had anyone to cling to before." Jensen starts to push himself away, but Jared pulls him back in.

"You're here now. Stay." Jared pulls the fleece blanket over them both.

Jensen sneezes three times, and Jared knows it must be love because he doesn't even care that Jensen's getting snot all over his shirt. He hands Jensen a tissue and Jensen clutches it gratefully. "Thanks," he says, the 'n' sound swallowed by congestion.

"What are we gonna do with you?" asks Jared, but the fondness in his voice is unmistakable.

*~*~*~*~*

By morning Jensen is absolutely miserable. He can hardly breathe without sneezing or coughing, his fever is up to 102, and whenever he gets the chills he ends up clinging to Jared like a limpet. Jared's not sure whether Jensen remembers they're only pretending to be boyfriends, the way Jensen keeps cuddling up to him.

"You're so warm," Jensen says by way of explanation. "You're like a big, heated pillow."

"Nice to know you only like me for my body," says Jared, but he's smiling down at Jensen, who's currently resting his head on Jared's chest. "It is a pretty great body, though."

"You keep telling yourself that," mutters Jensen, but he's smiling too.

Jared chuckles and shakes his head. "Never change, Jensen."

"I don't plan to." Jensen rolls away and sneezes into the blanket. Jared sighs and throws some tissues at him. He went through a whole box yesterday, and it's shaping up to be a two-box day today. "Ow."

"What happened?" asks Jared.

"Sneezing makes my head hurt worse," replies Jensen, and he's walking a very fine line between complaining and whining. He rubs his temples and winces.

Jared sits up. "I'll get you some Tylenol, then. Is it in the medicine cabinet upstairs?"

"Yeah." Jensen flops back onto the pillows and coughs.

Jared pats Jensen's knee and stands up. "I'll be right back."
Jared runs into Donna when he reaches the top of the stairs. She smiles knowingly at him. "You're awfully dedicated. Jensen can be...trying...when he's sick."

"He's not so bad," says Jared.

Donna pats him on the shoulder. "You're a good kid, Jared."

Jared grins. "Thanks."

Jared retrieves the Tylenol from the medicine cabinet and decides to just take the whole bottle downstairs. There's a bottle of cough syrup in there too, and he grabs that as well. When he goes back down to the rec room, Jensen's curled in on himself, coughing up a lung. Jared sits down beside him and rubs his back. "Take it easy," he says softly.

Jensen pushes himself up on one elbow. "This sucks out loud."

"Yeah, I know." Jared sits the cough syrup on the table and opens the Tylenol bottle. He shakes two pills out and hands them over to Jensen. He hands Jensen the glass of ginger ale his mom had brought down for him, and then measures out a cup of cough syrup. Jensen makes a face but swallows it down anyway, immediately washing it down with soda.

Jared smiles and rests a hand on Jensen's back. "Good job."

Jensen sags against him, and Jared can feel the heat of his fever through the fabric of his shirt. His arm stretches across Jensen's shoulders seemingly of its own accord. Jared scoots back until he's leaning against the back cushions of the couch. Jensen curls into Jared's side and for a long moment they just sit there in the quiet, the only sound being Jensen's congested breaths, and it's so affectionate, so intimate, that Jared can't believe Jensen doesn't know how he really feels. It's not just the physical closeness, it's emotional; they're closer than two friends have any right to be.

He has to tell Jensen. When Jensen's feeling better, Jared has to come clean with him. He can't hold it in anymore. He has to be the only person who gets to be this close to Jensen.

Jensen's breathing grows deep and even, and Jared realizes he's fallen asleep. He finally gets to do what he's been wanting to do this whole time. He strokes Jensen's hair with a light touch, brushing the sweat-damp spikes back from his face, and just indulges his sappy, sentimental side as much as he wants.

Jared doesn't know how long they stay like that, but finally Jensen jerks awake to sneeze and the moment is lost. Jensen cuddles back up to Jared almost instantly, pulling the fleece blanket up to his shoulders. Jared can feel the shivers starting where Jensen is pressed against him.

"You want some tea?" asks Jared. "I can go make some."

"Yeah, that'd be g-good," answers Jensen, still shivering.

Jared extricates himself from the blanket and goes upstairs to the kitchen. Jensen's mom is in there, mixing something in a big blue bowl. "How is he?" she asks.

"He's got the chills pretty bad," replies Jared. "I said I'd bring him some tea."

Donna pulls a measuring cup out of the cabinet and fills it with water. She sticks it in the microwave and turns it on. "Faster than the kettle," she explains. Jared nods.

Jared retrieves the now-boiling water from the microwave and carefully pours it into a snowman
mug. There are about half a dozen kinds of tea in the pantry, so Jared picks one at random—orange zinger—and places the teabag in the mug. He spots a container of honey in the pantry and squeezes some into the mug, stirring it with a spoon that Donna hands him.

Jared puts the spoon in the sink and prepares to leave. Donna smiles softly at him. "Jensen's lucky to have you."

Jared's cheeks burn. He can't meet her eyes. "Thanks."

Jensen's curled up in the space Jared left, coughing and sniffling, when Jared gets back to the rec room. Jared sits down on the edge of the bed and grasps Jensen's shoulder. "I'm back."

Jensen sits up. He accepts the mug of tea gratefully and takes a sip, pressing both hands to the sides of the mug for warmth. "This is great. Thanks."

Jared smiles. "You're welcome."

"You're too good to me," says Jensen.

"I probably am," Jared agrees. "But I know you'd do the same for me."

Jensen scoffs. "If it were you, I'd be running very fast in the opposite direction."

"No offense."

"I am pretty awesome." Jared lightly bumps Jensen's shoulder with his own. "You're definitely gonna owe me after this."

"I'll make it up to you," Jensen promises. "Any way you want."

Jared shakes his head. "I was kidding. I'm doing this because I'm your friend and I care about you."

Jensen's glassy eyes widen. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'd like to be your real boyfriend." Jared takes a deep breath. He did it. Now it's up to Jensen. He really hopes he hasn't misread the situation entirely.

Jensen smiles, but shakes his head. "Dammit, Jared, I really want to kiss you right now, but I can't."

He drops his head down. "But I swear, the second I'm better, I'm going to kiss the hell out of you. For days."

Jared grins and grasps both of Jensen's shoulders. He presses a kiss to Jensen's hot, dry forehead. "So I guess that's a yes?"

"With a side of 'what took you so damn long'?" replies Jensen. "I've been practically throwing myself at you for months and I thought you were completely oblivious."

"I could pretty much say the same thing!" Jared shakes his head, but he's still grinning. He doesn't think he'll ever stop grinning, now that he's gotten everything he wanted for Christmas and then some. "I thought you were the oblivious one. I just—I didn't want to mess up what we had. But God,
I wanted to tell you so many times."

"We're quite the pair, aren't we?" says Jensen, setting the mug of tea aside and pulling Jared into a hug. "We're such dorks."

"Well, we've got it together now," Jared murmurs into Jensen's ear. He kisses Jensen's neck just below his ear. Jensen shivers, but not with cold. Jared leans back against the couch cushion, pulling Jensen down with him, until Jensen is half-draped over Jared's chest. Jared rubs Jensen's back and smiles. "This is the best Christmas ever."

Jensen's response is thick and sleepy but unmistakable: "It is now."

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